

Bioregional Ethics in the Literature of the United States: A Literary Survey of Four Major
United States Bioregions

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DEDICATION

AMDG

And to all those who have aided me along the way, both people known to me and unknown, who are still in my life and who are not.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to forward critical thinking about place, ecology and literature. By analyzing examples from four major U.S. bioregions (the Prairie, the Southwest Desert, the Marine Rainforests of the Northwest, and Appalachia), this dissertation argues for a new consideration of virtue ethics conceived as bioregional ethics as a means to attain sustainability as imagined by literary representations of place. This dissertation is divided into an introduction and four chapters. The introduction outlines a discussion of virtue ethics as drawn from historical and religious tradition; it also surveys significant statements in ecocriticism and the newer discourse of bioregionalism as means of drawing together the three areas in which this project hopes to intervene: ethics, literary criticism, and bioregional thinking. The four chapters consider works by Willa Cather and O. E. Rølvaag (Chapter I), Cormac McCarthy and Leslie Marmon Silko (Chapter II), Ken Kesey (Chapter III), and James Still and Ann Pancake (Chapter IV).

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Introduction: On Bioregional Ethics

A Prelude by Way of Wendell Berry

Early in his novel *Jayber Crow*, Wendell Berry shows us how attending to the particularities of landscape alter our sense of time and of our place in the world. We hear Jayber in his old age meditating on time and the river in his childhood as he sits at his camp house near the river's edge:

I would learn later that there had been other ages of the river that I had arrived too late to know but that I could read about and learn to imagine. There was first the age when no people were here, and I have sometimes felt at night that absence grow present to my mind, that long silence in which no human name was spoken or given, and the nameless river made no sound of any human tongue. And then there was the Indian age when names were called here that have never been spoken in the present language of Port William. Then came the short ages of us white people, the ages of the dugout, the flatboat, the keelboat, the log raft, the steamboat. And I have lived now into the age of the diesel towboat and recreational boating and water-skiing. And yet it is hard to look at the river in its calm, just after daylight or just before dark, and believe that history has happened to it. The river, the river itself, leaves marks but bears none. It is only water flowing in a path that other water has worn.¹

The river, Jayber understands, is a somewhat unchanging presence. Though the land it flows through far longer than any human has floated down it or water-skied upon it has changed, the river remains constant as well as the driver of change. The land has risen and fallen, been eroded,

¹ Berry, Wendell. *Jayber Crow*. Counterpoint Press, 2000, p. 19.

for much longer than humans have walked upon it, longer than humans have shaped the land with their hands. And Jayber understands that the land and the river are *there*, before his perception, open and unhidden, shaping the human mind that contemplates them, conforming the human mind to themselves. Imagine: history has happened to the land and the river, and yet they remain now and will remain far after perceiving humans have passed back into dust. Jayber's slipping into contemplating the past, present, and future of the land and the river emerge early in the novel after he recounts to us, his interlocutors, the irreversible changes a great flood and freeze have wrought on the communities (and the land) in the Kentucky River valley surrounding Port William: "The river rose and then a thaw came and it rained, and the river rose out of its banks," Jayber tells us about the year of his birth.² "Great ice gorges formed that sheared off or uprooted the shore trees and wrecked steamboats and barges. People had never seen anything like that ice. No flood that they had known ever resembled it....nothing—nothing!—could stand against it."³ The river (and its supreme power) arrests Jayber's attention throughout Berry's eponymous novel as he begins to understand what it means to live upon and alongside such a mutable landscape. He understands what it means to live in a human community so much at the whim of the water and the soil that its very survival depends entirely on how that community conforms itself to the will of the particular land upon which it has placed itself.

That the land is the prime mover (after God) of our moral relationship to the Earth is a foregone conclusion for Berry. As his fiction, poetry, essays, and his lifelong practice of subsistence farming clearly attest, ignoring the needs of the land and behaving towards it in such a way as to deny local commitments and conservative mandates works only for the land's total

² Berry, p. 13.

³ Ibid.

and complete degradation.⁴ Instead, he has called and does call us to attend to the Earth, to care for the Earth, to live small and with restraint, to deny the desires of the self and the global in favor of the land's and the community's—to become Earthkeepers,⁵ in a word. Because of Berry's own embeddedness in place and his insistence on setting each and every piece of his fiction within the limits of Port William, we are able to see how each and every ecological (and social) issue begins at the bottom, with the land and with the river and with our virtuous or sinful attitudes and behaviors towards them. Yet, as Jayber thinks about the river and its seasons and movements throughout the valleys (and in his own travels upon it), he comes to understand that even the local is part of larger and larger ecosystems—essential parts that make up a whole, which depends on those essential parts. As all rivers begin locally, in their own individually and physically perceptible sources *and then* flow into larger and larger bodies, so too do dwellers in the land have local, individual sources for their own ethical behaviors—and that source should be the land, their place on earth, without forgetting that that place is part of larger wholes. Midway through *Jayber Crow*, the eponymous narrator tells us of the river, “And I saw how all-of-a-piece it was, how never-ending—always coming, always there, always going.”⁶ We clearly should see that because all problems begin locally (as do lived moral behaviors)—with the actions of individuals within particular communities and particular ecosystems—then the only real possibility for healing and the changing of behavior is from the bottom up by changing the character of the people in the community we live and move and breath inside.

⁴ “Conservative” here, as it does throughout this project, refers to limits and “thinking little,” living within landscape-prescribed limits that enable us to live ethically & sustainably in place.

⁵ I am borrowing this term from Steven Bouma-Prediger uses in and as the title of his book on ecological virtue ethics, *Earthkeeping and Character: Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic* (Baker Academic, 2019), which I will discuss more at length later in this introduction.

⁶ Berry, *Jayber Crow*, p. 132.

Berry himself has witnessed massive ecological degradation, especially at the hands of what he calls the “evil of the industrial economy (capitalist or communist),” an evil he identifies as the “abstractness inherent in its procedures—its inability to distinguish one place or person or creature from another.”⁷ His characters also witness this kind of degradation, the ruination of the land because it has not been properly cared for; as both Berry himself and his characters have come to realize, the profit-motive, the ethic of immediate gain, and industrial economic value systems are foreign to any notion of Earthkeeping. Because these value systems are abstract (as in, general principles) and cannot distinguish one place or one people from another, Berry’s entire fictional, poetic, essayistic, and personal project has been to return our attention to the local, to *real, specific* places and how we can have healthy relationships with them.

He speaks the unmitigated truth when he tell us, “In our relation to the land, we are ruled by a number of terms and limits set not by anyone’s preference but by nature and by human nature” and goes on to list seven of those truths (limitations) so that there can be no mistake about what he means.⁸ Especially pertinent to this project are the principles that deal directly with the consequences of malformed behavior towards the land such that “[l]and that is used will be ruined unless it is properly cared for.”⁹ Berry articulates that proper care for the land cannot be done “by people who do not know [the land] intimately, who do not know how to care for it, who are not strongly motivated to care for it, and who cannot afford to care for it.”¹⁰ Though someone far more qualified and versed in economic theory than I would need to address the latter part of Berry’s principle, the emphasis on knowing the land intimately as a prerequisite for

⁷ Berry, Wendell. “Out of Your Car, Off Your Horse.” *Sex, Economy, Freedom, & Community*, Pantheon, 1993, 23.

⁸ Berry, Wendell. “Conservation and Local Economy.” *Sex, Economy, Freedom, & Community*, Pantheon, 1993, 3.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Berry, “Conservation and Local Economy,” p. 3

caring properly for it remains essential to the argument of *Bioregional Ethics in the Literature of the United States*. In brief—and I will discuss this more fully later in this introduction—I argue that giving attention to the particularities of particular places through the bioregional and ethical methodologies I will articulate below can help us understand how American novelists of the twentieth-century have considered and represented human relationships to and with the land. I argue that these readings demonstrate how American writers have represented those local and bioregional relationships for the purpose of teaching us how to live virtuously in place in conformity with what the land demands of us for survival.¹¹

The Land Ethic

In order to pursue this argument through a study of American fiction, it is firstly important to delineate for the reader several commitments, presumptions, and principles from which this dissertation emerges. This project has rooted itself firmly within the burgeoning sub-field of literary criticism concerned with bioregionalist principles and methodologies—and its far-longer-established sibling, virtue ethics.¹² To begin effectively, it is important to discuss the work of Aldo Leopold, which has not only proved foundational to the social and political discourses of conservation, localism, and ecology, but it has also made him a pre-eminent

¹¹ Essential to note as well is that much work of this kind is being done within the social sciences under the name of “more-than-human” studies. Landmark texts for that work are *More-Than-Human Sociology: A New Sociological Imagination* (2016) by Olli Pyyhtinen and *Humans, Animals, and Biopolitics: The More-Than-Human Condition* (2017) by Kristin Asdal, as well as *Geographic Thought: A Critical Introduction* (2013) by Tim Cresswell, *More Than Human Geographies* (2014) by Roger Lees, and *Machine Ethics and the Idea of a More-Than-Human Moral World* (2011) by Steve Torrance. My approach in this project is to suggest what literature can offer these other fields to further the bioethical discourse within the Anthropocene.

¹² The traditional name for this field of study is aretology and emphasizes attitudes over behavior and sees character as more foundational than conduct. I will use the more common term virtue ethics to reduce the amount of jargon used in this project.

progenitor of bioregional criticism and ecological literary criticism more broadly. Especially important is his notion of the land ethic. This principle is central to the methodologies I use throughout this project to analyze fiction from four major American bioregions and serves as one of the major pillars that hold up this exploration.

In “The Land Ethic,” originally published in 1949, Aldo Leopold argues that if we are to have any success in effectively being Earthkeepers (though he does not use this term) and healers of the land, we must expand an understanding of ethics so that it includes what he broadly terms “the land”: “a community of interdependent parts” that includes “soils, waters, plants, and animals” in addition to humans.¹³ Beginning with the claim that ethics understood ecologically refers to “a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence,” Leopold articulates a shift in humans’ relationship with the land.¹⁴ The aim he sets forth is to push back against strictly economic understandings of land-relations in order to “change the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it” so that we can establish a comprehensive land ethic that “implies respect for [the] fellow-members [of the land-community], and also respect for the community as such.”¹⁵

We have seen this emphasis on respect and the presumption of inherent dignity in other community members (human and non-human) in Wendell Berry’s emphasis on intimate knowledge of place in order for proper care to be done to it. Indeed, Leopold has been a continuing influence on Berry’s understandings of place and virtue ethics to the point that both have insisted, as Leopold puts it, that “[i]t is inconceivable...that an ethical relation to land can

¹³ Leopold, Aldo. “The Land Ethic.” *A Sand County Almanac. Aldo Leopold: A Sand County Almanac & Other Writings on Ecology and Conservation*, edited by Curt Meine, The Library of America, 2013, 172.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 171. Henceforth, I will refer to ethics with a slight modulation of Leopold’s definition: instead of a struggle for existence, I will refer to life as an attempt to subsist.

¹⁵ Leopold, p. 173.

exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value.”¹⁶ Both Berry and Leopold would contend that the word value refers to the broader, holistic understanding of value—an understanding that includes not only economics but also aesthetics, morality, religion, and every aspect of human behavior and value-giving that has nothing to do with industrial value systems.

Part of enacting this holistic understanding is to reject any ethical formation that “defines no right or wrong, assigns no obligation, calls for no sacrifice, implies no change in [our] philosophy of values...[or] urges only enlightened self-interest.”¹⁷ Instead of describing ethical human relationships with the land-communities of which persons are a part, Leopold suggests that we should learn that most events in our geologically brief history have been “actually biotic interactions between people and land” and that “the characteristics of the land [have] determined the facts quite as potently as the characteristics of the men who [have] lived on it.”¹⁸ In other words, we can no longer presume ourselves to be mere masters of the land we live on and work, no longer can we presume the land to be merely property, its only value residing in whether or not we can make it profitable. And we can only begin turning away from those presumptions through what Leopold calls “an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions”—in our characters, our moral practices, our religious practices, and our scales of perception.¹⁹

But why, we might ask, is this turning away necessary? And how can Leopold’s land ethic help us understand American literature in terms of virtue ethics and bioregionalist

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 187.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 175.

¹⁸ Leopold., p. 173.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 177. What comes after the em-dash is my own addition and extension of Leopold’s original list.

methodologies for literary criticism? These are guiding questions that I am attempting to answer throughout this project. To begin with the first, Leopold tells us that we need to turn away from conqueror-oriented presumptions of land-relation because “a system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided. It tends to ignore, and thus eventually eliminate, many elements in the land community that lack commercial value” but which are essential to the health of that selfsame land community.²⁰ A focus on the things within a land-community that have solely economic value has the effect of devaluing the whole community—birds which cannot be sold or eaten, trees that grow slowly and with difficulty, land that cannot produce “goods” all are given up as waste and have no place in the minds of those caught in the stranglehold of the industrial value system.

Indeed, no obligations are placed upon human relationships with the land in an industrial system, no real ethical system is in place other than economic consequentialism—wherein, as Steven Bouma-Prediger argues, “what is morally right and wrong is determined by an assessment of good and bad consequences.”²¹ And in this case, the good consequence is exploiting the industrial use-value of the land-community, and the bad consequence is not maximizing the industrialization of the land-community; thus, according to this model of economic consequentialism the morally right choice is defined in terms of the economic “good” of the people rather than the overall, philosophical, spiritual, and ecological good of the land-community as a whole.

Instead, Leopold tells us, what is finally needed is a land ethic that can account for the holistic—even if this comes at the expense of the economic. And both Leopold and Berry would

²⁰ Ibid., p. 180.

²¹ Bouma-Prediger, Steven. *Earthkeeping and Character: Exploring a Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic*. Baker Academic, 2020, 10.

agree that if a land ethic excoriates and eliminates the power of the industrial in overmastering human relationships with the land-community, then that land ethic is an unmitigated and virtuous good. This is not to say that economic considerations are bad or immoral. It is, however, to say that economic considerations should not be the center of a bioregional ethic—which we ought to understand as synonymous with a human ethic. Rather, the *oikonomia* (the management of the homeplace or household) should be subordinated to a foundational and motivating virtue ethics descending from a holistic *oikophilia* (a love for, a devotion to, the homeplace) that spurs us towards growing and husbanding a virtuous character as means of teaching us how to have a moral relationship with the land-community.

With an admonition to “quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem [but] [e]xamine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right,” Leopold articulates his land ethic thusly: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”²² By tying the aesthetic to an ethic describing human relationships to and within land-communities, Leopold makes room for what we might and have traditionally called the “use-less” members of the *oikos*. Indeed, by articulating the land ethic in this way, Leopold has taken land-relationships outside the context of the economic entirely. Integrity, beauty, and stability all work together to maintain a wholeness of place, a harmony that requires and obligates our *aesthetic* response to place as among the first order of our ethical considerations.

No longer would we need to resort to arguments that “find” and invent a use for the songbird or the cypress tree or the not farmable tract of land. An aesthetic response to the landscape allows us to see the necessity of every member (being and non-being, person and non-

²² Leopold, p. 189.

person) to the health and ecological sustainment of the biotic communities of which we are parts—even, especially, the members we dislike. This is why a land ethic that syncretizes consequentialism with obligations, both of which are necessarily underwritten by virtue ethics, is necessary if there is to be any hope of establishing loving, sustainable relationships *between* persons and the land with which they co-exist.

Too, we must extend our love for specific places beyond those Wendell Berry describes as merely “scenic” (the non-productive, like national parks or meadows) because a love only of scenic places tends to “exclude unscenic places from nature and from the respect that we sometimes accord to nature.”²³ Where Leopold reminds us to emphasize our aesthetic response to place as a means of working towards a land ethic, Berry reminds us not to forget to aesthetically respond to places that have been most abused, for “beauty and utility are alike dependent upon the health of the world.”²⁴ But to do so requires sacrifices from us, from those who actually dwell and settle in places (which is to say, all of us; none are excused)—specifically, in this case, understanding freedom *as* limitation of behavior, subject to a set of morals *derived* from the constraints of particular places. In Berry’s words, this knowledge is that “man’s only real freedom is to know and faithfully occupy his place—a much humbler place than we have been taught to think—in the order of creation.”²⁵ To preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the *oikos* requires a shift in behavior, *as well as* a change in the character (virtues) of a person living in place—which, again, is all of us.

²³ Berry, Wendell. “Conservation is Good Work.” *Sex, Economy, Freedom, & Community*. Pantheon Books, 1993, 28.

²⁴ Berry, Wendell. “Think Little.” *A Continuous Harmony*. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1972, 84.

²⁵ Ibid.

Earthkeeping, an Ecological Virtue Ethic

In order to understand what this change is and how it relates to the literary methodology concerned with an analysis of American novels from distinct bioregions of the United States, we must first briefly discuss what I have referred to above as Earthkeeping, a term which derives from the recent work of Steven Bouma-Prediger who has written extensively on the relationship between religion, ecology, and creation care. His most recent work on ecological virtue ethics is centrally relevant to this project describing an approach to literary analysis that pays direct attention to the representation of landscape in bioregionally-specific American novels. For this project in particular Bouma-Prediger's work provides a useful framework for how the process of storytelling and the growth of virtue are inseparable, especially if we understand that connection as being rooted in particular places. In the opening pages of *Earthkeeping and Character*, Bouma-Prediger invites readers to consider along with him "a reframing of ecological ethics" by drawing connections between environmentalism and a specifically Christian faith tradition.²⁶ While my readers may not share Bouma-Prediger's faith commitments, the particular way in which he articulates and grounds his notions of earthkeeping (an ecological ethic) have been central to the procedures followed in this project.

Bouma-Prediger chooses the term "earthkeeping" to express human commitments to care for the planet *in toto* and for the particular places in which we dwell because earthkeeping "is concrete, unlike the abstract term *world*. Also, earthkeeping focuses on where we actually live, this blue-green orb called Earth, unlike the hopelessly expansive term *creation*."²⁷ Too, the term earthkeeping, as Bouma-Prediger defines it, drawing on the work of Loren Wilkinson, improves upon the term "nature." For, earthkeeping "includes the entire biosphere and all the interlocking

²⁶ Bouma-Prediger, p. 3.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 4

systems and creatures that are an integral part of this thin slice of life-filled existence, thereby emphasizing both human and other-than-human creatures” without implying an unbridgeable divide between the human and the non-human.²⁸ The focus on holistic approaches to earth-care, to ecological ethics, acknowledges the interdependence and embeddedness of the human organism in place—and not just in place in the singular but in specific, empirically describable *places* in the plural and insistently local sense.²⁹

Too, this emphasis carries with it a sense of *dwelling*, in particular a notion of dwelling forwarded by Kirkpatrick Sale in his book *Dwellers in the Land* which identifies understanding “the immediate specific place where we live” as the “crucial and perhaps only and all-encompassing task” of the human person.³⁰ Knowing that place and its particularities (Sale lists the soil, rocks, source of the water, meaning of the wind, common fauna and flora, proper agricultural practices, local cultures and populations, and more as part of those particularities) requires dwelling there—to be fully engaged with our immediate land-community.

Robert L. Thayer argues in his book *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice* (2003) that to be fully engaged with our individual “life-places” involves a clear ethic rooted in and derived from the particular landscapes that constitute where we each live and move and have our being. Understanding our embeddedness in particular “life-places” (another term for bioregions) helps us come to terms with the central questions of our own existence, Thayer argues:

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ As has been shown already, this is something that Wendell Berry, Aldo Leopold, and many others have articulated thoroughly and in very accessible ways since at least the 1950s. Other recognizable writers who have approached being and doing in this way are, of course, Rachel Carson, Kirkpatrick Sale, Albert Schweitzer, Gary Snyder, Ken Kesey, Wallace Stegner, and Denise Levertov—the latter four of whom were friends, colleagues, and correspondents with Wendell Berry when they were still living.

³⁰ Sale, Kirkpatrick. *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision*. Sierra Club Books, 1985, 42.

“Questions of our existence and action are separable neither from each other nor from place.”³¹

Thayer makes clear to us that “to deeply comprehend *where* one is is also to know *who* one is and *what* needs to be done.”³² Thayer locates the answers to these questions in the fertile ground of biophilia, which he defines as “our innate affection for the totality of life in all its forms.”³³ And from this biophilia (which I will instead refer to as oikophilia throughout) we can derive an ethic of being and doing in place that enables us to work towards a sustainable future as “rooted, active, participating members of a reasonably scaled, naturally bounded, ecologically defined territory.”³⁴

This rooted oikophilic ethic involves, as Mark Johnson has argued, “[a]cknowledging that every aspect of human being is grounded in specific forms of bodily engagement with an environment”³⁵ acknowledging, in other words, that our processes of knowing are shaped and commanded by—and, importantly, conformed to—the individual landscapes in which we live, have lived, and will live. This acknowledgement deeply motivates Bouma-Prediger’s investigation into earthkeeping and ecological ethics and leads him to conclude that an understanding of human behavior from the position of a specifically *ecological* virtue ethics “firmly tethers our minds to the unimpeachable fact of our inescapable embeddedness in this world.”³⁶ For Bouma-Prediger that tether is tightly attached to the landscape and how it forms our virtues, affects our “desires and affections, our dispositions and inclinations,” and how we

³¹ Thayer, Robert L. *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice*. California UP, 2003, 1.

³² Ibid.

³³ Thayer, p. 4.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

³⁵ Johnson, Mark. *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*. Chicago UP, 2008, 1.

³⁶ Bouma-Prediger, p. 24.

direct them towards our specific approaches to our specific places in the world.³⁷ But that tether also includes our “intellectual virtues such as attentiveness and wonder, aesthetic virtues such as appreciation and creativity, physical virtues such as stamina and hardiness” as well as virtues like wisdom and humility in addition to traditionally ecological virtues like self-restraint, patience, austerity, and so forth.³⁸

Bouma-Prediger’s ecological virtue ethic emphasizes that our embeddedness in the world requires that we attend to how our doing impacts, alters, degrades, or grows the places in which we are embedded. Whether or not an action has long-term, generation-long consequences is not (and never should be) in doubt; to think otherwise would be grossly immoral. Each behavior, each act we make in the world—especially when those acts are directed towards the earth (as in agriculture)—must be weighed against whether or not the act will degenerate the place in which we are embedded (both in the short-term *and* in the long-term). Each act must also be weighed against whether or not the place will grow, bloom, and become more healthy because of our doing.

In order for us to morally and accurately evaluate our doing in the world, we must instead focus on our being—who we are rather than what we do. This emphasis on being is essential to areteology because it is from the virtues (i.e., what we have commonly called throughout time our characters) that our doing derives and grows. And yet, being and doing are not entirely separable; indeed, Bouma-Prediger argues that if we are to have a successful ecological virtue

³⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

³⁸ Ibid., 18. Bouma-Prediger draws heavily on the work of environmental virtue ethics (EVE) philosophers Philip Cafaro and Ronald Sandler and their extensive EVE publications including *Environmental Virtue Ethics* (2005), *Character and Environment: A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics* (2007), and *Environmental Ethics: Theory in Practice* (2018)

ethic, we must also include consequentialism and deontology along with virtue ethics.³⁹ Yet, what we do depends in a large part on who we are; our dispositions towards the biotic communities of which we are members (virtues, character) drive our actions, and our actions help us grow to be more virtuous persons. As Bouma-Prediger puts it succinctly, “Conduct (habits over time) shapes character (virtues and vices), and character (dispositions to act) informs conduct (for better and worse).”⁴⁰ Philosopher Lewis Smedes, from whom Bouma-Prediger partially derives his framing, states this process another way: we must “face the facts, respect the rules, consider the consequences, and be responsible” as people with a virtuous moral character.⁴¹ But we can only best do this if we rely on stories that help us imagine our world. As Alisdair MacIntyre reminds us, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”⁴²

Bouma-Prediger goes on to ask how we become (being) virtuous people in the first place, and his answer relies heavily on philosophers and writers as various as James K. A. Smith, Barbara Kingsolver, and Jonathan Gottschall. Because we are “the story-telling animal,” shaping our world through the stories we tell and the stories we are told, we should understand that “most of our actions are pre-reflective, a result of having an intuitive, embodied feel for the world,” which Bouma-Prediger describes as “a kinesthetic way of being in the world shaped over time by

³⁹ Bouma-Prediger defines consequentialism as asking “What are the ultimate goods, and which human actions produce those goods?” and defines deontology as asking “What are our obligations?” In other words, it is like T. M. Scanlon’s question “What do we owe each other?”

⁴⁰ Bouma-Prediger, p. 14.

⁴¹ Bouma-Prediger, p. 13. See Lewis Smedes’ book *Choices* for a more in-depth framing of ethical decision-making. I have elected to use Bouma-Prediger’s parsing of Smedes’ argument for its directness and brevity.

⁴² MacIntyre, Alisdair. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame UP, 1984, 216.

habits and routines.”⁴³ But how do these habits and routines develop? Where do they come from? Describing the work of James K. A. Smith in his book *Imagining the Kingdom*, Bouma-Prediger quotes Smith saying, “[O]ur action emerges from how we *imagine* the world.”⁴⁴ Barbara Kingsolver emphasizes this point by reminding us that “[s]torytelling is as old as our need to remember where the water is, where the best food grows, where we find our courage to hunt.”⁴⁵ The stories we tell about ourselves, in other words, shape our characters because of their effect on us as persons, because they have captivated us over time, because they have “sunk into our bones,” as Smith puts it.⁴⁶ These are the stories that have helped us picture the good life, what it means to be a good person, how to create and foster a good society—the stories in other words that have helped us become more virtuous people who orient ourselves virtuously towards the world.

The Bioregional Imagination & Bioregional Ethics

This project aims to proceed, then, by connecting stories that present to us both positive and negative depictions of character with ecologically-specific encounter with place. It aims to demonstrate how an attention to place-centric detail in examples of American literature can teach us to live more virtuously in our individual life-places. What might living in the desert basins of the American Southwest require of us that is different from (*and* similar to) what living in the deciduous forests of the Ohio River Valley or tall-grass prairies might require? What about the

⁴³ Bouma-Prediger, p. 15. The phrase “story-telling animal” comes from Gottschall’s eponymous book *The Storytelling Animal* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2012).

⁴⁴ Bouma-Prediger, p. 15. Smith uses the term “passional orientation” to describe “all the ways we’ve been primed to see the world” (*Imagining the Kingdom*, Baker Academic, 31-32).

⁴⁵ Kingsolver, Barbara. “Knowing Our Place.” *Small Wonder: Essays*. Harper Perennial, 2002, 40.

⁴⁶ Smith, James K. A. *Imagining the Kingdom*, Baker Academic, 32.

marine rainforests of the Pacific Northwest or the ancient and weathered mountains of Appalachia? In an attempt to answer these questions and because this project draws heavily on Bouma-Prediger's understanding of not just virtue ethics but specifically *ecological* virtue ethics, I turn now to a consideration of whereabouts this project sits within the discourse of what we have called "ecocriticism."

This project considers how specifically *literary representations* of particular places within the United States demonstrate what this dissertation refers to as a bioregional ethics. Each author discussed is making literary and imaginative claims about bioregional ethics through their novels, and this project attempts to resist the urge to make the fiction into prescriptive social or political documents. Instead I have preferred to emphasize the aesthetic and moral responses to the landscape, especially in the sense that Leopold has articulated with reference to the land ethic. While the social and political responses to human behavior towards landscape and localities have their place and can be quite useful they are not central or essential to this project about bioregional ethics in literary representations of landscape.

In other words, paying attention to the aesthetic representations of particular *places* in the United States—which I will refer to variously as ecoregions and bioregions—allows us to see how authors with an intimate knowledge of those places are attempting to teach readers to live more virtuously in whatever place those readers are embedded. They are attempting, as Smith has articulated, to help us sink their stories into our bones, to make them part of our habits and routines so that our characters might grow and that our doing-in-the-world might become more virtuous and work towards the health of our particular bioregions.

I am taking the term bioregion as my preferred reference to the particular land-communities in which people are embedded because of its directness and accessibility. It does

not represent complicated jargon and provides a simple definition that is, thankfully, gaining currency within the larger field of ecological literary criticism and the smaller-yet-growing subfield of bioregional literary criticism. I draw my understanding of bioregions from Robert L. Thayer's book *LifePlace*:

A *bioregion* is literally and etymologically a “life-place”—a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries within a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human communities. Bioregions can be variously defined by the geography of watersheds, similar plant and animal ecosystems, and related, identifiable landforms...and by the unique human cultures that grow from natural limits and potentials of the region.⁴⁷

Thayer's notion of a bioregion as somewhere that life actually (physically, objectively) *takes place* reinforces the possibility of regeneration, sustainment, and human community working together as part of a total ecosystem—if we are to understand these things in their proper place and on their proper scale. Too, bioregion understood as life-place negates and obviates the ultimately unhelpful divisions between human persons and the non-human world in which humans are embedded *alongside* vegetation and animals and stones and soil. In other words, the life-place or bioregion allows us to more clearly approach literature without having to resort to oppositions like “anthropocentric” or “ecocentric.” Rather, we are able to focus on the togetherness, the mutuality of all life in its various forms—something that Albert Schweitzer has called “life that wants to live among other forms of life that want to live.”⁴⁸

Though the field has thankfully grown to recognize the abstraction inherent within a division between the so-called “anthropocentric” and the so-called “ecocentric,” one of the

⁴⁷ Thayer, Robert L. *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice*. California UP, 2003, 3.

⁴⁸ Schweitzer, Albert. *Out of My Life and Thought*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1998, 156.

earliest statements about ecological literary criticism committed this incredible error, ignoring the simply observable fact that humans are embedded in place within a mutually beneficial relationship with that place. Under the erroneous title “Revaluing Nature,” this early statement forwarded the urgency of turning literary criticism into propagandistic activism that addresses the apparently imminent collapse of global ecosystems due to human causes.⁴⁹ Desiring that we “radically reject” the human-focused concerns, the essay excoriates academics for having “placed self-interest above public interest, even, irrationally enough, in matters of common survival.”⁵⁰ Instead, the essay argues that we ought to solely focus on nature-writing instead of the human-focused texts that have made up our cultural and literary touchstones for millennia. What this focus would cost, it should be clear, is any clear understanding of how humans and place are connected: in other words, we cannot have an ecologically-centered critical focus *without* a human-centered focus. They grow in tandem, they work as members of the same community, or not at all.

Thankfully, ecologically literary criticism has grown into maturity in the three decades since its initial conception. Though “Revaluing Nature” has been influential as an archival document within the history of ecological literary criticism, its status as a reactionary essay should not remain in doubt, even as it was a movement towards the right direction that ecocriticism has since gone. Further, despite its manifesto-like nature, the essay has enabled the growth of ecological literary criticism into useful and valuable areas, as well as making

⁴⁹ Love, Glen A. “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism.” *Western American Literature*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1990. I am not criticizing Love himself; however, it is perhaps conceivable that he himself fell under the spell of feeling as if he needed to make a “bold” and “revolutionary” claim so that other academics might see the importance of the field (which no one, to my knowledge, has questioned). Whatever his motivations, divorcing the human from the ecosystem was, is, and always will be a mistake with as grave consequences as ignoring extra-literary ecological issues.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

connections with fields like historicism, feminism, aesthetics, reader-response, and others. Too, this growth of the field has been fruitful in helping us rethink our various relationships to our life-places in which we are inextricably embedded. It should be noted, though, that due to their accessibility, popular appeal, actual knowledge of place and practice, Aldo Leopold and Wendell Berry have likely done more for that rethinking since the 1950s and 1970s (respectively) than some academic criticism. But, bringing Leopold, Berry, and ecological literary critics (Thayer et al.) together has enabled the field to give birth to what Tom Lynch, Cheryl Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster have begun to codify under the term “the bioregional imagination,” which I will refer to as bioregional literary criticism throughout.

Drawing heavily on the work of Robert Thayer and Kirkpatrick Sale—both of whom I have mentioned above—Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster have forwarded an idea of creating “a sort of parallel culture” and redefining “the locus of their work, moving away from existing but for the most part arbitrary political boundaries in favor of those that emerged from a biotically determined framework” for the basis of their literary criticism.⁵¹ Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster also list several bioregional thinkers that have influenced the way in which their book codified a bioregional literary and cultural criticism. These thinkers include people as various as Peter Berg, Raymond Dasman, Stephanie Mills, and Gary Snyder. The inclusion of these specific people should not be surprising for anyone within or alongside the field of ecological literary criticism or the genre of ecological poetry. However, what *is* surprising is the omission of several of Snyder’s well-known contemporaries who have been both explicit and evidentiary in their bioregional thought; most notable for his absence is Wendell Berry (who

⁵¹ Lynch, Tom, Cheryl Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster. *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*. Georgia UP, 2015, 2.

corresponded often with Snyder)—even in the book’s bibliography.⁵² Though everyone’s work is necessarily incomplete and prioritizes different things, *The Bioregional Imagination*’s exclusion of such an influential thinker and *practitioner* of bioregionalism suggests a distortion of the book’s approach in favor of the theoretical and the global.

Lynch et al. further establish their notion of a bioregional criticism by suggesting (as I have above) that “bioregional thinking implies a political and cultural practice that manifests as an environmental ethic in the day-to-day activities of ordinary residents.”⁵³ Despite the fact that their language is somewhat abstract and dehumanizing (referring to persons as “residents”), the connection they draw between thought and practice is a necessary move that I attempt to forward and expand upon in this project as I consider specific bioregions and the practices that fiction-writers imagine occurring in those places. Citing Doug Aberly in his work on “the challenge of reconnecting socially-just human cultures in a sustainable manner to the region-scale ecosystems in which they are irrevocably embedded,” the authors acknowledge the lack of central leaders and messiahs for the bioregional movement.⁵⁴

The authors appear to begrudgingly admit an incredibly essential element in understanding bioregionalism into their analysis: that there are no central figures, that there is “no official bioregional program or ideology.”⁵⁵ Rather, they acknowledge (and yet this is an

⁵² This absence is most frustrating because of Berry’s extensive and explicit work on bioregionalism since the ‘60s. Furthermore, the correspondence between Snyder and Berry has been quite easily accessible and not an obscure fact (they have appeared together on-stage at several events)—and, even though Lynch et al., would not have had access to this book (because it had not been published yet), it is important to note that Berry and Snyder’s correspondence covering a period between 1969 and 2013 has been collected in *Distant Neighbors: The Selected Letters of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder* (Counterpoint Press, 2015).

⁵³ Lynch et al., p. 3.

⁵⁴ Aberly, Doug. “Interpreting Bioregionalism: A Story from Many Voices.” *Bioregionalism*. Edited by Michael McGinnis, Routledge, 1999, 13.

⁵⁵ Lynch et al., p. 3.

unbridled good) the necessary decentralism inherent within a bioregional criticism, which is to say, they tell us that “there is an evolving dialogue about a set of ideals and ideas continually tested by practice and, as would seem proper, continually inflected by the particularities of diverse places and cultures.”⁵⁶ Forgiving the authors their mild condescension to the particularities of diverse places and cultures, they do touch upon another central facet of bioregional literary critics, one which this project expands upon. They emphasize an intense attention to the local and the diverse, a recognition that “[b]ioregional thinking may be expressed quite differently in San Francisco, California than in Ferrara, Italy.”⁵⁷ It is concerning, however, that their examples are solely urban (and highly dense, unsustainably-populated urban spaces in the case of San Francisco) and that they do not draw from the more numerous (and more representative) rural places that constitute the majority of the United States. Even so, the authors’ emphasis on bioregionalism’s more positive orientation to the world and to persons allows them to note that bioregionalism seeks to imagine and create “human communities that live sustainably in place” centered on ideas the lead to behaviors such as “community, sustainability, local culture, local food systems,” and others.⁵⁸ Indeed, part of the authors’ purpose in writing *The Bioregional Imagination* was to push forward methods that we can use to talk about how literary authors have and do imagine place-based communities. However, what is missing from their imagining is a specific emphasis on how American writers from particular bioregions have used fiction to teach us through illustration (rather than polemic/propaganda) to be more virtuous

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Lynch et al., p. 3.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

persons embedded in particular, objective places and how American writers have used their writing to help us live *into* the stories that have been written.⁵⁹

The obvious starting point for describing what a bioregional literary criticism looks like is Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*, a landmark work in ecological literary criticism. Buell argues that ecological crises are, in sum, "a crisis of the imagination," or, in other words, are indicative of the way a culture imagines itself and imagines its position within the natural world.⁶⁰ Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster build on Buell's work by arguing that "[l]iterature and other arts function as vital expressions of cultural values that can ignite emotion, change minds, and inspire action," which can shape and be shaped by the bioregional imagination they hope to articulate.⁶¹ To connect this conception with the discussion of virtue ethics and literature above, we can see that the relationship between storytelling and the various bioregions we inhabit is widely recognized and is of vital importance if we are to grow into more virtuous persons living more morally as members of our diverse communities. That is a major aim for this project—to show how different American authors attend to the specific bioregions in which their characters are, and how they demonstrate their moral development through close encounters with the landscape.

Lynch et al. push the idea that literature can shape and be shaped by the bioregions out of which it emerges towards an argument that suggests that stories "can also reflect, develop, celebrate, and protect the unique character of the bioregions that produce them....literature and

⁵⁹ James K. A. Smith invites us to consider what living into stories means in *Imagining the Kingdom* (cf. p. 32).

⁶⁰ Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Belknap Press, 1996, 2.

⁶¹ Lynch et al., p. 12.

stories can play a crucial role in renewing a sense of place among residents.”⁶² By showing people of those places the beauty and connectedness that exists in the relationship between persons’ being and doing and the land, literature “can also provide models for how to reinhabit a bioregion or otherwise transform our relationships to places.”⁶³ What is required, then, is what the authors’ call “a bioregional perception,” which is “more a certain kind of attention to place than a sense of identity that divides on place from another.”⁶⁴

While I do agree with Lynch et al. that this so-called bioregional perception is a certain kind of attention to place, they do pass over significant ways that people can be shown the value (and indeed the virtue) of forming lasting relationships or memberships with the places in which they have been embedded. This project instead suggests that both attention to place and a sense of identity in place are crucial to any kind of growth in a bioregional ethics. While certainly shifting focus away from “divisions” can be useful—especially in terms of constructed political categories, economic categories, ethnic categories, etc.—when speaking of *grounded*, *place-oriented* communities, it is important to preserve an understanding of bioregional divisions alongside that which is similar across bioregions. It is important to a member of a desert community to know what divides her relationship to the land from a member of a mountain community—just as it is important for both to realize that each other’s actions will eventually flow into the larger whole of which all of us are inextricably a part.

Because of these two modes of perception and being, we should come to understand bioregional literary criticism as distinct (though related) to ecological literary criticism more broadly. Cheryl Glotfelty has defined ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between

⁶² Ibid., p. 12-13.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 13.

⁶⁴ Lynch et al., p. 13.

literature and the environment,” which has been an incredibly influential, clear, accessible, and lasting definition of the field.⁶⁵ Too, Greg Garrard has attempted to add to Glotfelty’s definition by specifying that ecocriticism studies relationships between “the *human* and the *non-human*, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ self.”⁶⁶ Much preferring the former definition, Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster (and this project) place their focus on simply the connectedness of people to place, emphasizing more clearly the ways of doing involved in actually living in place. From both of these definitions, the authors indicate that while bioregional literary criticism shares a similar goal with ecocriticism, “its focus is more narrow, concentrating on how literary works relate to specific bioregions or contribute to bioregional practice and imagination.”⁶⁷ Rather than rethink an editorialized (and somewhat debasing) notion of human personhood, the authors have attempted to articulate an approach to literary criticism that attends to the particularities of specific bioregions, maintaining local vocabulary as often as possible and preserving human persons as necessary members in the growth and flourishing of the bioregion.⁶⁸ Doing so can assist us in learning that we ought to understand living-in-place, as Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann have argued, as “following the necessities and pleasures of life as they are uniquely presented by a particular site....[this] may be the only way in which a truly civilized existence can be maintained.”⁶⁹ We can, in other words, as Lewis Smedes has said, begin to face the facts, respect the rules, consider the consequences, and be responsible.

⁶⁵ Glotfelty, Cheryl and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Georgia UP, 1996, xviii.

⁶⁶ Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2011, 6.

⁶⁷ Lynch et al., p. 16.

⁶⁸ This approach is something that Wendell Berry has advocated in clearer terms since at least the mid-to-late 1970s.

⁶⁹ Berg, Peter and Raymond Dasmann. “Reinhabiting California.” *Ecologist*, vol. 7, no. 10, 1977, 400.

Bioregional Ethics in the Literature of the United States

This place is where *Bioregional Ethics in the Literature of the United States* seeks to intervene. This project does not seek to rebut or counter trends in bioregional literary criticism; rather, it seeks to contribute in long form to the “terrain of bioregional literary criticism,” which, as Lynch et al. correctly note, “remains largely unmapped.”⁷⁰ It seeks to devote intense and specific attention to four particular bioregions of the United States: the Prairie, the Great American Desert, the Marine West Coast Forest, and Appalachia. Within each of these bioregions, which serve as the foci of the chapters, this project discusses authors who have extensively and carefully written about and represented the places in which their novels are set. The Prairie chapter focuses on *My Ántonia* (1918) and *O Pioneers!* (1913) by Willa Cather and *Giants in the Earth* (1925) by O. E. Rølvaag, the Great American Desert chapter focuses on *Blood Meridian* (1985) by Cormac McCarthy and *Ceremony* (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko, the Marine West Coast Forest chapter focuses on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) and *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964) by Ken Kesey, and the Appalachia chapter focuses on *River of Earth* by James Still (1940) and the 2015 collection of short stories *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley* by Ann Pancake.

These four bioregions have been chosen for this project because they have been totally or relatively ignored as bioregions in and of themselves within the larger context of literary criticism as a whole. They have also been chosen because they represent possibilities of discussing regions outside of the ones commonly talked about—namely the American South, the Northeast, and the West (which often simply refers to California). Likely, however, Appalachia

⁷⁰ Lynch et al., p. 16.

has been the most discussed of any of these places as a region itself, but much of this discussion has relied on political and cultural divisions instead of within bioregional contexts. The same can be said of the Midwest. In recent years, attention has been paid to the Midwest as a region, but as of this writing little-to-no attention has been paid to the *Prairie* as a bioregion.⁷¹ And it is accurate that attention has been given to McCarthy's Southwest novels, and attention has been paid to how the environment functions within his work, but to my knowledge, no criticism has as of yet made clear the connection between ecology and region with regard to his work. Some attention has actually been paid to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* with regard to the environment, but specifically this attention has been to the Department of the Interior's efforts to dam the Columbia River and its effects on displaced Amerindian populations as they have been represented and embodied by Chief Bromden within the novel. Too, attention has been given to Silko's novel within the context of environmental criticism, with especial regard to the uranium mines on Laguna tribal lands.

But, as has been the case with each bioregion this project discusses, there has been little-to-no attempt to connect the fiction to the larger bioregion out of which it emerges, especially in terms of how the fiction demonstrates proper means of living morally and sustainably in place. This is the major impetus for this project: to pay close attention to the places that authors represent and in which they place their characters. To do so, this project attempts to discuss passages within each work of fiction that are intensely local in their description, especially

⁷¹ Though critical writings about Cather and Rølvaag do attend to the prairie environment, little of it attends to the prairie as a bioregion in which ethical relationships with place are worked out in the sense that I am discussing the two authors. Further, much criticism on Rølvaag relates to immigration and assimilation within larger American cultures.

passages that emphasize the natural world and characters' aesthetic response to the local natural worlds.⁷²

In one sense, this is where the project's attention will be given. In another, the project attempts to focus on how these different authors see the bioregions they are writing about. Too, this project emphasizes that the way these authors see the bioregions is inextricably tied to their aesthetic responses to and presentations of their local life-places—that representing the prairie, say, in a particular way allows Cather to teach readers how to live virtuously in place, especially by tethering landscape and plot together such that human destiny is inseparable from the land's.⁷³ Rooted within this attention is an essential principle that has been discussed throughout this introduction both in the context of Wendell Berry and the ethical decision-making framework developed by Lewis Smedes: namely, that we must derive our ethical systems from the specific landscape itself. This conclusion should come as no surprise if we consider that a specifically *bioregional* ethics emphasizes the land-community of which all things are members. Different places, it should be obvious, support different behaviors—living ethically in the desert will look different than living in Costa Rican jungles.

To attempt to live and do in a way improper to the bioregion in which one is would be to work to the overall degradation of the bioregion. Instead, then, of imposing our own, preexisting ethical systems onto the vast diversity of local landscapes, we should attempt to *derive* our

⁷² Elsewhere (and in the context *Paradise Lost*) Peter C. Remien has connected this aesthetic response to the world with ecological concerns, labeling it as “Satan’s pause” upon first seeing the Garden of Eden. For a fascinating study of this phenomenon, see “Satan’s Pause: Wonder and Environmental Preservation in *Paradise Lost*.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2013, pp. 817-836.

⁷³ It is important to distinguish this kind of work from the more propagandistic work of those whose goal is to communicate a “message” to readers. The authors discussed here do good work *presenting* characters whose actions in a world we can evaluate in bioregional-ethical terms. This is distinct from attesting or declaring that a certain behavior is true (which often occurs through “preaching” at readers, or telling rather than showing).

ethical systems from the world outside of us, considering as the foundation for those systems what the particular bioregion will and will not support in terms of individual and community behavior. This process is compatible with a virtue ethics approach to bioregional ethics because we can observe behaviors consistent with many of what we call virtues within the natural world. For example, we understand stewardship and respect for the soil as virtues because we have for millennia seen what our behaviors do to the soil. If we are observant and if we are persons willing to grow into being more virtuous persons, we will respond to those observations and learn to be better stewards of the biotic communities of which we are a part.⁷⁴

Describing this derivative form of bioregional ethics takes up much of the first chapter, “Anchoring on the Sea of Grass: Willa Cather & O. E. Rølvaag’s Hermeneutics of Place.” It considers the anchoring that necessarily takes place for human communities to survive and thrive on the tall-grass and other prairies of what we call Nebraska and South Dakota as they are respectively represented in the work of Willa Cather and O. E. Rølvaag. This chapter first discusses the ecoregions and bioregions of the plains in general, moving towards a specific consideration of the Cather and Rølvaag’s local bioregions. It argues, as a means to shape the mind for remainder of the project, that knowing what makes up the real world local bioregions enables us to begin making strides towards approaching the *imagined*, literary representations of those bioregions. By allowing our minds to be shaped by the local, we can begin to approach literary works on the terms that they set before us.

The necessary first steps in this process is by attending to how an author represents the terms of the bioregion and how the characters respond to it; we can then evaluate how well or

⁷⁴ Of course, it is to be acknowledged that part of our response to our doing-in-the-world is for the sake of survival and sustainment. We learned to be better stewards in part because we needed to feed ourselves—yet, innately, we have come to understand this as a virtue the landscape has been attempting to teach us.

poorly these characters responded and speculate on why the outcomes that occurred, occurred. As the chapter argues, this is due precisely to not following the virtue ethics of bioregion itself. In a word, the precise, focused representation of place in a specifically literary form allows authors to test, imagine, and form a localist, bioregional ethics. Readers, acclimating themselves to a proper approach to the work of fiction, are able to come to terms with the facts placed before them, respect the limitations essential to the fictional ecosystem, and learn the bioregional ethics of place grown by the authors they are reading.

First discussing Willa Cather's novel *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!*, this chapter argues that Cather's work in both form and content cultivates what I have called a derivative hermeneutics. She forwards an idea of local, bioregional culture that works against cosmopolitan standardization of culture (especially of cultural values) and promotes the idea that people of the Middle West should develop their own cultures and own ways of being and doing rather than imitating the American Northeast and European models that were being imported to the Middle West. We are shown through Cather's work what the land has to say for itself, how it wishes to be in harmonious relationship with people, and how it aims to preserve the rapidly disappearing ways of prairie life in the face of the industrial-scientific economy of the United States.⁷⁵

In discussion of O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, this chapter covers an alternative, darker view of learning to listen to the landscape as human persons attempt to make their place on earth coterminous with the land. In this novel, the prairie exerts its agency in a far more assertive fashion than the satisfied sighs that the prairie lets out when the plow churns up its soil.

⁷⁵ Allow me to reinforce here Wendell Berry's reminder that the industrial refers to capitalist, socialist, and communist formations of economics, culture, and values. Any discourse that retains capital (and its distribution) and power as its foundational elements is the imposed and the imperial that every author in this project ultimately rejects in favor of a bioregional, land-community model that keeps aesthetics and membership—keeping faith in Jayber Crows words—with the place and people outside of economic, industrial value-systems.

The focus of this section's analysis is what happens when attempts made to read and understand the landscape's inherent ethical systems fail—what happens when mis-readings and misunderstandings occur and how that affects the hermeneutics of becoming a native to the place in which one arrived.

The project transitions from a chapter about a landscape that is difficult to thrive and survive in to a chapter about a landscape that contains an even more precarious balance between sustainability and degradation: the Great American Desert. Focusing on Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, "Like Wonders Much Reduced: The Great American Desert" considers how the desert deceptively appears devoid of life and that, indeed, forms of life do survive there; they cling to the soil and dig deep to persist despite the difficulty of doing so. The argument focuses on the forms of reconciliation that exist within the desert and how McCarthy and Silko represent both the encounters of people with land and the representations of that land and its bioregional ethics.

The chapter begins with a discussion of *Blood Meridian* and considers the rapacious damage done to the local desert bioregion by the imported, imposed, industrial, and imperial value-systems of the American East. It considers whether or not the damage done can be repaired, whether or not the hostile value-systems can be expelled, redeemed, reformed, or reconciled with by renegotiating human persons' relationship with the bioregion. Taking as a starting place that McCarthy has always presented readers, like Flannery O'Connor, with an understanding of word and world that is sacramental, this section argues that *Blood Meridian* presents human persons torn from their sacramental understandings of the biotic world and questions whether or not the "hoping for" is even possibly in face of exterminating and depraved tendencies inherent within the human person.

This chapter then considers how *Ceremony* presents readers with a tentative hope for reconciliation with the land through Tayo's participation in the Laguna healing ceremonies. It considers Tayo's re-memembering back into the Laguna community—its stories, traditions, morals, and attention to what the land will tell the people in terms of how to live with it. The chapter insists that through an investigation of the guiding themes in Silko's novel and the ways it represents Laguna responses to the ravaging of their land by industrial forces that hope necessarily remains embedded in and essential to the local landscape. The movement of Silko's novel is through the dark night of the soul into the light—it is the movement through the sunset and the nighttime into the sunrise of reconciling the old with the new without discarding, erasing, or excoriating the traditional.

Turning then from landscapes of absence and extreme limitation, “Looking Dead At It: The Confrontational Ethic of Seeing in *Sometimes a Great Notion* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*” considers the Marine West Coast Forests as they are represented in the work of Ken Kesey, specifically his first two novels *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Throughout that chapter and in other bioregional writing, this bioregion is also called Cascadia—though I have privileged the marine rainforest designation because it is more concrete and less abstract. Because this bioregion is lush with life that flourishes easily, the bioregional ethics of living in place here are vastly different than those of the desert or the prairie. The crowdedness of the bioregion, though it does have similar ethics (as do all bioregions) to living in place as other locales do, requires different ways of being and doing than other places on earth. As this chapter argues, Kesey represents the confrontational and complementary natures of a bioregional ethics in the marine rainforests, primarily focusing on how the closeness of all organisms affects the readings and misreadings of landscape that occur in his novels.

Indeed, he attempts to demonstrate that living both as an individual (separate from the mentality of the community) and as an individual member of the community becomes a vital, necessary component to living ethically in this bioregion.

An analysis of *Sometimes a Great Notion* reveals that the central bioregional question in this novel is: “How do we make sense of mankind’s place within a complex ecosystem composed of other organisms, human and non-human memories, and the necessities of survival for all organisms in the ecosystem?” What this entails is a constant renegotiation of the human position in the landscape such that the human person can live alongside and within the limits set by the bioregion itself. Mirroring these concerns in the structure of the novel itself, Kesey constructs a narrative of biotic relationships between the persons and the land more generally but also between the various human persons that inhabit the novel’s setting. As Kesey deeply implants characters within their biotic community, he also invites readers into that community and helps us begin to understand that all of us are life that wants to live amongst other life that wants to live.

The latter half of this chapter offers an ecological reading of Kesey’s first novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. The reading demonstrates how Kesey’s ecological concerns are distributed across his novels, and specifically in *Cuckoo’s Nest* how those ecological concerns run up against the impositional institutions that aim to control and oppress the human person, specifically the mental ward. The novel represents the dissolution of natural ecosystems through the creeping imposition of centers of artificial power; indeed, the mental ward remains a twisted form of a biotic community presenting its residents with a degraded form of bioregional ethics from which Chief Bromden eventually escapes.

I suggest the novel contrasts the sanitized and artificial ecosystem the ward attempts to construct with the desire for reintegration and reinhabitation represented by the major characters in the novel—McMurphy and Bromden especially. What this reading discovers is that resistance with the desired outcome of reinhabitation inside of a proper bioregional community requires a bottom-up approach, a choice made by the individual to resist the immoral systems inherent within discourses of power and instead actively seek out ways of living virtuously in place. And this choice must begin with the individual's desire to improve their being so that their doing may follow forth from it.

The project then turns towards a consideration of the relatively familiar bioregion of Appalachia. "The Settled, Blasted Land: The Appalachia of James Still and Ann Pancake" follows after the work done by Jeff Biggers in his articulation of how Appalachia has historically been stereotyped and ergo misrepresented by people with poor or incomplete information about the bioregion—its people and its landscape. The ethics of living in Appalachia as represented by James Still and Ann Pancake necessarily involve a critical renegotiation of how we approach the bioregion (separating it from the South; expanding it to include Pennsylvania, New York, Maine; etc.) and a re-acclimation to how the bioregion presents itself to us—what ethical systems are inherent within it.

Considering first James Still's *River of Earth*, this chapter analyzes this first major twentieth-century novel of and about Appalachia in terms of husbandry and the bioregional ethics involved in practicing care for the land. Because this is the context in which the chapter discusses Still's novel, it is important to note that there is no such thing as "bad husbandry." If a practice is immoral within the bioregion, it definitionally cannot be husbandry but rather exists as industrial extraction and exploitation. The beginning intrusion of the global-cosmopolitan-

industrial ethical paradigms are shown in the novel to be disastrous from a bioregional standpoint since their practices extract for the net benefit of those who have and will never set foot inside the Appalachian bioregion—especially not as dwellers in the land.

Intensifying this consideration is the chapter's discussion of Ann Pancake's *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley*. Focusing primarily on a single story from the collection, this section attempts to examine how the encroachment of the urban and industrial affects the available means humans have of living ethically in place, of living harmoniously with other humans in those places. The discussion of Pancake emphasizes the way of love as the only means of healing the trauma done to the landscape—love for other persons, love for the landscape. As well as listening to the land's leading (because the bioregion is one of the most ancient in the world), Pancake's story reveals to readers what kind of objective love is the necessary for grounding any bioregional ethics: it is the love that demonstrates to us how embedded we are in our particular places, the love that teaches us to be still and make room for others, the love that requires us to love another whether that be person or place.

It is the hope and aim of this project to forward discussions of bioregionalism more broadly and bioregional ethics in particular. Further, it is the hope of this project to inspire readers towards more objectively loving, moral relationships with the people and places with and in which they are embedded. What stands to be gained from a consideration of literature as the means to cultivate these kinds of bioregional virtues that we derive from the landscape is a recovery of the capacity of literature to teach through example how to live in place—and, importantly, more in the form of art or hagiography rather than political tract or propaganda. Moreover, it is the hope of this project that it stands as the first steps towards reclaiming a more concrete, less subjective/abstract aesthetics as the grounds of our moral education. "Literature,"

Karen Swallow Prior writes in her introduction to *On Reading Well*, “is birthed from our fallenness....it is the nature of literature to express—and cultivate—desire.”⁷⁶ May it be that our desires are directed towards living better in our places, are directed towards husbanding and cultivating the local cultures in which we inevitably find ourselves. Let us become and remain dwellers in the land.

⁷⁶ Prior, Karen Swallow. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life Through Great Books*. Brazos Press, 2018, 26.

Chapter I: Anchoring on the Sea of Grass: Willa Cather's & O.E. Rølvaag's Hermeneutics of Place

Introduction

The ocean of grass resting between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains is unique as an ecosystem in the world. Its settlement and representation in literature is uniquely American and essential to both American history at large and the history of American literature in particular. With the expansion westward in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the so-called opening of the plains, the prairie serves as a singular focus for American literary creation and as a myth in the American consciousness. The frontier in American literature (and in critical writing about it) has been unfortunately homogenized through a cultural perception of the plains as “flyover country” and an emphasis on coastal, cosmopolitan literatures as default expressions of American literary identity.

And yet, the vast sea of grass contains immensely diverse species and the textures of its landscapes. There, as in other individual localities, are a wealth of species that prohibits (due to their distinct biologies and particular adaptations to their climates) and allows certain ethical, political, agricultural, social, or moral actions to take place within the ecosystem—if we have the courage and attention to take note of what these species tell us. This ecological diversity then should guide our approaches to any analysis of particular places—that the moral positions evidenced, embodied, and demonstrated in a Fitzgerald novel about New York City are different and perhaps antithetical to a Cather novel about the Prairie or about a Midwestern city. Further, if we are guided by the ecological diversity of a place, we should be able understand that there is

no central position that we can claim as the sole moral authority, equally applicable across all borders.

In particular, the decentralized nature of an ethics or morality rooted in the ecology of a place demonstrates the scale element of Kirkpatrick Sale's bioregional paradigm, wherein the unit of organization and analysis (especially in terms of the efficacy of any action) is the community or the region.⁷⁷ Indeed, even in an analysis of literary representations by humans (and therefore subjective authors) of *ecoregions*, care must be taken to choose an appropriate scale with which to begin analysis. Though we could begin with the large Level I ecoregions described by the EPA, we would be missing on the specific speciation of additional ecoregion levels. Though Level II is more useful in separating specific ecosystems from each other, even this level covers too much ground quite literally, especially when Levels III and IV are taken into account. For example, government-assigned borders, though they already have fallen apart due to ecoregional classification, are further exposed as utterly artificial at Level II and even more so at Levels III and IV. Indeed, what we call Nebraska is separated into five different-but-related ecoregions at Level III (Northwestern Glaciated Plains, Nebraska Sand Hills, High Plains, Central Great Plains, and Western Corn Belt Plains). What this division evidences is that even on a state-by-state basis, the scale is wrong for analysis. Regions, ecologically speaking, must be broken down into smaller and smaller pieces if any analysis derived from the land is going to be effective and in ethical relationship to land from which it is supposed to have come.

At Level IV, which brings us closest to the literature that this chapter is about, we arrive at ecoregional divisions that are far more functional to literary analysis. Though a trained geographer or specialist in plains ecosystems might be able to identify (if tentatively) the

⁷⁷ Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers in the Land*, UGA Press, 2000, 50.

localities in which authors set their works from trends in and descriptions of the landscape in novels or poems, I have elected to use a hybrid method of grounding the setting of the novels I will discuss. Initially, I will use common knowledge about authorial and biographical decisions regarding where these novels are supposed to be set. I will then attempt to connect an analysis of the novel's themes to the landscape in such a way that that particular landscape's agency will emerge and will lead us to consider how each author I discuss imagines a set of locally grounded ethical principles in relation to the landscape represented.

For example, taking into account that it is widely accepted that Black Hawk, Nebraska is a fictionalized version of Cather's home Red Cloud, we can use Red Cloud's real-world location in Webster County, Nebraska to determine that *My Ántonia* is set in the Level IV ecoregion labeled 27b: Rolling Plains and Breaks. This ecoregion is described in *Land Resource Regions and Major Land Resource Areas of the United States, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Basin* as "dissected plains" having "broad undulating to rolling ridgetops and hilly to steep valley sides. The valleys are generally narrow, but broad flood plains and terraces are along the Republican River and its larger tributaries."⁷⁸ If we then compare the description here from the US Department of Agriculture with the way Jim sees the prairie in *My Ántonia*, we find that they corroborate each other. The oft-quoted passage where Jim sees the grasses as the color of wine-stains and cries in wonder that "there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running," provides us with an understanding of how deeply the landscape has affected Cather in her literary creation.

⁷⁸ *Land Resource Regions and Major Land Resource Areas of the United States, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Basin*, United States Department of Agriculture, National Resource Conservation Service, 2006, 200.

Of course, corroborating Cather's description of how Jim sees the grassland does more than just allow us to empiricize somehow Cather's attention to landscape and thereby suggest that she knew what she was talking about when writing her novels. In fact, to stop at that assertion would be to invite the obvious question of why that empirical corroboration matters, and in one sense it does not matter, since the purpose of my study is not to make claims about the empirical verifiability of writerly description of landscape. In another sense, however, thinking about the thick, locally-oriented description matters quite a lot to a study looking at the bioregionalist ethics imagined in literary fiction and poetry—it can help us to see the value in looking through an ecological lens that privileges the attempt to take places and representations as they are, as they have been imagined by authors like Cather and Rølvaag.

Additionally, looking through this lens of the ecosystem gives us a vocabulary for ways to talk about relationships with landscape. The EPA, for instance, recognizes that ecosystems are interactive and blend with one another and that they do not follow the easy, cartographic systems of delineation used by nation-builders and culture-makers. The EPA also insists that by-and-large ecoregions have fairly consistent and observable boundaries, what are called ecotones or transition zones between biological communities. These transition zones are important to understanding how ecosystems interact and how they behave, especially as they become different-yet-bordering ecosystems. Knowing about the real-world consistency of an ecosystem that someone like Cather writes about in her novels can help readers find ways to approach the *imagined* and literary construction of those ecosystem using some of the vocabulary that ecologists use to describe the extra-literary environments that make up the North American continent. Because this area is so large it is ecologically diverse it is essential that any study of the Great Plains as such must consider those smaller, individual pieces that compose such a vast

ecoregion of an even vaster continent. Doing so helps us to see particularities of place and enables us to approach those small parcels on the local terms already there, whether those localities exist in the heart of an ecoregion or at the ecotone.

As a consequence of using the ecosystem (the ecoregion) as a lens, it is ethical and thereby appropriate to take the Rolling Plains as the name for the ecoregion to analyze when discussing *My Ántonia*. Further evidence for the truth of this claim comes from Jones' *Field Guide*, in a section on the flora of the plains. Jim describes the grasses as red, as the color of wine. With knowledge of the growth patterns of grasses on the prairie, we can identify this grass as the Big Bluestem or *Andropogon gerardii*, a grass that has blue-green colors in its stem in early summer but by mid-to-late summer is a specific shade of red that led Jones to remark that “ ‘Winestem’ seems a more appropriate name for this grass in the late summer and early fall.”⁷⁹ Beyond knowing that the time of year dictates when the big bluestem turns red, we can also perhaps learn something about the themes of the novel if we know how the big bluestem behaves within the prairie landscape: just like the events in the prairie dog town and Ántonia's orchard (both of which I will touch on later), knowing how species operate in “native” landscapes gives us a way in to read the novel or poem under discussion.

So too does paying attention to the subtle difference we find when we look at the setting of *O Pioneers!* It is the township of Hanover, which based on the tight range of Cather's settings in her Prairie novels could be a version of Hanover in Gage County. We can see that this Level IV ecoregion is more precisely classified as 27f: Rainwater Basin Plains. According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Nebraska Wetland Management Division, the Rainwater Basin “is a complex of wetlands scattered throughout a 21-county area. The wetlands are shallow basins that

⁷⁹ Jones, Stephen. *A Field Guide to the North American Prairie*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004, 24.

provide resting and feeding areas for millions on [sic] bird species during spring and fall migration.”⁸⁰ Though both the Rolling Plains and the Rainwater Basin share some of the same topographical features such as flood plains, terracing, and rolling shifts in elevation from east to west, they are distinctly different in that the former is not considered a wetland and as such could help us to explain some of the different aesthetic effects Cather generates in her representation of these two different ecosystems across two different novels in addition to a consideration of her own intentions regarding what she attempted to accomplish with her novels. Cather’s representations of these two different ecosystems are inseparable from her aesthetics, such that where the landscape is represented as expectant and hopeful, the effect is often that of joyful fulfillment but where the landscape is represented as antagonistic or mournful, the effect is often that of regret, sorrow, and disappointment.

The embeddedness of these kinds of aesthetic effects appear most clearly through a close analysis of the novels of Willa Cather and O.E. Rølvaag. What will be shown are the different ways these authors read the prairie and fashion an agency of landscape and place within their work. The agency of landscape and place that each author reveals in their novels is fashioned or assembled rather than created, and, I will argue, the events of the novels themselves are mapped onto ethical and ecological structures already present in the landscape that serves so clearly as a main character in each of these novels.

What ought to be clear at this point is the variety within an ecoregion that at first glance (and what is literature if not the correcting of first glances?) seems homogenous and empty of landmarks by which one can orient or place oneself in a landscape. To that end, it also needs to be made clear that though these authors respond to landscape with much of the same emotion

⁸⁰ “About the District.” *Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District Nebraska*, accessed 28 June 2018, https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Rainwater_Basin_WMD/about.html

and similar aesthetic choices in their writing about it, they reason out different agencies they find in the landscape within the pages of their novels. For instance, the role that the Rolling Plains plays in the life of Jim Burden is vastly different than the role that landscape plays in the lives of the Hansa family in *Giants in the Earth*. Though similar in their representations (like figuring the empty plain as an earthen sea), Cather and Rølvaag imagine the prairie as *doing* something different to and with their respective characters. They see the landscape as teaching the novels' human characters something different about how to relate to the land, even as those humans apprehend the land similarly. And by representing a similar landscape in different ways, Cather and Rølvaag are able to fashion a *possible* bioregionalist ethics out of their fiction.

Certainly, it is one of the central advantages of fiction that it is in fact imaginative—no matter how “realistic” or aligned with “realism” we describe the fictional production, the fact remains that it is indeed fiction, unreal, imaginative. This essential quality of fiction demonstrates that the fiction does not always already or immediately have real world consequences (though we often impose this quality on the fictions we encounter); rather it provides an imaginative space in which we can meet people like and unlike ourselves, with all of our strengths and all of our evils. We are able to pause and consider and evaluate whether or not an application of the ethical principles proposed by the fiction are workable or desirable in an extra-fictional world.

Through this imaginative space, an author is able to test out an idea, in this case various bioregional ethics, in order to show readers the possible ways of living in relationship to both other people and the world. Thus, what readers will find here in my analysis of what various regional American authors see as the agency they find within landscapes is not comprehensive, impositional answers but rather a collection of diverse, decentralized, localist suggestions for

living within an ecosystem wherein everything one does contributes thereby to the health, detriment, and sustenance of that ecosystem. Further, this awareness necessitates an emphasis on that which connects, that which builds and creates, as a means to imagine an ethics of place.

What we find of these imaginative dealings with ecosystems and bioregional ethics in these prairie authors selected for this study is a common obsession with the act of reading the landscape, especially in terms of its comprehensibility. While in some sense, all fictive creations consider the act of “reading” (variously defined in the case of music, painting, writing, film, and so on), it is in these authors’ work that reading the landscape is intensified such that it takes a central role in what has been chosen by these authors as major themes in their work. Indeed, like the discussion of bioregional ethics above Willa Cather and O.E. Rølvaag, all are interested—within their work about the Prairie—in dealing with this question of how to properly comprehend the place in which they place their characters. Reading the prairie properly (and thereby representing it imaginatively) is directly tied to a proper understanding of what constitutes the ecological particularities of the place. The lived experiences and empirical knowledge of the authors finds their way into their art, and their representation of an agential landscape becomes, in short, a setting wherein a localist, bioregional ethics can be imagined, tested, and evaluated. What they find, what they show readers, what they attempt to teach us is that the landscape has much more to say about understanding itself than humans often give it credit for.

Willa Cather’s Prairie

Some of the most powerful examples of a method of interpretation that derives both its practices and conclusions from the subject being interpreted (what I call derivative hermeneutics)

in American fiction come from the work of Willa Cather. Not just in theme but also in form, much of Cather's work could be said to be *about* this question of coming to terms with the landscape on its own terms. Susan Rosowski has gone as far to argue that Cather creates an ecology of place by, in part, "reading drama into the vegetation about her" and that the interaction of different species in her stories and settings are all narratives influenced by emerging ecological models at the time, suggesting that "Cather wrote her plains stories with reference to a real world where...settlers seeking farming methods appropriate to their land plant sod[,] corn, introduce winter wheat, and debate whether to plant red clover or alfalfa."⁸¹ Cather becomes—in Rosowski's estimation, an estimation which I unequivocally share—a social reformer "concerned [with] advocating a culture that is native to a place," arguing "against standardization and for diversity" and for the Middle Westerners to develop their own style of life instead of mimicking the culture of the East.⁸² Though Rosowski does not explicitly locate this idiosyncratic lifestyle within the unique ecologies of the Middle West or the Great Plains, I am, and I believe that Rosowski would also be willing to entertain an ecoregional growth of localized culture.

As much as we can say that Cather's novels of the Prairie—*My Ántonia*, *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *One of Ours*—are about the pioneer experience and about female pioneer experience in particular,⁸³ we must also acknowledge that they also take as their central

⁸¹ Rosowski, Susan. "Willa Cather's Ecology of Place." *Western American Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1995, 39, 40.

⁸² Ibid, 40-41.

⁸³ *One of Ours*, Cather's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel is excluded from this latter particularity because its hero, Claude Wheeler, is male. The novel, however, needs to be included in any discussion of Cather's Prairie Cycle because it takes as its characters and setting the Nebraska plains *after* they have been altered into farmland. This second generation of pioneers—those who did not have to break the land and come to terms with its wildness and agency—is a worthy

theme the pioneer learning to listen to and understand the landscape in which she has arrived and the pioneer beginning and maintaining a permanent relationship with it. This essential fact of rootedness and embeddedness within a specific place ties people together in a way that extends beyond the mere postal codes, street addresses, and city-state affiliations that assist in defining a human's personhood and community. In the literature, these ties are deep—even if a character leaves, their relationship to new places is fraught with anxiety about assimilation and successfully dwelling. What Cather in particular shows is that maintaining a relationship with place is much different than the kinds of transience and alienation and expectation people may feel when coming to a new locality. Indeed, relationship with place is never a given—it takes work to develop *and then maintain one* over a person's lifetime. This makes metaphors of marriage appropriate for this relationship between human and landscape, especially if we take seriously a sacramental view of marriage, wherein traditional vows are exchanged culminating in the commitment to never sunder the relationship until death parts the vow-makers.

This eternal relationship and required participation (because the land is always there) in a marriage between human and landscape necessitates a thorough literary imagining of how this essential relationship can succeed. This becomes necessary especially if we regard human action toward the landscape as something that contributes to or detracts from the relative health of the ecosystem in which a person lives. The question of marriage, of the joint and daily activity of actually living together is central to Cather's prairie novels from the first (*O Pioneers!*) to the last (*One of Ours*), though I will only discuss in detail *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* in this chapter. While the human side of this relationship has been widely discussed in terms of ecocritical questions about the problems of imperialism, consumerism, and certain versions of nationalism,

thematic conclusion to Cather's cycle that I maintain is about what happens when we lose our sense of place and rootedness.

what has not been thoroughly discussed is Cather's sense of (or attention to) what the land has to say for itself, especially if we can see this as an alternative to the industrial-scientific American imagination as well as a preservation of the rapidly disappearing prairie lifestyle.⁸⁴

Rather than proceed through a discussion of Cather's novels chronologically, as might be expected, I will move through Cather's prairie novels more organically, without a sense of time as regards the material production of the novels. Place and time certainly are important, but place and time external to the specific ecoregions and ecosystems represented in the novels are less important to my discussion of them. Since *My Ántonia* most lucidly and most familiarly captures the voice and agency of an ecoregion, I will begin with it, though it was published five years after *O Pioneers!*.

My Ántonia presents readers with the reminiscences of Jim Burden, a boy who is moved from Virginia to the Nebraska plains, the Rolling Plains ecoregion of the Great Plains. Though this movement mirrors Cather's migration from Virginia to Red Cloud, Nebraska, is unnecessary to align Jim with Cather herself. Rather, we should assume that Jim's perceptions and memories are different from Cather's—that he is the speaker of the novel (like the speaker of the poem) and not a stand-in for Cather herself. Rather, he is an imagined person with his own past (given to him by the author). Further, I would draw the reader's attention to the formal elements of the

⁸⁴ I use "industrial-scientific" much in the same way that Kirkpatrick Sale does in *Dwellers in the Land*, where he contrasts the industrial-scientific with the bioregional. See my introduction for a fuller discussion of the rifts between these paradigms. The point here is that Cather's novels are often talked about as nostalgic for or Romantic in sensibility about a landscape that no longer exists. This is especially true of the discussion around *My Ántonia*, which is often read as an elegy for the lost prairie. My argument in contraindication to the elegiac/Romantic reading of Cather is that her purpose in writing is to show that the prairie is still there because the land is, and that she is attempting to tell this to industrial-scientific city-dwellers who see themselves as the culture-makers and conquerors of the young nation.

novel's opening before looking closer at how landscape, even in the Introduction, begins to work on and commune with the characters.

Much ink has been spilled over the Introduction to the novel, and much has been written discussing the supposed “unreliability” of Jim as narrator. Recently, Keith Wilhite in this vein has attempted to connect the supposed “narrative indeterminacy” of the novel with notions of aesthetic emplacement throughout, arguing that “*My Ántonia* offers a layering of narrative perspectives that should provoke more thoroughgoing readerly skepticism, belying the notion of a ‘privileged’ voice in the novel.”⁸⁵ Though there is a layering of narrative perspectives within the novel, we don't necessarily need to encourage readerly skepticism about what Jim has to tell us about his memories of Ántonia, especially considering that, as I show, a charitable reading of the novel elucidates Jim's intense and difficult relationship with the land.

Further, though Wilhite is correct to argue that multiple landscapes (though within the context of his argument, he would be more correct in saying *perceptions* of multiple landscapes) coexist with each other in the novel, he does not explore the ramifications of Jim and Ántonia sharing more than a “common, albeit distinct, desire to form *symbolic* connections to place, to create a personal sense of ‘at-homeness’.”⁸⁶ What they share is not merely a desire to connect to a place but *an actual connection to an actual place*. To argue that their connection to landscape and their desire form that connection is solely symbolic and not literal is to both miss the agency of the landscape and to keep the analytical perspective firmly within the anthropocene. To then connect the symbolic connections between human and land to aesthetic *emplacement* is, as I will

⁸⁵ Wilhite, Keith. “Unsettled Worlds: Aesthetic Emplacement in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*.” *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2010, 270.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 270 (the emphasis on the word “symbolic” is mine).

demonstrate, a misreading of where the aesthetic effect derives: that is to say, an aesthetic grows out of the land rather than being emplaced within it.

Additionally, in an otherwise excellent article about the “ethic of cultivation” in *My Ántonia*, Rachel Collins has argued for the weaponization of language (she conceives of it as a “rhetoric of animality”) by the Burdens against the Shimerdas and other immigrant people in the Nebraska prairie in what I see as an attempt to revise Mrs. Burden’s character to make her some kind of mild racist. This line of argumentation fails, however, to consider Mrs. Burden’s kindnesses toward the Shimerdas as a charitable, generous act, considering the effect of the landscape on the Shimerdas upon their arrival in a place so vastly different from their urban life in Prague. Further, by figuring *action* through a *rhetoric*, Collins keeps this piece of her argument firmly within the anthropocentric modes of analysis, even though the remainder of her argument presents a compelling way to view how cultivated versus unimproved landscape operates in *My Ántonia*.

The ethic of cultivation, she argues, operates to create a barrier between humans and the natural world, that the ethic of cultivation creates “powerful obstacles to bioregionally appropriate housing—and to ecologically sound principles more generally.”⁸⁷ Though she never details what those “ecologically sound principles” are, Collins does make clear how humans have difficulty adapting themselves to whatever ecosystem in which they find themselves in the sense that they have “replace[d] their bioregionally native earth dwellings with imported European-style timber architecture as quickly as they can.”⁸⁸ Because they have traded bioregional ethics for commitments to development and cultivation, Collins wants to argue,

⁸⁷ Collins, Rachel. “Where All the Ground is Friendly: Subterranean Living and the Ethic of Cultivation in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2012, 44, 45, 58.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 44.

along with Patrick Dooley—who claims that *My Ántonia* forwards principles of “homocentric conservation”⁸⁹—that Jim masters Ántonia through the language of homo- or anthropocentrism. For Collins, this makes Jim suspect as a narrator, wherein Ántonia is subject to his “authorial predilections.”⁹⁰ However, since Jim’s perspective is the only way we can access Ántonia and her experiences, bringing in a dialectic of mastery doesn’t get us very far in attempting to describe Cather’s attempts at troubling homocentric approaches to landscape. And, as Susan Rosowski has reminded critics in her essay on Cather’s regional aesthetics, “[W]e must not forget that *My Ántonia* presents human experience of a specific region—the Great Plains or, more precisely, Nebraska. That experience may help us to understand other experiences and values...but it begins with and experience of Nebraska.”⁹¹

Additionally, one element critics don’t seem eager to discuss is the stakes of arguing *for* Jim’s unreliability. If he is unreliable, we are actually saying that his credibility has, at the very least, been merely limited if not seriously compromised. If he is not credible, he is untrustworthy, and if he is untrustworthy, the novel isn’t worth reading in the first place for the simple reason that everything following the Introduction is presented as Jim’s manuscript tidied up a bit by the unnamed person Jim meets on the train.⁹² Even if we accept a broad definition of unreliability (which this project does not, preferring instead a narrow definition of unreliability), Jim’s

⁸⁹ Dooley, Patrick. “Biocentric, Homocentric, and Theocentric Environmentalism in *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.” *Cather Studies*, vol. 5, 2003, 68.

⁹⁰ Collins, “Where All the Ground,” 55.

⁹¹ Rosowski, Susan. “Willa Cather—A Pioneer in Art: *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*.” *Prairie Schooner*, vol. 55, no. 1, 1981, 142.

⁹² Jim’s unreliability or trustworthiness is essential to the novel’s holistic themes or Cather’s intended aesthetic effects. If unreliability were essential, as in the case of Conrad’s Marlow, Ford’s John Dowell and Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert, then it would be important to consider what effect any lack of trustworthiness in Jim has on the novel. As it stands, Jim is a trustworthy character and narrator, as well as our only access to the events of the novel; therefore, let us trust Jim, trust Cather, and trust our own cognitive abilities to differentiate between the two.

credibility does not need to be suspect, especially considering that the novel does not have unreliability (in the sense of trustworthiness) as its major theme. We, instead, should assume that Jim's perspective does not always align with Cather's, that he is the speaker of the novel as the narrator of the poem is the speaker of the poem and not the poet.

This is the crucial fact of the Introduction and Cather's opening move for showing how the agency of the Rolling Plains operates on her characters. If we would like to say that Jim's manuscript is a set of memories about a place and a people made into vignettes by the passage of time, we would be describing the neurological process for how *all* human beings' memories function—indeed, this project takes as an assumption that Cather intended Jim to present a different perspective than her own, as a way to imagine a set of place-based bioregional ethical positions. Further, if we keep in mind that Jim calls his manuscript and Cather calls the overall novel *My Ántonia*, we can realize that what is important here is that these are Jim's *impressions* of a person, a community, and a place through which he considers how the land has worked on him and the various attachments that have been created because of his emplacement in that particular land. His impressions are all that we have, and if we are to say anything about the novel, we must trust their veracity since without them we have neither a novel nor a set of themes that can teach us one way of relating to our ecosystems.

As a way to begin teaching readers how to relate to local ecosystems, it must be noted that the literal opening of the novel places characters within a landscape at a particular time. The first sentence tells readers they are in Iowa, during the summer. Predominately, Iowa is part of what the EPA categorizes as the Western Corn Belt Plains, an ecoregion that the ScienceBase Catalogue of the US Geological Survey describes as consisting of “nearly level to gently rolling glaciated till plains and hilly loess plains” with a climate and precipitation levels that “make this

on [sic] of the most productive areas of corn and soybeans in the world.”⁹³ That this rich and fertile and relatively flat landscape serves as the opening for the novel’s present time becomes significant in that Iowa is not the city, it is not the urban environment in which Jim finds himself as a lawyer for a railroad, even though it has become a commoditized landscape in part because of the railroad. The urban environment represents for Cather the Old World, the cultures and values of a built environment, in other words, a set of values and cultures that is not immediately workable in a flat, seemingly inhospitable ecosystem.

The “season of intense heat”⁹⁴ Cather describes serves as a catalyst for memory—the land, the corn, the climate, and the passage through the land, all work on Jim from the moment we meet him. Yes, we could make an argument from the position of nostalgia, that Jim is affected the ways he is affected because he remembers his childhood experiences with people and his grandparents, his growth and development. We could also make the argument that his nostalgia is motivated by his unsatisfying present circumstances—a marriage that appears only in Jim’s telling rather than *en scene*—such that Jim elegiacally longs for a better time.

Indeed, in an article making clear the implications of reading *My Ántonia* within the context of a version of the American Dream, James Miller, writing in *Prairie Schooner*, has argued that “[f]or Jim the book might be described as a search for that lost and forgotten plow....Jim is in search of the American past, his past, in an attempt to determine what went wrong” and right with the American Dream.⁹⁵ This intensification of Jim’s sense of dissatisfaction with his and the United States’ present builds a foundation for a highly

⁹³ “Western Corn Belt Plains.” *ScienceBase Catalogue*, last modified on 14 June 2018, <https://www.sciencebase.gov/catalog/item/55c77fc4e4b08400b1fd8354>

⁹⁴ Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia*. Boston: Mariner Books, 1995 (1918), 1.

⁹⁵ Miller, Jr, James E. “*My Ántonia* and the American Dream.” *Prairie Schooner*, vol. 48, no. 2, 1974, 115.

anthropocentric reading of the novel (even as it attends to the loss of wild spaces on the prairies). His dissatisfaction is one that misses an opportunity to ask who the real actor is that generates or motivates Jim's desire to write what amounts to a fictional memoir of *Ántonia*. However, though one could argue that Jim feels the need to put his experiences within the context of an anthropocentrism, we can also see Jim's retelling of his life as atonement for the environmental degradation he has, in part, assisted with by leaving and working as a lawyer for the railroads. If we take seriously the ability of landscape to affect human persons, if we shift the center to include the landscape's agential possibility, we see clearly that it is the land itself that moves Jim to create and attempt atonement with the land. Cather writes,

While the train flashed through never-ending miles of ripe wheat, by country towns and bright-flowered pastures and oak groves wilting in the sun, we sat in the observation car, where the woodwork was hot to the touch and red dust lay deep over everything. *The dust and heat, the burning wind, reminded us of many things.* We were talking about what it is like to spend one's childhood in little towns like these, buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate...⁹⁶

We are shown a train deep within an ecosystem of heat and corn and wheat, and what is clear from this passage and about the novel as a whole is Cather's insistence on the agency of place and landscape. From the sentence I have italicized we see clearly that Cather attributes to the land, to its climate, not just agential qualities but agency itself. It is "the dust and heat, the burning wind" that are in the nominative position. They are the subject of the sentence, they are the cause, the prime mover of the memories both Jim and the narrator begin talking about. The kind of freemasonry that Cather attributes to growing up in a small prairie town not only

⁹⁶ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1 (emphasis mine).

instigates the necessity of localism in Cather's novels but also serves to evidence the undeniable and biological authority of the senses to generate memory. What immediately follows the emplacement, occurring *in media res* like a good epic ought to,⁹⁷ is the bringing forth of memory, a set of experiences so strong and detailed that no one who has not had them can understand them.

Crucially, these memories that Cather lists in the Introduction are not of people or of human-human relationships, but rather, they are memories of the land and the seasons that alter both the land and the people who live on it. They are the

burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the colour and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with little snow, when the whole country is stripped bare and grey as sheet-iron. We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it.⁹⁸

The intense exclusivity of knowledge is rooted in the landscape out of which these characters have come. What the narrator highlights are the seasons, the colors of the land, the sense experience of a place more real it seems than the urbane New York City, a place (like Jim's unseen wife) that represents unimpressibility and lacking in the sort of enthusiasm that comes from a billowy, heavy landscape. Further, it is clear that this is not an empty place like Jim's first

⁹⁷ See "The Epic and Great Plains Literature: Cather, Rølvaag, and Neihardt" by Paul Olson, published in *Prairie Schooner* 55.1 (1981), pp. 263-283, for a fantastic and enlightening discussion of how plains novels often function as formal epics, epics that as Olson maintains succeed in their literary purpose because of their subject matter, their characters, and their form, where other English-language epics (like *Ulysses* or attempts at the epic in the American Northeast) ultimately fail.

⁹⁸ Cather, *My Antonia*, 1.

impression of the landscape suggests it might be,⁹⁹ but rather a place overwhelmed by the vegetal world.

By ending the passage above using an alignment of experience with freemasonry, Cather contextualizes the agency of the landscape within epistemological frameworks of the gnostic variety. By doing so, she is able to begin showing the reader a bioregional, localist, and ecological ethics embedded in a landscape. Since much of the novel is a chronicle of a man's and a woman's coming to terms with a foreign ecosystem, it is appropriate for Cather to claim that one must have deep, personal, and firsthand knowledge (here perhaps synonymous with experience) of place in order to know how one should behave towards it. This is a moral proposition set against the kinds represented by the train conductor Jim is in care of after he reaches Chicago. Cather tells us that "[h]e seemed to us [Jim and Jake] an experienced and worldly man who had been almost everywhere; in his conversation he threw out lightly the names of distant states and cities."¹⁰⁰ By treating the names of far off particularities lightly, the conductor shows he is the kind of person who is always migratory; he is not one who settles, but rather he is one who collects experiences and information about places.

Cather goes on to tell us that this conductor wears pins marking the various fraternal orders he belongs to and that his cufflinks were heavily inscribed with what Jim views as hieroglyphics. This particular marking suggests further that he may have been *to* a lot of places (as one would in one's work as a conductor) without having been *in* them. Since Cather did not

⁹⁹ Indeed, I would argue that this is the impression of everyone who has not actually been *in* the landscape. Driving through on Interstates or spending time in airports between flights does not count as having been *in* a place. From the standpoint of a localist, ecologically conscious perspective, we cannot rightly say we have been *in* Nebraska until we have been to the small towns (like Red Cloud) and the prairies (like the Niobrara Valley Preserve) that make up the varieties represented by the state.

¹⁰⁰ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 6.

write that the conductor told Jim and Jake all about the people, the land, the idiosyncrasies of those distant places, we can conclude that a close inspection of this throw-off character reveals a set of behaviors more akin to the tourist than the local¹⁰¹. This is a set of behaviors intended to contrast with Cather's insistence on dwelling in the land throughout the remainder of the novel. To collect (like commodities) the names of places far-and-wide, it seems, is antithetical to what the novel is actually about.

This emphasis on local, firsthand knowledge of place as the pathway to ecological ethics—knowing how and actually living in proper relationship with the natural world—is further evidenced in Jim's first encounter with the Rolling Plains and Breaks. It is here that the land first began to work on Jim, to attach him to itself in ways that cause and motivate his response to both it and the woman whom he sees as most completely rooted in the landscape. During that initial experience when Jim remembers being overwhelmed by the landscape, we see two major points of interest that serve to seed the furrow for the novel's thematic growth. Cather writes of Jim's exodus from the built environment into the natural ecosystem that they—Jim, Jake, Otto—were “surrounded by utter darkness”¹⁰² and that people were huddled in groups around sources of light. Immediately, we are to understand that Jim has been totally embedded within the place in which he has arrived. The stakes of this total immersion are not only the intense defamiliarization of being in a place unlike the place you had been in before but also the effect of the landscape itself working to erase preconceived notions about itself so that it can prepare the ground of being for new growth—i.e., new attachments, new relationships, and new communities. This is the first point of interest: the landscape overwhelms in order to create that

¹⁰¹ These I envision as separate ways of engaging the land rather than competing ethical perspectives.

¹⁰² *My Ántonia*, 6.

cognitive dissonance, that essential discomfort necessary for someone to fully embrace the new and unknown.

Part of this discomfort engendered by the landscape is bodily, and part of it is religious. The material discomfort, which we might also label the psychological discomfort, is created by the land's absence of familiar markers—fences, trees, creeks, fields, and hills. Jim, beginning to feel the land working on him, to change his affections, realizes “[t]here was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land—slightly undulating...”¹⁰³ The lack of familiar markers and the absolute presence of the land signifies greatly what is at work both in the novel and in the material discomfort Jim feels in the dark. Much attention is given to the latter half of the oft-quoted passage above: that *Jim* (as actor, as subject) feels this land to be empty, to be the raw material out of which culture (i.e., a country) can be created.

Susan Rosowski has made much of this sense in Jim, especially in terms of Jim's ability to perceive symbols in external things. By introducing a singular narrator whose individuality limits the narrative and experiential scope, Rosowski argues, Cather brings Jim into the Nebraska landscape by first having him experience “a sense of empty space” and movement from “conventional order” to experiencing that “loss of self” that goes along with being lost in an immense landscape.¹⁰⁴ This utter disorientation Rosowski identifies here conveys for Keith Wilhite a sense of displacement for the subject, a mythic coalescence of time and space working together to blot Jim out in order to prepare him for the new experience of place. Wilhite argues

¹⁰³ Ibid, 7-8.

¹⁰⁴ Rosowski, 148.

further that this “allow[s] Cather to establish the passing from the real into the mythic that marks the regional displacement of both immigration and migration.”¹⁰⁵

This deeply felt displacement, and the almost mytho-religious qualities of such an experience, render the migratory experience as one prone to encountering the sublime, a trend which Barry Hudek claims has been almost totally ignored in evaluations of Cather’s novel. Writing of “that obliterating strangeness” in *My Ántonia*, Hudek argues that while landscape remains important to Cather’s literary imagination, it is her “sublime aesthetics” that allows Cather to “express her effort to call attention to the prairie as a national landscape worth preserving.”¹⁰⁶ Further, Hudek believes (and rightly in my estimation) that the import of Cather’s sublime is, in part, that she “eschews a longstanding tradition of identifying the sublime with a commanding and...imperialistic verticality;” this shift allows Cather to create a horizontal sublime that, for Hudek, is “more conducive to democratic principles.”¹⁰⁷ What all these readings of Jim’s feeling that there is nothing but land have in common is their focus on the smallness of Jim, the terror inspired by the prairie’s sublimity and mythic qualities, and the utter nothingness in a place where there is no world, where they are “outside man’s jurisdiction” as Cather describes Jim’s feeling.

What these attempted elucidations of Jim’s perception here often point to is the supposed fact that Jim doesn’t see any of the normative markers of human habitation, yet the majority of things Jim looks for when trying to make sense of the place he has been brought to is natural features with the exclusion of fences, trees, creeks, fields, and hills after initially comparing the flatness to the mountains he originally grew up in. I don’t wish to argue that we should invalidate

¹⁰⁵ Wilhite, 277.

¹⁰⁶ Hudek, Barry. “‘That Obliterating Strangeness’: The Prairie as Sublime Landscape in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*.” *The Willa Cather Newsletter & Review*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2015, 28.

¹⁰⁷ Hudek, 28.

Jim's perspective on the world (since his is our only entry point into the novel), but we should refocus our attention on what Jim says about the land and about what he does and does not see. This would also suggest that movement from one ecoregion to another can result in successful assimilation, comprehension, and reevaluation of bioregional ethics in the new place.

Forgetting for a moment that he would not be able to see much of anything in the dark, though certainly the stars would have given off enough light to see a little, what Cather suggests here is not so much the exploitability of the landscape or its emptiness but rather is richness and fullness. Hudek, perhaps, comes closest to refocusing our attention to the landscape by arguing that Cather clearly "presents the prairie as a sublimely charged ecology on par with the greatest verticality that can be found on the mountainous regions of either coast."¹⁰⁸ The way this sublime landscape works is certainly to overwhelm Jim and make him *feel like there isn't anything there*. Like many feelings, however, it doesn't adapt itself right away to the empirical reality literally lying before it, external to the feeler. Even so, what the land has to "say," the work that it is beginning to do on Jim still seeps into the language he uses to describe his response to the prairie in that first scene. Critically, we forget that as much as Jim uses the kind of language to make us think of absence and emptiness, the one repeated statement he makes is that the land is all there is.

By then coming to terms with the feeling that they were "outside man's jurisdiction" and recognizing the absolute presence of the "complete dome of heaven, all there was of it,"¹⁰⁹ Jim is able to sense the agency of the landscape, of that particular place, without the veneer that culture and civilization build over it, used to mediate both it and our experiences with it. And this feeling bleeds into the religious dimensions of that discomfort. Cather writes bluntly that Jim did not say

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 31.

¹⁰⁹ *My Ántonia*, 8.

his prayers that night, so powerful was overwhelming effect of the landscape as to render prayer unnecessary or pointless, considering that he believed initially that his parents' spirits would be unable to find him in the new landscape.

Paul Olson, in his essay tracing the epic structures in Plains literature, describes this new landscape Jim experiences as both "beyond the gods and prayer" and that Jim's experiences of the land is often cast in ocean-faring terms.¹¹⁰ The land is undulating and sealike, full of motion that renders it incomprehensible, like the depths of the sea. Picking up on the primordial associations conveyed by the ocean-like Prairie, Wilhite makes clear that Jim's world in the Nebraska prairie is unsettled, that he feels a sense of "cosmic displacement" in a land that is "on the verge of coming into or passing out of being."¹¹¹ Wilhite goes on to argue that Jim's initial experiences of this dark landscape are "almost a-spatial" more closely aligned with mythic structures rather than material-experiential ways of understanding and interpreting the world. These structures are for Wilhite, the mythic "anticipations of a 'new world'" in sharp contrast with the old one of Virginia.¹¹²

Coded in a certain way, these mythic qualities can take on religious meaning since myth and religion often share a close relationship with each other. As Cather makes abundantly clear, we are meant to see the significance of Jim being unable to say his prayers through a religious lens. If not a god in its own right, the landscape has such a power as to engender awe, silence, and passivity in its ultimate presence. What this tells readers is that the agency of the landscape

¹¹⁰ Olson, 281.

¹¹¹ Wilhite, 276.

¹¹² Ibid, 276.

is quasi-religious in its own right. We might interpret this line panentheistically:¹¹³ that Jim's prayers are unnecessary because the absolute presence of the land fills the hole where desire for God might otherwise be and for which prayer is often used. Jim, in the moment of reflection on his youth, is able to see the potentiality of desire in the landscape, the hope that *could be* in the emptiness—even while he presents his young self as experiencing disorientation and fear. The balance here, the dissonance between young Jim and older Jim, suggests Jim's desire to make sense of the place of his past as well as atone for the degradation wrought on the environment through the coming of the railroad and enclosure of land into farms. Further, the making sense of a past place, as an adult, speaks to Jim's desire to understand the agency of place involved with the bioregional ethics of the Rolling Plains and Breaks.

If there were more empirical evidence within the novel to suggest this religious understanding of the landscape's agency (and there certainly is in Rølvaag's work), I might further suggest that what Cather articulates through this opening scene of darkness is an apophatic version of the Christian stewardship ethic in tension with a more familiar cataphatic version from "back East." What we might be able to suggest then is that Jim not saying his prayers is not an inability to pray but a hallowed silence in the presence of divinity so vast as to be incomprehensible. The silence of the natural world could become a manifestation of the divine, leading one to believe that the way to behave towards the landscape is with first silence and then slow considered action. However, since this is the only instance where Cather has Jim so overwhelmed by the land that he is unable to pray, and one of the last times she directly mentions Jim's religious practice, I will leave the line of argument here. I will instead say only

¹¹³ This is a slight yet significant alteration of the familiar Transcendentalist concept of pantheism. Rather than everything *being* God, panentheism holds that God is *in* everything. This distinction is the difference between substance and presence.

this before moving on: it would seem clear that the mere fact of the land's unmediated, unadulterated presence has enough agency to overwhelm even religious conviction and habit. Once that effect is made sense of and once Jim is brought to terms with it, he will have to develop new habits and new relations with the place he must now dwell.

It would be easy to see the prairie as an empty canvas, especially if we do not interrogate the metaphor of nakedness or lack of mediation when we describe the landscape. What Cather instead shows readers is that even in the face of Jim's *feeling* blotted out and erased, this is not the case at all. After Jim arrives at his new home and can observe his new reality in the daylight, he is able to better apprehend the landscape and begin to learn how to read it. After racing outside in the morning he sees clearly the place he has entered and the deceptive homogeneity of the landscape is able to instill in him the beginnings of aesthetic and personal attachment. What the landscape presents to Jim everywhere he looks is the "rough, shaggy, red grass" against which the few hedges and trees introduced into the landscape appear insignificant:

As I looked about me I felt the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the colour of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running.¹¹⁴

Of first importance in this scene is the almost immediate revision Jim makes to his perception of the landscape as no country at all but rather the raw materials that can make a country. By realizing that the landscape has as its essential substance the grass (like the Appalachians have as theirs the mountains), Jim begins to understand what the landscape is trying to show him, what it is trying to teach him: that this alien place, this flat land is not like where he came from and that

¹¹⁴ *My Ántonia*, 12.

to live in it requires a different set of behaviors derived from a reading of the landscape which respects its preexistence of Jim.

The behaviors that the landscape requires as the foundation for an ecologically sound and ecologically principled relationship with itself can be hinted at when Jim goes to the garden with his grandmother. On their way to the garden, Jim's grandmother insists that he can never go to the garden without a rattlesnake cane or knife because rattlesnakes tend to frequent the garden, as well as prairie dog towns. Had Jim attempted to impose the set of behaviors he used to relate to his native Virginia landscape onto the prairie, he may have ended up sick like the Black Hawk girl who was bit, and he certainly would not have been able to kill the old rattler at the prairie dog town he visits with *Ántonia* later in the novel. Instead, by taking the spade with him, by deriving his behaviors from the landscape, from a derivative hermeneutics, he is able to keep himself safe from the dangers the landscape presents.

Additionally, what Jim learns on his first trip to the garden with his grandmother is that as large and as aesthetically peaceful as the prairie seems, this is clearly not the case. Rather, it is a functioning ecosystem that operates according to its own rules and its own, consistent and evolving-yet-currently-stable system of relationships between animal, vegetable, and human lives. The plurality of the landscape's speciation incites in Jim a series of revisions he must make to his assessment of the landscape each time it presents something new to him in its continued effort to teach him how to act responsibly toward it.

This deceptive homogeneity of the Rolling Plains and Breaks works on Jim to such a degree in his early years, especially on that first trip with his grandmother, that he finds little to interest him in the bounded area of the garden. Instead, he "wanted to walk straight on through the red grass and over the edge of the world, which could not be very far away," and once their

work is done, Jim finds he wants to stay longer in the garden to experience further the lightness of this world's edge.¹¹⁵ The very landscape is drawing him further out of the familiar and into an entirely new set of ways of understanding the world he lives and walks in. This landscape's agency is further evidenced by the grandmother's stated affiliation with the badger who comes out to watch her work. "In a new country," she tells Jim, "a body feels friendly to the animals,"¹¹⁶ suggesting a set of behaviors working for the maintenance of the ecosystem: the badger eats a chicken every so often but since this behavior isn't parasitical, the grandmother refuses to let the men harm the badger. What she reveals here is that relationships with the landscape are not either/or—they are not mutualist or parasitic. Rather, relationships between species in and on the land can be commensalist in nature: the badger benefits from humans dwelling there and the humans neither suffer nor benefit.

Of course, this commensalist relationship between species does not extend to the rattlesnakes the grandmother warns Jim of. The antagonism between man and serpent certainly does carry with it Biblical overtones (and Jim's crushing of the rattler's head echoes God's curse in Genesis) and is thereby understandable from an anthropocentric point of view. However, if we shift focus onto the landscape as agent, we find, I believe, that the grandmother's warning to Jim can be read in two ways. First, we can see it as a position stemming from unbridled aggression and hatred of a specific species native to ecosystems in which humans have arrived and have dwelt (if migratory) for millennia. Considering that the Burdens are not *native* to the Rolling Plains and Breaks but are instead immigrants into this ecoregion, we can perhaps understand their aggression within the context of the ever-present and real difficulties of adapting oneself to

¹¹⁵ *My Antonia*, 13.

¹¹⁶ *My Antonia*, 14.

a new landscape, especially when one confronts a species that attacks venomously out of an instinct that can be coded as inherently malignant.

Second, we could instead see this warning as a lesson derived from the landscape itself, a lesson borne from experience with a complex, variegated ecosystem replete with its own dangers, beauties, and difficulties. Each species in an ecosystem lays claim to their own territories and pursues their own instinctual (neither good nor evil; rather neutral) behaviors in order to sustain and cultivate life. When a new species enters an ecosystem, it must either assert itself and make a space for itself within the larger ecosystem or be squeezed out by the native species. Though this does not justify human expansion and severe altering of the place, we can consider that perhaps human expansion can ethically occur without major damage to an ecosystem—part of what Jim feels remorse about, since the coming of the railroad and parceling of land into farms could be in contradiction to the ethics of the place as represented in the novel. The squeezing out of nonassertive species, however, according to Jones' field guide to the plains, is what happens to trees in the prairie when there are no humans around to ensure their survival, and as Jim realizes, "Trees were so rare in that country, and they had to make such a hard fight to grow, that we used to feel anxious about them, and visit them as if they were persons."¹¹⁷

The landscape's order, the natural laws by which the ecosystem functions, resists the introduction of trees (since they are in this case an invading species) and would, if allowed to take over, irrevocably alter the stability of the prairie ecosystem. The settlers' anthropomorphization of the trees, then, reveals one of the first instances in Cather's novel where the characters begin to resist the agency of the landscape, part of Cather's purpose for the novel and support for the critical position calling this novel an elegy for a lost landscape. Of course,

¹¹⁷ *My Ántonia*, 21.

Jim's memories are somewhat inconsistent here; rather than remembering the detail and wonder he felt while lying in the garden, he instead attributes the anthropomorphization of the trees to the absence in the landscape: "It must have been the scarcity of detail in that tawny landscape that made detail so precious."¹¹⁸ Rather than letting himself remain overwhelmed by the landscape's absolute presence, Jim instead builds up his defenses (something he reflects on as an adult narrator), relying rather on the old, familiar things to structure his world. Where Jim's grandmother is earnest to teach him a lesson about the detail, the varieties of behaviors and dangers therein, Jim instead has forgotten in time how to live in relationship with an alien landscape.

Both positions exist within *My Ántonia*, and the tension between them comes to a head in the prairie dog town when Jim kills the rattler. That scene serves as an intensification of human resistance to the landscape's agency, which leads to one of the novel's main themes regarding the landscape: the ultimate failure of humans to adapt themselves to a set of ecologically sound behaviors already present in a landscape different from the ones with which they are familiar. When Jim and Ántonia arrive in the prairie dog town armed only with a shovel, they are full of curiosity, ready to investigate the inner-workings of those creatures that live *within* the landscape itself.

Rachel Collins has contrasted the scene at the prairie dog town with Jim sitting outside the badger hole earlier in the novel, arguing that when outside the badger hole, Jim "strongly identifies with the elements of the natural world and he experiences a gradual dissolution of the perceptual barriers that normally lead him to differentiate himself from his environment."¹¹⁹

Though Collins approaches Jim's experiences from an anthropocentric stance, we can easily

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 21.

¹¹⁹ Collins, 46.

attribute that dissolution of cultural barriers to the landscape's ability to work on, affect, and teach humans how to be in relationship with it.

She goes on to say that Jim attributes order to the prairie dog towns, revealing an anthropomorphic attitude toward the natural world. Though certainly this is true in the case of the trees from an earlier scene in the novel, the "orderly and very sociable kind of life" he finds *in* the prairie dog town is not as anthropomorphic as Collins wants to make it; instead, Jim says that "[o]ne always *felt*" that life in the prairie dog town was orderly and sociable.¹²⁰ By structuring his phrase in this way, Jim attributes the feeling to something other, something derived from an experience with the landscape: it is the landscape's own agency working to show him that there is order, structure, and community already functioning in a landscape thought to be empty and on the edge of the world. Jim may be guilty of imposing too much order that may or may not exist; certainly he is trying to read the natural world for order, but what remains clear is that in Cather's representation of the prairie dog town, there is some kind of order to it: there is a sense of life within the place whereby it functions ecologically and successfully (though the violence of hunting and killing may not appear ordered to human perception). What this agency generates in Jim is what Kate Soper has called the desire to "show our affection for animals through allowing them to share a human 'life' and our fondness for ourselves in projecting onto them the feelings we deem exclusive to us."¹²¹ Though Soper attributes this desire to anthropocentric motives, we can instead read Jim's wanting to affection for animals as an effect of the power of the landscape working on him (rather than a solipsistic projection of a fondness for ourselves onto animals). In a word, Soper is right to point out that

¹²⁰ *My Ántonia*, 31 (italics mine).

¹²¹ Soper, Kate, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human*. Blackwell, 1995, 83.

the desire is present, but as I am arguing, we needn't attribute the cause of the desire to a *human* source.

And yet, this desire does not extend to the snake. It should be noted here that not *all* snakes lie under the grandmother's warning. Bull-snakes are okay and won't bother a body if the snake isn't bothered. It is only those with venom that are to be looked-out for, to be killed before they kill you. Keeping in mind the two positions in tension I have outlined above—unbridled aggression and lesson derived from a landscape—we can see in Jim's attack on the rattler, and his subsequent realization that his "accomplishment" was no such thing, the acting out of the grandmother's warning and that apparently primal hatred of the *serpentes: viperidae* family member. Jim and Ántonia have wandered into its hunting ground, its territory, its "community" as it were, so when Jim kills it, he perhaps goes too far in asserting himself (as a relatively new species in this ecosystem). Instead of attacking out of fear, instinct, aggression, what-have-you, Jim could have run, could have left the snake after realizing and remembering the grandmother's warning derived from the landscape: that when you encroach onto another species territory, you have the choice of leaving, of letting that other species live.¹²²

The landscape (or chance as Jim calls it) and the variety of relationships existing within it—the way in which the prairie dogs have dug out their homes, the owls living in vacant holes, the snake's need for sustenance—all work to teach Jim a vital lesson of living in a place that is difficult to live in: to cleave to those communities in which you live and let those others outside of yours live. For the ethic is the ethic of life, that the various creatures must live because we live,

¹²² Jim, of course, initially felt like a conquering hero for killing the snake, but later reflects on that type of masculinity, discrediting it as he recalls returning home with Ántonia. Instead of being more masculine for killing the snake, Jim's adult self recognizes the inherent contradictions in a violence-oriented masculinity *if* that masculinity is understood through a bioregional ethics.

because the landscape can indeed support both, if we are willing to learn from it. Jim, in a moment of poor hermeneutical process and final judgement, misreads the landscape, thinking that he must conquer it like the mythic knight slaying the dragon, only to realize later that this encounter was nothing so heroic but a rather imperial gesture stemming from the belief that “the world doesn’t owe rattlers a living.”¹²³ The resulting loss of life shows us the kind of behaviors Jim, I believe, attempts to atone for by writing of *Ántonia* and her coming to adapt herself entirely to the landscape she is in.

This failure of the life ethic derived from a proper reading of, a properly oriented hermeneutical approach to, this landscape, as Cather shows it in *My Ántonia*, largely results in the sundering of attachment to a place and the trivialization of different sets of behavior towards that place. Largely, what Cather attempts to show readers—and indeed is one of the major purposes of the novel—is what happens to a place if a person 1) leaves or 2) stays. In the closing scenes of the novel, we see an *Ántonia* deeply embedded within the landscape. No longer, as Rachel Collins has pointed out, is this a “miserable hole in the ground” but rather a “cozy bountiful cave of plenitude.”¹²⁴ James Miller has called this experience an “image of affirmation and vitality...of all that *Ántonia* stands for—and all the he [Jim] has somehow missed.”¹²⁵ She has secured for herself a place in the world by working closely with that place, by remaining in it (by and large, with a brief detour from which she quickly returns) and working to cultivate the place. Her work and Cuzak’s to grow a home derived from what the landscape allows them unlocks the landscape’s hidden potential in a process similar to the long living together required for a marriage to continue to grow and strengthen: the laying down of roots and the shooting off

¹²³ *My Ántonia*, 34.

¹²⁴ Collins, 55.

¹²⁵ Miller, 122.

of branches and the budding of new growth to sustain an organism that would otherwise die if left alone.

This is a process Jim opts out of in order to instead become a representative of *mechanical* progress, to become consul and legal adviser for an industry geared towards insulation and imposition. The railroad tracks press down onto the land; they keep the wheels of the carriage from ever having to touch the dirt, insulating the passengers from the land. The cars themselves are engineered to move people *over* the landscape rather than *through* it. Though passengers can open windows, they are still kept from the feel of grass, the stillness required of the body to *see* the motion and particularity always already there. These sorts of descriptions come from the Introduction, of course, which contrasts heavily with the novel proper. Jim's feelings in the Introduction predicate his meditations in the novel itself. These lead the reader through his attempts at atonement, at breaking out of mechanistic and anthropocentric thinking. Yet what Jim feels upon returning to Black Hawk and seeing that everything has changed (the people, the places, the land itself except in patches and hidden tracks) is a deep sense of loss, of having missed out because he left. This alienation is something he began to feel but subsequently ignored during the lectures on Virgil's *Georgics* at university. Jim still can remember "that obliterating strangeness" he felt in the night of his first entry into the landscape, even as he returns to Black Hawk as an adult. This return signifies Jim's "coming home to [him]self, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is," and this realization takes precedence in his understanding of landscape agency in the novel.¹²⁶

Returning again to the bioregional locality within the Rolling Plains and Breaks gives Jim a sense that this is where he ought to be and ought to have been, being a part of the growth of a

¹²⁶ *My Antonia*, 238.

community that continued to do so without him. His severance from the Black Hawk ecosystem seems to be both a pruning and a damaging loss (the latter at least to Jim), and it serves to show Cather's theme: what happens when the landscape is misread and misunderstood by people. The severance shows what happens when one rejects the ecological responsibility to conserve a place, to remain there and contribute to its health, its vitality, and its sustainment. Though Jim misreads the landscape in this way as a boy, his adult self consistently revises and critiques his own impressions in an attempt to atone for his youthful blindness towards his bioregional responsibility to the sustainment of the place.

Cather does not only represent failure in her novels as regards the landscape's ability to work on a human person. Indeed, atonement through revision of the past—the latent working of the landscape on the human creature—is unique to *My Ántonia* in Cather's oeuvre. In *O Pioneers!* she instead highlights how the landscape successfully influences human behavior, to encourage a hermeneutically grounded reading of the landscape. The hermeneutics in the novel are akin to positive bioregionalist approaches to living in place. From the opening scene of the novel, through its melancholic (and, I would argue, true-to-life) conclusion, Cather shows readers a consistent attempt to make sense of the very fact of the landscape. In the character of Alexandra Bergson, we see all of the moral and ethical strength that Jim either did not have or was not able to muster towards ecologically sound action.

Cather's initial descriptions of the setting for *O Pioneers!* provide clues for how she will build a landscape and what that landscape's agency will be throughout the novel. Though Susan Rosowki has convincingly argued that Cather's open prairie novels, and especially *O Pioneers!*, “traces a rather precisely defined perceptual movement” in characters' changing attitudes

towards the landscape, her assessment that the “novel opens with separation and alienation”¹²⁷ misses Cather’s insistence that landscape and human life are inextricable. So much so, in fact, that the very first thing we learn about Hanover and the surrounding farms is that they are “anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland...trying not to be blown away.”¹²⁸ Though there is precariousness in this setting, it is clear that the very first image in the novel is one of connection, not separation or alienation. The way to not be blown away is to cling together, whether that be out of necessity or not. Though this is not a Romantic notion of connection with nature, it is a kind of connection that ties one to the place one is anchored to. Extending the metaphor, a ship anchored in a storm is clinging to the hope that it will not be capsized—though the connection with the seafloor is not ideal or blissful, the attachment is nonetheless essential for survival.

If either of the latter appears in the opening of the novel, they would represent a specific kind of separation more akin to isolation than alienation. The town is connected to the landscape, even though it is separate (i.e., isolated) from the more developed American East. However, Rosowski is right to add that this is a place from which “conventional human orders” (like a main street that connects different parts of towns with each other and the railroad) are relatively absent.¹²⁹ Though the main street is not paved as it would be in more “civilized” places, Cather tells us directly that “[t]he main street was a deeply rutted road” running from the railroad to the horse pond at the opposite end of town.”¹³⁰

Clear from this description is the presence of a *regional variation* of that feature common to towns across countries: the main street is still present even though it may not look like the seemingly permanent piece of asphalt in other places. It is in this description and the assertion

¹²⁷ Rosowski, 143.

¹²⁸ Cather, Willa. *O Pioneers!* Vintage Books, 1992 (1913), 3.

¹²⁹ Rosowski, 143.

¹³⁰ *O Pioneers!*, 3.

that the town is anchored to the prairie (even though it appears to have no permanence due to the winds threatening to blow it away) that we begin to see the agency of landscape in *O Pioneers!* and its eventual self-revelation: that it is in fact the only permanent thing, the only thing people absolutely must understand if life is to be sustained. If characters in the novel can understand this essential fact about the landscape in the novel, they can clearly come to terms with the landscape itself. They will be able to read the landscape, understand the ethical requirements of living anchored to such a place and thereby able to create a sustainable bioregional community in that place.

Once the Bergsons and Carl leave Hanover and the town “had vanished as if it had never been, had fallen behind the swell of the prairie,”¹³¹ Cather provides readers with a complex image of how the prairie operates on those who have chosen to live in its difficult, semi-hospitable reaches. Cather tells readers that Carl and Emil’s faces “were turned mutely towards” the wintry prairie and that

the stern frozen country received them into its bosom. The homesteads were few and far apart; here and there a windmill gaunt against the sky, a sod house crouching in a hollow. But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes....[H]e felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness.¹³²

This, of course, is an experience of the land to be quickly and repeatedly contrasted by Alexandra’s relationship with the prairie throughout the remainder of the novel. However, here, at the beginning, though there is separation and difficulty and a sense of human powerlessness in

¹³¹ *O Pioneers!*, 8.

¹³² *Ibid*, 8.

the face of such vastness, there is also the fact that humans *have* embedded themselves in this landscape. They *have* made marks, whether they be the spots where sod was dug up to build those first homes or the building of communities on the prairie. As the novel will continuously make clear, the land does want to be let alone; its hardness does indeed discourage those who can't make it there, but eventually under the guidance of a woman who has the capacity to read and understand well what the land needs and requires, the prairie will unfold its rich, hidden potential.

The first suggestion for readers that the landscape is not as hard and unwelcoming as Carl and Emil have perceived, like Jim's initial perceptions in *My Ántonia*, is the very fact that as they exit the town, Cather writes that the landscape receives the wagon and the boys into its bosom: this is a welcoming and often comforting gesture, a gesture suggesting safety rather than hostility. The prairie's tough winters—its periods of growth wherein as Alexandra observes “the grass had, indeed, grown back over everything”¹³³—is balanced by the way it envelopes humans into itself. Further, if we keep in mind that the word “waste” has been used to convey a meaning of as-yet uncultivated areas of land full of potential, our understanding of the overwhelming landscape as one, as in *My Ántonia*, that requires certain ways of behaving towards it and living in relationship to it for humans to survive there.

The landscape that Cather builds in *O Pioneers!* is additionally more welcoming, as if waiting for that group of people who will live in mutualistic relationship with it (again, as a marriage), in that its geographical features sometimes assist humans in building their communities and surviving alongside it. The Bergson homestead, Cather tells readers, is easier to find than many precisely *because* of the landscape's particularity. The creek that humans have

¹³³ *O Pioneers!*, 9.

called Norway Creek “gave a sort of identity to the farms that bordered upon it.”¹³⁴ This work of the landscape to help sustain the human communities on its surface is crucial, according to Cather, especially in a new country: one of the most “bewildering things” for people on a new land is “the absence of human landmarks.”¹³⁵ Cather goes so far as to say they are among the most disheartening things newcomers can experience, and Karen Ramirez has remarked that this feeling of being “lost and without a sense of place” perhaps derives from the fact that these immigrants into the territory have been “trained to recognize only ‘human landmarks’.”¹³⁶

Though accurate in her assessment, Ramirez attempts to connect this feeling of loss to the impositional versions of grid-style mapping that resulted in the look of the counties of the Great Plains on contemporary maps. What Ramirez misses, in the context of *O Pioneers!* is something of which Susan Rosowski has reminded us: that “[w]ithout human landmarks, mapping occurs neither by rectangular surveys nor by grid or property lines, but by ecological realities.”¹³⁷ Additionally, the fact that Cather highlights the *human* quality to the landmarks makes clear that in this landscape wherein the ground is inescapable, sojourners and settlers in it must find earlier modes of interacting with the land in the form of older ways of marking space and direction, and like the creek called Norway, the land appears to have provided those methods of doing so already.

If there is distance and separation in the early scenes of *O Pioneers!*, then it is all anthropocentric, from a perspective that either cannot or will not admit that the landscape might have something to teach the people who have arrived there. Further, if the land is at all

¹³⁴ Ibid, 11.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 11.

¹³⁶ Ramirez, Karen. “Narrative Mappings of the Land as Space and Place in Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!*” *Great Plains Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2010, 107.

¹³⁷ Rosowski, “Ecology,” 44.

unwelcoming, as Rosowski and Cather's youthful male characters seem to think, it could be due to John Bergson's belief that "no one understood how to farm it properly....Many of them had never worked on a farm until they took up their homesteads. They had been *handworkers* at home."¹³⁸ What Cather here highlights is the land's needing to be read and understood through a proper hermeneutical approach, one that begins with the land and works towards practice and theory instead of the other way around.

Cather writes that John Bergson understands this simple fact of life when she tells readers he "had the Old World belief that land, in itself, is desirable. But this land was an enigma."¹³⁹ Because Bergson understands the mystery of the landscape, and because he and Alexandra have long and frequent discussions about this fact, Cather has demonstrated that some have the capacity to properly understand the landscape and thereby behave properly towards it.¹⁴⁰ The tension between Old World—capitalized by Cather, I believe, because it is meant to stand in for the known, the mastered, the categorized—and the enigmatic landscape of the Nebraska prairie provides that defamiliarization, that cognitive dissonance necessary for Alexandra to learn how to live in long relationship with the landscape.

Unlike Jim, however, Alexandra allows herself to move through the dissonance, letting her barriers fall so that she can learn to live in a new place, something she learns upon her initial visit to Crazy Ivar's home. Ivar's Christian and transcendentalist syncretism represents for Alexandra, and I think for Cather, one of the two possibly successful ways of living in ecologically and morally good relationship to the landscape in the novel. The first thing

¹³⁸ *O Pioneers!*, 12.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁴⁰ Susan Rosowski has, correctly, identified the dissonance here as a Keatsean negative capability, and links what happens to Alexandra in the early pages of the novel as an erasure of personality, which prepares her for coming to terms with the very fact of the land itself by the end of the novel.

Alexandra feels in terms of the landscape's agency as she nears Ivar's homestead is a shift in the *kind* of country she is in. Rosowski has described this as Cather showing readers "what it is to acquire the 'feel' of a place in all its particularity" and that as Alexandra and her brothers cross the county line, "their journey traces an ecological map in describing the contours of the land,"¹⁴¹ all of which suggests the power of place to draw human attention to itself, to cause the human being to pause and observe and attune itself to the landscape. Crossing the county line, Cather constructs the locality of Ivar's homestead by telling readers,

The road...was a very poor one. He had settled in the rough country across the county line, where no one lived....The Bergson wagon lurched along over the rough hummocks and grass banks, followed the bottom of the winding draws, or skirted the margin of wide lagoons, where the golden coreopsis grew up out of the clear water and the wild ducks rose with a whirr of wings.¹⁴²

Cather's deep attention to particular ecological detail here represents a sudden shift in emphasis from the shape of the land to the content of the land itself. The naming of the tickseed flower and the quality of the water and the animal beings on the plains evokes for the reader a sense of the life of the place, the life that wants to live. This movement from the "lagoons and the red grass" of the land surrounding Hanover to this new place where "the grass was short and gray, the draws deeper than they were in the Bergsons' neighborhood, and the land was all broken up into hillocks and clay ridges"¹⁴³ is clearly marked as the movement from the hospitable to the inhospitable. Lack of color and lack of uniformity give the land a texture of roughness and difficulty such that anyone choosing to live here must have done so because of something the

¹⁴¹ Rosowski, "Ecology," 43.

¹⁴² *O Pioneers!*, 18.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 19.

land itself offers, something the land itself did to work on a human person. And this is the case with Ivar, whom Cather tells us chose to live in the gray, broken land because he has less temptations with fewer neighbors.

It is this choice of isolation that allows him to come closer to God through nature that marks Ivar's character and his relative position in terms of Cather's purposes for the novel's representation of landscape. Matthias Schubnell, writing about religion and ecology in *O Pioneers!* has identified Ivar's choices as similar to those of the Desert Fathers, similar in that their choices of asceticism and isolation from other human dwellings allowed them to seek "a new spiritual vision through solitude and closeness to nature," and in Ivar's case to become "a prophetic voice, castigating the rise of a rapacious and intolerant generation" by the end of the novel.¹⁴⁴ Though perhaps Schubnell goes too far in saying that the younger generation at the end of the novel is rapacious and intolerant and perhaps closes critical doors by making Ivar the *only* moral center upon which we should found a Christian environmental ethic, he does convincingly make clear that as far as religion is concerned, attention to the landscape is required for any ecological morality or ethical behavior to be successful. Schubnell argues that Ivar's "monasticism blends religion and ecology" so that he can become a defender of the natural world and represent in the novel someone who treads lightly over the world in order to "instill in others an understanding of God's benevolence toward all life."¹⁴⁵

It is this closeness to the natural world, this almost-synonymous relationship between sacred texts (the Bible is clearer to Ivar in the empty spaces than in town) and the natural world that makes Ivar's message of restraint and ecological responsibility so compelling to readers,

¹⁴⁴ Schubnell, Matthias. "Religion and Ecology on the Divide: Ivar's Monasticism in *O Pioneers!*" *Literature and Belief*, vol. 22, 2002, 41.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 48, 42.

especially in light of practices that are detrimentally exploitative to various ecosystems (in the context of the Nebraska setting, corporate agriculture and practices that render out-of-season foods available when they ought not to be must surely loom in background of readers' minds). However, it would be short-sighted and selective to claim that Ivar is the only way of reading and living in relationship with the landscape.

The other version of long-term relationship with land appears in Alexandra's response to what the landscape shows her about itself. Though Ivar, who has a religion all his own such that he cannot get along with any of the protestant denominations in and around Hanover, rejects the "litter of human dwellings" in favor of the supposed "cleanness and tidiness of the sod"—thinking that "the badgers had cleaner houses than people"—it is in Alexandra's clear, irregular, relatively uncluttered human dwelling he finds himself later in the novel.¹⁴⁶ Though one could read this event as the supposedly inevitable "march" of industrial progress, one could also approach Ivar's loss and Alexandra's seemingly simultaneous ascendancy as Cather's gently ironic treatment of transcendentalist conservationism. Though conservation and the conservative/bioregional approach to local life are doubtlessly important to the novel (an emphasis on keeping together as a family then as a community, humble and frugal management of resources, and so on), it is the barefooted, "palaeo" version of the conservative/conservationist ideology that appears to be on Cather's chopping block. This ideology, represented by Ivar, appears in the novel as a return to ancient ways of becoming embedded in with the earth as well as similar to transcendental notions of living within the environment. And yet, it is based on a negative action, a reneging of the will to act on the landscape, which can be read as a misreading of what the landscape in the novel desires and how it acts upon its characters.

¹⁴⁶ *O Pioneers!*, 20.

After the passage of sixteen years between parts one and two of the novel, we are told unequivocally that Ivar comes to live with Alexandra because he had “lost his land through mismanagement.”¹⁴⁷ What the details of that mismanagement are, Cather does not tell us.¹⁴⁸ In one sense, the details of Ivar’s misuse of his land are unimportant. What is important is that he somehow misused the land on/in which he lived, and he *lost* it. Though “lost” could typically be interpreted in a monetary, materialist sense, if we consider what it would mean to lose land in a novel wherein the landscape is the protagonist,¹⁴⁹ then we see perhaps part of what it means for Ivar to *lose* his land: that he misread the landscape’s agency, that it desires to be acted upon and brought to fruition as the eventual plowing of the land suggests.

Alexandra, by contrast, learns to read the landscape quite effectively, learning how to court it, to live with it in order to build a fruitful marriage of human being to land by the novel’s end.¹⁵⁰ At first, though, what seems like the end of everything approaches. The farmers must endure three years of drought, what Cather describes as “three years of drouth and failure, the last struggle of a wild soil against the encroaching ploughshare.”¹⁵¹ Cather leaves this description ambiguous—while it could be interpreted as the objective narrator telling the reader that soil is resisting being plowed, it could also be read as a sublimation of anthropocentric despair. The

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 44-45.

¹⁴⁸ We also aren’t told to whom Ivar loses his land. Speculation here would be fruitless since Cather does not provide us with the information and we never see his land again in this novel.

¹⁴⁹ Susan Rosowski has convincingly made this point in her essay, “Willa Cather’s Ecology of Place” (1995), citing letters in which Cather stated that the novel had no backbone, that its form was derived from the landscape itself.

¹⁵⁰ Wes Jackson in *Becoming Native to this Place* (1996) uses a similar metaphor to describe ecology as a set of behaviors (rather than a set of theoretical principles or embodiments): We must “turn our thoughts to building a science of ecology that reflects a consultation of nature. Ecology is the most likely discipline to engage in a courtship with agriculture as we anticipate a marriage” (25).

¹⁵¹ *O Pioneers!*, 25.

struggling farmers, who are attempting to succeed, project their despair onto a dry landscape that will not support their crops.

Either way, what is clear is that the land is understood as acting against the farmers in some capacity. Considering that many of the homesteaders give up (many having never been farmers before now) including the Linstrums and leave the country for places “that had been proved habitable,”¹⁵² it is especially significant that Alexandra chooses to stay, despite her brothers’ repeated encouragements to give up and do like everyone else. Indeed, Alexandra has been worked on by the land and has learned to read it to such a degree that, in a moment of weakness, she tells Carl, “Sometimes I feel like I’m getting tired of standing up for this country.”¹⁵³ By standing up for the locality of Hanover and the surrounding country, full of duck ponds and lagoons, flowers and hills, Alexandra is both anchoring herself to place and reading deeper into the landscape than the other characters in the novel are. “We must have faith in the high land,” she declares to Emil on their trip back from the river farms, where the good land is already owned and farmed and the rest is far too difficult to do so; this faith, derived from the untapped potential she senses in the landscape makes itself evident:

...Emil wondered why his sister looked so happy. Her face was so radiant he felt shy about asking her. For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set towards it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit that breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Ibid, 25.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 28.

¹⁵⁴ *O Pioneers!*, 33.

The land, it seems, has revealed itself to her, slowly, through the years, as she and her father discussed it, drove about in it, worked it, and learned from it. And now, at this moment, even in the midst of drought and despair, she is able to turn her face towards the landscape with both love and desire: this expression of faith is her acquiescence to the methods by which the land will be made fruitful.

By sticking it out through the hard times, Alexandra practices self-denial—the turning away from luxury and indulgence in material things; the rejection of the easy route, the fleeing back East, for the difficult road of the waste, out of which great bounty will be brought. It is only *after* her denial of self, only after she resolves to focus her efforts entirely on cultivating the land (with thought of material gain absent from her thinking, especially considering she buys the Linstrum place and takes out another mortgage on her land), only after these things does the Genius of the Divide, the local spirit of the place bend its will to her.

Alexandra comes to terms with the landscape in an act of mutual respect and understanding.¹⁵⁵ The great fact was the land itself, as we know, and Alexandra has realized that in order to 1) make sense of the landscape and 2) farm it effectively, she must commit herself to doing what the landscape will allow. She tells her brothers of this newly cemented relationship between herself and the land when her brothers question her about how she knows whether or not they will be successful and get a return on their investments. Alexandra tells them, “I can’t

¹⁵⁵ Susan Rosowski ties the invocation of the Genius to Virgil, wherein the spirit of the place is the “tutelary and controlling spirit connected with a place” (“Ecology” 44) and quoting Virgil’s *Georgics*, she tells us “Care must be taken to observe the winds / And changing skies, what modes and habits be / The region’s heritage, what gifts each place / Bears or denies...” (*Georgics*, I.57-60, trans. Theodore Chickering Williams, Harvard UP 1915)

explain that....You'll have to take my word for it. I *know*, that's all. When you drive about over the country you can feel it coming."¹⁵⁶

Though Cather cuts out sixteen years of farming practices that Alexandra and her fellow farmers who remained on the land used to cultivate their farms, we are told immediately that there has been prospering for those who stayed through the drought. Cather writes in the present tense that could John Bergson rise from his grave and look out over the prairie, "he would not know the country under which he has been asleep. The shaggy coat of the prairie, which they had lifted to make him a bed, had vanished forever."¹⁵⁷ What has happened in the span of sixteen years is cultivation of the landscape by people who learned from the land and who now understand how to farm it. Yet a tension exists here, as well as in *My Ántonia*, about the act of cultivation. In some sense, cultivation could be read as a killing off of what the landscape was, a human taming and mastering of the land rather than a symbiotic existence. However, even while Cather holds cultivation and taming in tension through the different kinds of farmers in *O Pioneers!*, the novel represents the landscape's agency as something desiring use in order to bring to life the potential embedded within the landscape. Doing so requires the farmer's plow, and it requires a proper reading of the landscape as a way to build a mutually beneficial relationship between humans and the land.

The prairie is described as "a vast checkerboard, marked off in squares of wheat and corn; light and dark, dark and light."¹⁵⁸ Farmhouses dot the landscape, as do other metal constructions such as windmills that "vibrate in the wind that often blows from one week's end

¹⁵⁶ *O Pioneers!*, 34.

¹⁵⁷ *O Pioneers!*, 39.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 39.

to another across that high, active, resolute, stretch of country.”¹⁵⁹ If that were not enough to establish the cultivation of the landscape’s potential (conceived as it is as a waste), Cather tells readers that “[t]he rich soil yields heavy harvests; the dry, bracing climate and the smoothness of the land make labor easy for men and beasts” and in the spring plowing the land “yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft deep, sigh of happiness.”¹⁶⁰ The land and the humans have adapted themselves to one another in a way that allows both to be sustained; the land’s yielding eagerly to the plow and sighing in happiness reveals, in Cather’s representation of *in the novel*, its apparent desire to be in this way fulfilled, as the desire for humans to survive is fulfilled.

Though there is significant ecological change in the landscape and though real-world consensus would suggest that this is a destruction of an essential global ecosystem, Cather’s thematic purpose is not to write a textbook on ecology or a pamphlet decrying the “injustices” of agricultural practices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Instead, it is to write imaginatively about common people, most of them immigrants, and show them living in relationship with a land that takes an active role in those communities. And it is clear in the *novel*, in the imaginative world Cather has created, that both the land and the farmers are sustained by this relationship that has helped the landscape give of itself as the farmers give unto it.

What we see in this section of the novel is that because of the changes wrought upon it by the agricultural practices appropriate to it, the landscape becomes young. Its youthfulness is brought forth to the surface as the human being becomes attuned to the land. Cather tells us, “There is something frank and joyous and young in the open face of the country. It gives itself

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 39.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 39.

ungrudgingly to the moods of the season, holding nothing back.”¹⁶¹ The farming is enlivening to the land, and its vitality and fruitfulness and beauty usher in a time of peace in living together in a local place: primarily, the people who have remained in the land have adapted themselves to the land.

It becomes apparent, then, that the land desires its use in Cather’s novel, and it teaches the farmers how to use it responsibly—from crop rotation to mowing to grazing practices. And we get the sense from the novel that Cather’s purpose, the major theme of the novel, is in part to develop that early line, that the great fact was the land itself. It, rather than human habitations, has a quality of permanence about it that it only sensed by the characters once they have yielded to the land and it has become fruitful. Time and space become married in the landscape and the necessity of acting responsibly to the landscape emerges from that marriage when we encounter Marie walking through the fields: “The years seemed to stretch before her like the land; spring, summer, autumn, winter, spring; always the same patient fields, the patient little trees, the patient lives; always the same yearning, the same pulling at the chain.”¹⁶² Connecting time with the horizontal space of the land and with the cyclical nature of the seasons we clearly see that the landscape’s character has been a patient one throughout the years the pioneers have spent on the prairie. Through difficult times and easy times it has remained there, beneath their feet and before their eyes as the only permanent thing in the locality. That quality of permanence and constancy is something to which Alexandra has clearly attempted to adapt herself, though by the end of the novel, she realizes that even though that adaptation is right, it is impossible for a woman to achieve in her lifetime. Nevertheless, it is an adaptation that should be pursued by each generation of men and women, each in succession to one another.

¹⁶¹ *O Pioneers!*, 39.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 128.

This constancy in the landscape drives home Cather's ecological ethics in the novel and encapsulate what Cather wants the landscape to teach her characters (and consequently her readers) about living in small, regional places where the land is so insistently present. At the end of the novel, Alexandra and Carl are together looking west across the land. She tells him, "There is great peace here, Carl, and freedom," and he tells her that she "belongs to the land," which leads to Alexandra's final realization about the landscape (and thereby the concretization of the novel's main theme):

Suppose I do will my land to their [Lou's and Oscar's] children, what difference will it make? The land belongs to the future, Carl; that's the way it seems to me. How many names on the county clerk's plat will be there in fifty years? I might as well try to will the sunset over there to my brother's children. We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while.¹⁶³

Alexandra's understanding that the land exists not only in the present moment but eternally, forever after her body is buried beneath that "[f]ortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth"¹⁶⁴ is crucial to Cather's thematic ecological ethics. Alexandra's understanding is a holistic one. It is the realization that she must now (and has been) preparing the land for future generations of people living on it and with it—to act towards it with love and understanding, not to harm it but to cultivate it as it desires to be cultivated. Hers is a conservative position in that she understands her place in time and in history, in that she understands that those who came before her prepared both the land and herself to care for the

¹⁶³ *O Pioneers!*, 158.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

land but that she also must do the same. Her work has been to guard and conserve the family on the land, the community on the land, the locality in its entirety, to be frugal with resources, thinking of both the past and the future without shying away from the one universal truth that she can be certain of: We come and go but the land will always be there. Thus, we must act to sustain the land and ourselves alongside it.

O. E. Rølvaag's Prairie

Though similar in theme to Cather's prairie novels and in the composition of its characters, Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* takes a far darker and more sharply bifurcated look at how the prairie exerts its agency on people. Set in what is known as the Northern Mixed Grasslands (Eastern South and North Dakota and parts of Canada), Rølvaag's novel highlights what is at stake when attempting to read the prairie, what happens when it is misread, and the implications involved in the hermeneutics of becoming a native to the place one finds oneself in. Additionally, like Cather, Rølvaag's characters are Norwegian immigrants both to the United States and to the ecoregion in which Rølvaag gives life to the land and to his characters. Though the novel is about the Hansa family and about the Norwegian community's attempts to survive in an ecosystem apparently more hostile than Cather's Rolling Plains and Rainwater Basin, it is also clearly about what effect the landscape has on the people who have chosen to live on it.

Part of the tensions that Rølvaag sets up between the landscape and his characters' attempts to read it in the novel can be derived from the complex nature of the setting in what is now eastern South Dakota (but was at the time of the novel's events simply the Dakota Territory), a locality Rølvaag himself experienced individually when he traveled to South Dakota to work on a farm in his young-adulthood. The Northern Mixed Grasslands, according to the World Wide

Fund for Nature (WWF), are an ecotone, a transitional border between “three tallgrass prairie ecoregions to the east [and] the Northwestern Mixed Grasslands” as well as a border between “the shortgrass prairie to the south” and “the cooler boreal forests to the north.”¹⁶⁵ The ecoregion can support a variety of climates from the moist to the semiarid, composed primarily of grasses (grama, little bluestem, wheatgrass, and others) in the south, transitioning into a mixture of grasses and quaking aspens, burr oak, various tall shrubs, and fescue in the northern extensions of this ecoregion.¹⁶⁶ Its topography is pock-marked with “glacial pothole lakes,” and being also part of the EPA-designated Northern Glaciated Plains, it was once covered with glaciers until their recession.

These potholes in the prairie provide irregularities and interruptions in the otherwise immense and flat landscape, suggesting that a complex experience of the landscape both conceptually and physically exists. They provide both depth and texture to one’s experience of the land, which gives Rølvaag the opportunity to explore different responses and approaches to the landscape through the land itself. A scene early in the novel, after Per and his family have lost their way demonstrates the complexity of experience that this interrupted landscape enables. Per, in attempt to orient himself in the place, locates a hill across one of the potholes in the prairie and begins walking towards it. Yet, so distorted is distance on the plain, that even in its relative flatness, Per’s journey to the hilltop takes far longer than he imagined it would, full as it is with smaller ups-and-downs along the way.

The fact of the landscape’s transitional quality further allows Rølvaag to emphasize struggle in the novel on the level of agriculture and on the level of plot, especially considering

¹⁶⁵ Shay, J. and G. Whelan-Enns, A. Appleby, R. Usher, K. Kavanagh, M. Sims, S. Chaplin, P. Sims, K. Carney, E. Dinerstein “Northern Mixed Grasslands.” World Wide Fund for Nature, accessed 2018, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/ecoregions/na0810>

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

that his characters are in a transitional state themselves. On the way to becoming Americans, the Hansa family, headed by the imperial Per and the strong-yet-frightful Beret, attempts to find and create a place on earth that is their own, and while they attempt to adapt themselves to the place (and adapt the place to themselves), they also struggle with preserving the way of life they have both left behind and brought with them into this new and alien landscape. As Erica Haugtvedt has argued, Rølvaag dealt with questions of assimilation throughout his prairie trilogy, of which *Giants* is the first book. The novel, according to Haugtvedt, advocates for the preservation of “ethnic American enclaves” within the larger American nation, existing as a set of pluralities assimilated just enough to preserve the balance between American national “traditions” and their ethnic traditions.¹⁶⁷ Unfortunately (and predictably), Haugtvedt denies Rølvaag any moral authority to suggest that the loss of ethnic Norwegian values and practices, which she reductively identifies as “strong religious faith, respect for one’s parents, love of home, and an appreciation of a collective ethnic past.”¹⁶⁸ So general are these values that one could substitute just about any nationality or polity and her argument would work just the same.

Nothing about the list above is essentially or recognizably *Norwegian* about these values, and they were values shared by a vast majority of ethnic groups who were immigrating to the United States during the nineteenth century (like the Irish, another immigrant group Rølvaag deals with in *Giants*). So universalizing then is her identification of these values that her larger argument about *Giants* as a novel dealing deeply with questions of assimilation is damaged. Simply living in a place with similar people does not create a healthily assimilated community, and as such I approach assimilation through bioregionalist understandings of social formation.

¹⁶⁷ Haugtvedt, Erica. “Abandoned in America: Dissonance and Ethnic Preservationism in *Giants in the Earth*.” *MELUS*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2008, 147.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 147.

With an emphasis on reading the landscape and deriving one's community values from what the landscape will allow, assimilation is a process of individual responsibility and intentional striving towards healthy community. In point of fact, the novel *does* deal with assimilation and what it would mean for traditional practices to go into decline, but while Beret is anxious about her family's loss of religious faith and declining respect for family, place, and tradition, the only things explicitly ethnic or *Norwegian* at risk of being lost are their language and superstitions, derived from the ecosystems in Nordland—the place from where all the characters have come to the Northern Mixed Grasslands. Even though this oversight is significant in evaluating the credibility and efficacy of Haugtvedt's argument, she is absolutely right to say that Beret especially feels “abandoned in America” due to “her own refusal to integrate the American landscape into her identity.”¹⁶⁹ Beret, indeed, “occupies that moment between past and future and she struggles to go on,” feeling “the heartbreaking transience of identity.”¹⁷⁰ Yet rather than ethnic qualities of abandonment, I would like to focus our attention on the ecotonal readings/misreadings characters in the novel as way to think about how the characters begin to mythologize the new landscape they transit through.

This transience is something that Steve Hahn has discussed in his essay about how the Norwegians see the landscape and the narrative tension between the reality of the Great Plains landscape and a vision of that reality in terms of their Norwegian past.¹⁷¹ Setting the novel within the context of the settling of the American frontier (as Rølvaag did), Hahn argues that these settlers are “a people who cannot escape their heritage; they are part and parcel of Norwegian

¹⁶⁹ Haugtvedt, 148.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 166.

¹⁷¹ One might use “interpretation of reality” instead of vision, for that is part of the dichotomy of human experience: there is reality and there is our interpretation of reality, influenced by those things which are derived (sometimes) from reality itself, abstracted, and then reapplied to reality.

culture, displaced though they may be. The land itself is not Norwegian; it does, however, possess qualities which the settlers perceive as being Norwegian.”¹⁷² By locating the characters’ *perceptions* of heritage within their reading of the landscape itself, Hahn allows that these characters have begun to mythologize the new ecosystem within which they find themselves.

This is a theme April Schultz has treated in her discussion of folklore and landscape in *Giants*. She argues that the characters’ “perspectives are grounded in folk ideas about space, place, and the human beings’ position within both.”¹⁷³ The folkloric and mythic heritage inscribed on the human person in Norway has been imported, has immigrated with the Norwegians to the Dakota prairie, such that Beret see trolls and monsters and signs and portents in the landscape. This is for Schultz a reflexive act of reading onto the landscape the Norwegian community and shared values and stories she has left behind in Nordland. Schultz goes as far to connect *Giants* to the old Norse sagas (with which Rølvaag’s characters and audience of Norwegian-Americans would likely be familiar), suggesting that “sagas are episodic, with very little attention paid to plot development; they continually prepare the listener reader for the fatal ending.”¹⁷⁴ The novel is certainly episodic in structure and Per’s death at the end certainly seems tied to the doom Beret sees in the landscape as a fulfillment of destiny. If the novel is structured like a saga, then it has as its core a significant tension between its protagonists. For Schultz, this tension embodies itself in Per’s “prideful optimism in the vast, open landscape” and Beret’s

¹⁷² Hahn, Steve. “Vision and Reality in *Giants in the Earth*.” *South Dakota Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1974, 86.

¹⁷³ Schultz, April. “To Lose the Unspeakable: Folklore and Landscape in O. E. Rølvaag’s *Giants in the Earth*.” *Mapping American Culture*. Iowa UP, 1992, 91.

¹⁷⁴ Schultz, 95.

“profound loss of place.”¹⁷⁵ This is a struggle tied directly to the hermeneutics of landscape, how the characters read and misread the landscape’s agency.

This struggle is evidenced in the family’s behaviors as the novel progresses towards its tragic conclusion, and it also appears in the landscape’s various seasonal expressions, some of which (like the snowstorms and plagues) echo Cather’s idea that the prairie is pushing back against the invading plow. Though, as has been discussed, Cather’s novels discredit this idea, Rølvaag takes the tension seriously, constructing a set of essential binary conflicts throughout the novel in order to suggest a landscape ethics that operates as a middle way between the binaries. These conflicts take their residence in the characters of Per and Beret, the husband and wife heroes of the novel who arrive in the Dakota Territory certain of the way forward and fearfully humbly looking back, respectively.

Further, Ingeborg Kongslien has argued, in an essay tracing Rølvaag’s insistence on cultural and ethnic difference in his saga of the prairie, that while the latter books in the saga trace the “midwestern [sic] American prairie society with its pressure to assimilate” there still remains a “leitmotif of non-negotiable difference” throughout the novels.¹⁷⁶ By treating themes of assimilation and ethnic preservation, Rølvaag is able to structure his novels as a set of different approaches to the world, stemming from 1) myths about the self and world and 2) fearfully humble approaches to the world itself. Kongslien has identified that structure as a

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 91. Schultz goes too far in calling Beret’s sense of loss a kind of fanaticism that leads to Per’s death as a “tragic consequence” of both his pride and her “obsessive clinging to the past.” In doing so, she risks not taking Beret’s loss seriously. She also claims, and rightly so I think, that Beret does not make changes needed to survive in the new landscape; however, Schultz does not delineate what these changes are or needed to be.

¹⁷⁶ Kongslien, Ingeborg. “Difference and Diversity in O. E. Rølvaag’s Immigrant Epic.” *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 84, no. 2, 2012, 181.

contrast between “fairy tale and great deeds versus human costs and suffering, as well as looking back or turning fully to the future.”¹⁷⁷

Though Kongslien gives most of his time to the latter novels (*Peder Victorious* and *Their Fathers' God*), he clearly identifies early on the theme of contrast and conflict between cultures, going so far as to call it an antagonistic relationship carried throughout the saga;¹⁷⁸ however, significantly, he misses seeing how the landscape itself operates in alignment with and against the Norwegian settlers as the foundation for the antagonisms that later emerge in the novels. In a word, it is human response to the landscape's agency (as Rølvaag highlights in *Giants*) that provides a strong, meaningful basis for the cultural and religious differences that appear in the later novels.

I would even go as far to argue that the relationship between Per and Beret, *especially* in the first novel¹⁷⁹ is not as antagonistic or conflict-oriented as Kongslien and Haugtvedt have made out. Or, it is not *meant* to be antagonistic. Whatever conflict does emerge between Per and Beret derives from external stressors (like the need to establish a sustenance-farming community in an alien landscape when one comes from fishing country), thereby creating a tragic rift in what should otherwise have been a deeply complementarian construction of characters: that Per and Beret respond to the landscape differently, that the landscape works different things in them is essential, if not biological, and should come as no surprise; that Per and Beret cannot find a way to consistently complement each other in the enacting of their responses to the landscape represents the absent third way between the ecological and behavioral binaries that Per and Beret

¹⁷⁷ Kongslien, 182.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 185.

¹⁷⁹ I highlight the first novel here because it is artistically and aesthetically superior to the latter novels, which as Kongslien has pointed out (p. 183), lapse into ideological, hamfisted, tract-like language at the expense of literary, aesthetic, and artistic qualities.

enact in the novel. As Shaunanne Tangney has argued, Per sacrifices happiness (marital, domestic, communal) in order to achieve material wealth “beyond his wildest imagination”: “Per and Beret’s life together, once so full of love and affection, pride and joy, becomes one of madness and desolation, dishonesty and dismay.”¹⁸⁰ If Per had been more like Beret, the novel seems to say, and if Beret had been more like Per, both would have thrived throughout without the ultimate tragedy of Per’s death by the end of the novel.

What these critics all agree on, however, is that Rølvaag’s novel is deeply symbolic, with old Norwegian folkloric and mythic structures encoded into *Giants* and set against what April Schultz has called the “American narrative of individualism and inevitable expansion.”¹⁸¹ This reading of the novel clearly suggests that what the characters see in the landscape is not already there but instead read into it, imposed upon it, only “in” the landscape because of the lenses through which the characters are looking. This is especially clear with Per’s characterization; all of his behavior is geared towards founding a kingdom in a new, untamed land. Rølvaag has built Per as one who arrives in Dakota, already looking for what he wants to find in the landscape: the material out of which personal domains can be built. The impositional nature of the characters’ reading of the landscape is also clear if we take Beret’s reliance on religion, folklore, and myth as a way to 1) make sense of the prairie and 2) give a knowable structure to her life and experiences there.

Whereas Cather’s prairie seemed to thrive beneath the plow, seemed to become fulfilled in the work done to it, Rølvaag’s prairie is quite different. It is darker, less pliant, even unkind and far less habitable than the Nebraska prairie Cather created in her novels. Further, and unlike

¹⁸⁰ Tangney, Shaunanne. “The Proper Soil for Virtue: Yeoman Farmers, American Dreamers, and Socioeconomic Crises in *Giants in the Earth* and the *Little House* Books.” *North Dakota Quarterly*, vol. 69, no. 4, 2002, 110.

¹⁸¹ Schultz, 91.

critics have argued, the prairie has its own agency and what Beret sees in it (trolls, monsters, evil) is already there in some form. Rølvaag writes clearly and succinctly: “The Great Plain watched them breathlessly....”¹⁸² By turning the prairie into a proper noun and making it the subject of the verb “watched,” the landscape takes on its own qualities not of personhood but of the nominative: that which does something, that which acts and has the potential to act. Further, by ending the chapter “Home-Founding” with an ellipsis, Rølvaag suggests the plain will act further on the people who have chosen to settle upon it. Reasonable as it would seem to attribute storms, plagues of locusts, difficult ground, and other phenomena to mere weather and natural patterns (and an anthropocentric way of reading would be right to do so), Rølvaag’s *characterization* of the landscape indicates otherwise.

At the beginning of book two, where the battle between Per and the landscape has its fulfillment, Rølvaag describes the landscape as “[a]n endless plain” that stretched north and west “God alone knows how far...miles without number...Endless...beginningless.”¹⁸³ So vast and empty is the plain that when the Hansa family arrives in the territory all they hear is the grass speaking, a voice which Per resolutely ignores and which Beret listens to perhaps too keenly; for it says, inscrutably, “Tish-ah, tish-ah!” and Rølvaag tells us that this voice is the voice of resistance: “Never had it said anything else—never would it say anything else” (suggesting immutability) and “[i]t bent resiliently under the trampling feet; it did not break, but it complained aloud every time...in surprise to look at this rough, hard thing that had crushed it to the ground so rudely, and then moved on.”¹⁸⁴ Rølvaag clearly creates an agential prairie that can feel, speak, express emotion, and act when it needs to. Its relative and increasing silence, the

¹⁸² Rølvaag, O. E. *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie*, NY: Harper Perennial, 1991 (1927), 69.

¹⁸³ *Giants*, 283.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 3-4.

moods it can induce in people by its sheer presence, all point to a landscape that is enchanted and enlivened prior to the arrival of Norwegians, whose own cultural heritage helps them to 1) misread and destroy the landscape (and Norwegian tradition) and 2) understand and approach the landscape with the humility it requires of humans who have forgotten how small they are in the world. Beret survives at the end primarily because of this humility; whether she wanted to or not is a different questions altogether.

In Beret, specifically, the prairie inspires feelings of exposure and isolation from civilization back east (and back across the Atlantic). Her first impressions, often commented upon by critics, are that “*here something was about to go wrong*,” and the question “How will human beings be able to endure this place?...Why there isn’t even a thing one can *hide behind!*”¹⁸⁵ Full of grama grass, little bluestem, wheatgrasses, and potholes created by ancient moving glaciers, Beret’s mood derives, in a sense, from the geographic formations and biological homogeneity: the lack of trees, the lack of mountains, the presence of high grasses, the presence of depressions all contribute to Beret’s sense that humans cannot endure this place.

This fear of exposure and fear at the lack of protection along with her trepidation about the future appears to derive from direct contact with the landscape instead of her folkloric knowledge. It is only after they have begun to build a home, only after they have begun to construct a domestic space (that something to hide behind) that Beret begins to see monsters in the landscape. But even then, the monsters appear to come *from* the landscape itself rather than being imposed upon a landscape from which they can later emerge in order to self-fulfill the hermeneutical “prophecy” of the characters (something which Per embraces because he thinks he can conquer it; something which Beret fears because she knows they cannot).

¹⁸⁵ *Giants*, 32-33.

Indeed, that first night the community is all together, Rølvaag tells us that their “conversation gradually died away into silence” and in that silence, engendered it appears by the prairie itself:

A peculiar mood came drifting in with the dusk. It seemed to float on the evening breeze, to issue forth from the heart of the untamed nature round about them; it lurked in the very vastness and endlessness surrounding them on every hand; it even seemed to rise like an impalpable mist out of the ground on which they sat.¹⁸⁶

A mood that carries with it premonitions about the future comes from the landscape (it issues forth) and was, in Rølvaag’s analysis, already there (it lurked) and though felt, it remains unable to be grasped (the mist). And as Rølvaag makes quite clear in the second half of the book, these premonitions are of how the landscape will act against them, and in Per’s case, kill him.

Rølvaag opens “Founding the Kingdom,” book two of the saga, with a landscape actively hostile to human habitation and development, something which foreshadows the inevitable collapse of Per and his dreams of his kingdom, built and ruled by him alone. Indeed, as the novel shows, Beret is the survivor, the one responsible for continuing what Per had begun. We are told that the landscape is a “grey waste...an empty silence...a boundless cold” without beginning or end, that it is unequivocally

a universe of nothing but dead whiteness. Blizzards from out of the northwest raged, swooped down and stirred up a greyish-white fury, impenetrable to human eyes. As soon as these monsters tired, storms from the northeast were sure to come, bringing more snow....Monsterlike the Plain lay there—sucked in her breath one week, and the next

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 37.

week blew it out again. Man she scorned; his works she would not brook...She would know, when the time came, how to guard herself and her own against him.¹⁸⁷

The antagonistic qualities of the landscape here are vital to the bioregional ethics and landscape agency Rølvaag aims to represent in the novel, related as they are to the character's reading of the landscape and assimilation of it in to their ways of being. The monstrous quality is set against Per's reading of the landscape and consistent with Beret's understanding that the landscape is not merely the materials out of which a kingdom could be founded. Though Per persists and though farming continues unabated (especially into the following two novels, which deal with an increasingly colonized/civilized prairie), the landscape constantly attempts to stop him, from blizzards to lack of resources to do as he pleases, to plagues of locusts. The novel seems to make clear that those who impose their will on the landscape, those who forget their cultural heritage of an inhabited and enchanted world by buying into an imperial ideology of conquest are not the ones the landscape wants to survive (though of course, outside Rølvaag's novel, many do). Instead this prairie seeks out the fearful and the humble.

Beret's fear and humility are best realized in two scenes of the novel: when Per removes the Irishmen's stakes and when the locusts descend upon the wheatfields for several years and decimate the crop. When Per discovers that an O'Hara has planted stakes on the land that Per legally owns due to the deed filed in Sioux City, he removes them, hiding them in his barn. When the Irish arrive and attempt to take Per's land, the stakes, obviously, cannot be found, and the Irish settle elsewhere nearby. This scene becomes a clear victory for the Norwegians and a site of the racial tension Rølvaag constructs in this prairie environment. Though communities must stick together, for Rølvaag, it is better if they remain ethnically (racially, in his terms)

¹⁸⁷ *Giants*, 283.

similar because of shared cultural values passed down through generations.¹⁸⁸ When Beret discovers Per's actions she is mortified, for as Rølvaag's footnotes tell us: "for a more heinous crime than meddling with other people's landmarks could hardly be imagined."¹⁸⁹ Indeed, Rølvaag tells us that in traditional Norwegian religion, there is a special postmortem punishment reserved for people who do so. Though it is somewhat difficult to call wooden stakes driven into the ground "landmarks," her mortification is perfectly understandable, based as it is on an anthropocentric understanding of what counts as landmarks (like the fence posts Jim looked for initially in order to mark the Nebraska prairie). This perhaps may be the only moment in the novel where she reads *onto* instead of *out from* the landscape. Regardless, her portentous fear at Per's behavior derives from a respect for land and the marking of it by humans. If the land is marked, it must be approached with humility and respect, something the land has been teaching her throughout the novel: the land is marked by silence, by the fact that there is nothing to hide behind, by its vastness and inhospitality.

When the locusts arrive and destroy much of the wheat crop over most of the 1870s, Beret's fear is shown as something more akin to religious awe, the sublime, than simply being afraid of something. One is reminded of the fear of the Lord being the beginning of wisdom in this instance. Though many of the pioneers hold on, they are humiliated (excluding Per), some decide to "pull up their stakes" and go back east where they will be relatively untroubled by the hard lessons that the land itself would teach, since the land is covered by developments and far more familiar than something absent of human dwellings. The entire settlement fears the coming

¹⁸⁸ I want to make very clear that this is not an argument for racial purity on Rølvaag's part. Nor is it an argument for racial superiority or an argument for an impositional or imperial set of values. It is, rather, a means of survival both literal and cultural—a way to become Americans without giving up what makes them Norwegian. It is a pluralism grounded in localist and bioregionalist thought.

¹⁸⁹ *Giants*, 141, fn.

of the locust at first—they feel that “[h]ere was *Another One* speaking.”¹⁹⁰ The Abbadon-like creatures out of John’s Revelation on Patmos appear as agents of the landscape, agents attempting to drive away human habitants so that the land can return to its once-immutable-seeming self. Though Per and his sons attempt to beat away the whirling clouds of locusts, their efforts are useless, so Per returns to the homestead to find where Beret has gone.

What he discovers is that she has barricaded herself against the door inside their large steamer trunk, an object that Diane Quantic has identified as Beret’s “link to the old world that she deliberately abandoned to follow Per,” something that serves ultimately as Beret’s “refuge from a place that she cannot acknowledge as home.”¹⁹¹ Quantic wants to read this box as both a coffin (in which Beret wants to be buried when she thinks she will die in childbirth) and a “barricade” between herself and Per, one that, in the context of the locust plague, comes to represent “the diminished measure of his [Per’s] fairy kingdom.”¹⁹² Certainly, this artifact from the Old World is Beret’s material link to the life (home, place, and people) she left behind to come to the prairie, and it comes to represent toward the end of the novel, as Quantic argues, an “account[] of the costs of the transformation of the Great Plains grassland into cropland.”¹⁹³

When Per opens the chest, Rølvaag writes, “The sight that met his eyes made his blood run cold. Down in the depths of the great chest lay Beret, huddled up and holding the baby in her arms; And-Onge was crouching at her feet.”¹⁹⁴ Per’s reaction to Beret essentially burying herself in an artifact of the Old World is one of temporary insanity. Beret’s act of terrified defense then takes the strength out of Per and out of his imposed vision for the landscape. It is

¹⁹⁰ *Giants*, 392.

¹⁹¹ Quantic, Diane D. “Fairy Castle or Steamer Trunk?: Creating Place in O. E. Rølvaag’s *Giants in the Earth*.” *Great Plains Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2003, 254-255.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹⁹⁴ *Giants*, 397.

Beret's acknowledgement of the landscape's supreme power over human destiny, its bigness and ultimate agency, its superiority to the smallness of human beings as can be seen in her reaction to the plague of locusts (a plague of Biblical proportions, coded within the symbolic qualities of the novel). That acknowledgement made in terror (more terror than sublimity can admit perhaps) temporarily humbles Per as well at least until the plague is over, and he remembers his desire to found a kingdom, a belief that drives him out into the blizzard that kills him at the end of the novel.

What Beret has realized in the face of the plague, what readers are meant to understand at this point late in Rølvaag's novel is that this is a land not meant to be transformed, not meant to be settled—at least not in the way humans have intended to settle it, intended to impose themselves upon it. Rølvaag writes,

[T]he plague of locusts proved as certain as the seasons. All that grew above the ground, with the exception of the wild grass, it would pounce upon and destroy; the grass it left untouched because it had grown here ere time was and *without the aid of man's hand*....Who would dare affirm that this plague was not of supernatural origin?¹⁹⁵

Not to dismiss the spiritual attribution of the sending of the plague of locusts regularly onto the settlement, but at the very least, we can attribute the coming of the bugs to the agency of a place so vast that its doings seem supernatural. Further, if we are to take the novel at its word (and there is no good argument for why we should not), the agency of this landscape that Rølvaag has created is synonymous with spiritual agency or in Beret's ken, the doings of God as she understands him within her Lutheran theological exegesis.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 399-400.

If, as Rølvaag seems to be indicating, the land was not meant to be settled, how do we make sense of any ecological or ethical positions the novel forwards? Certainly, Per's imperial gestures are a failure, a clear and willful misreading of the landscape, a denial of its agency in favor of supreme human will to act upon it.¹⁹⁶ The bad faith readings of the land Per uses to order his world and his actions represent a faulty hermeneutics that approach a thing with positions, desires, and ends already primed—an approach that reduces vision to finding only that which we look for. He seeks only opportunity and finds only opportunity, which ultimately leads to his death since his hermeneutics can admit of no other approach to the landscape.

The same might be said of Beret: that she looks for monsters and trolls in order to make the landscape evil so that she is justified in resisting adapting to the place she is in. However, as has been shown, the monstrousness of the landscape was already there, a conclusion that can be derived from attention to Rølvaag's syntax: he frequently places the landscape in the nominative position when its agency, qualities, and behaviors is represented in the novel. It watches them, it lurks around them, it sends storms and plagues at them. Even so, if the land is not meant to be settled, what then does Beret's fear and trembling at the landscape matter if she must remain and continue on where Per was unable to do so? One answer to this question is easy and, ultimately, I think, unsatisfying. Rølvaag's novel could, it seems, be suggesting that though the land is not meant to be settled and terraformed, it is inevitable that it will be. And if it is inevitable, people like Beret who approach the world with humility and fear may likely be the ones who are most successful at settling the land.

¹⁹⁶ The pride Per exhibits throughout the novel ought to put us in mind of that other prideful figure in the Western tradition: Milton's Satan, whose choice to attempt to exert his will upon the world in which he was placed by God represents the ultimate failure of pride (especially in *Paradise Regained*) though it may at times succeed momentarily.

Rather, and much closer to the themes of the novel, is that Beret takes on the role of the *unwilling* pioneer. Those with strong wills directed at changing the land to fit their vision of it, like Per, are too caught up in myth-making to survive a place that will not have them. But those who have a lack of will, or an unwillingness to settle and transform, who find themselves in the alien landscape can live more successfully in the new and untamed place. Of course, this answer does not obviate the difficulty of what seems inevitable in the course of the novel: change does and must occur, change being the only constant.

The fact that Rølvaag does not allow the novel to advocate for ways of *stopping* change prevents his novel from becoming an environmentalist tract. His art, and ultimately the ecological ethics Rølvaag embedded within the novel, shows the kinds of people who can and cannot survive in such a place as the Dakota prairie. To live ecologically within the prairie ecosystem, the novel seems to say, one must allow the landscape to be itself, and since change is part of the human process, part and parcel with human life, one must approach the act of change without imperial or impositional motives. The art of Rølvaag's novel illustrates what Linda Ray Pratt has called the answer to the question "What is an American?": it is not just "self-reliance, ingenuity, love of liberty, and tolerance of others;" it is also "the sheer terror of settling a land that was not a country yet" in the face of those things "inexorably changing in response to the demands of a new world unlike the one in which they originated."¹⁹⁷ Though she incorrectly, I think, attributes Beret's immutably judgmental character (Per removing the stakes is a good example) to the landscape instead of the changes brought about by Per, Pratt is right to say that Rølvaag's novel demonstrates with clarity "what was good and glorious" and "what was weak

¹⁹⁷ Pratt, Linda Ray. *Great Plains Literature*. University of Nebraska Press, 2018, 54.

and mean” in the settlement of the “endless grasslands” full of “alien peoples, deadly weather, and the unrelenting fear for survival itself.”¹⁹⁸

What was good in the settlement of the prairie is the sense of place cultivated by people as they constructed strong bioregional communities, perhaps without knowing it. The life of the community, as imagined in the novel, is founded on care for and sustenance of a singular place in the world, connecting with care for and charity towards the people therein. They are, as Pratt claims, “the small communities where everyone in need is a neighbor,”¹⁹⁹ which attitude is derived from a desire to conserve both the traditions of the past in a new place (because these are the things that give life meaning and comprehensibility) and the knowledge that comes with learning to know a place for the first time. Though as in Cather’s novels, Rølvaag shows readers the prairie is by and large at first glance incomprehensible because it requires of human settlers a shift from an anthropocentric way of perceiving the world, we find that the lack of *human* landmarks connotes not an absence but an absolute presence.²⁰⁰ This being-there of the landscape yields in characters differing degrees of success and satisfaction, but one thing is the same for all of them: the utter necessity of dwelling-there if any ecologically local behavior towards the landscape is to emerge. Only then, the novel seems to suggest, would they be effective in conserving and sustaining the place and the people and the practices therein.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 55. It is important to note that Beret’s resistance to adapting herself to the new climate derives from a very real and very accurate knowledge that the plain is deadly, dangerous, and meant to be approached with caution. If it takes the death of her husband in order for her to learn the necessity of making those changes, then we must understand *that* as the cost, tragic though it may be and not reductively attribute Beret’s resistance to her faith or to her cultural (and ergo local) heritage so rapidly and violently imported into an alien landscape.

¹⁹⁹ Pratt, 55.

²⁰⁰ Absolute presence as being contained with absence is a theme which Denise Levertov takes up in her poetry, especially those poems from *Relearning the Alphabet*, in which she connects absence to poetic creation; however, her comments about language there extend to her approach to the natural world throughout her oeuvre.

Conclusion: Cather & Rølvaag's Commensalist Prairie Ethics

The ethical force of these novels, as their authors make clear through their art, is that to declaim about a place from a position exterior to it is at best misguided and at worst a willful misinterpretation or misrepresentation of that place, its people, its beliefs, its practices, and its ecology. Where Cather presents readers with characters who succeed in harmonizing themselves with the landscape (the syntax here is vital; miss this and miss my argument wholesale) in an act of commensalism or mutualism depending on the situation or representation, Rølvaag tends towards characters who act out of commensalist or parasitic motives. Both are commensalist in the sense that one organism always benefits—however, more often than not in Cather, the “other organism(s)” neither suffer nor benefit when the first organism benefits. In Rølvaag, there is always suffering when someone or something benefits; constructing his work in this fashion makes his work tend towards representing and working through parasitic relationships to land, which relationships are necessarily founded in an impositional reading of landscape—the will and the myth of imperial humanity. In Cather, on the other hand, we see even more clearly what happens when a character allows herself to come to terms with what the landscape desires her to know and how it desires her to behave towards itself.

What remains then is an ethics focused on removing initial perceptions (i.e., perceptions exterior to the thing itself) of an alien landscape and coming to know the place for the first time *on its own terms*. This is a vital thing to understand in our literature, especially in light of human tendencies to expect every place to be like home or to be like a preconceived version of what we think the place *ought* to be—in other words, the tendency to want places to be comfortable and comprehensible instead of nakedly real, coming to the perception in all of their individuality. If

we come to places with our understanding of it already in place, we have not been in nor understood that place in any real sense. If, rather, we come to a place bare of lenses, bare of impositional ways of thinking about or reading places, we have a very real opportunity to build new relationships with people and practices and beliefs different from (and perhaps at odds with) ourselves.

Chapter II: “Like Wonders Much Reduced”: The Great American Desert

Introduction

A landscape that deceptively appears empty exists in the Southwestern United States. Its sandy, rocky soil resists attempts to cultivate life—life as understood by emigrants from the lush verdure of the Eastern deciduous forests. And yet the passage west ought to have prepared the migrants of fortune for the vast harshness of the Great American Desert. As unforgiving as the sweltering wasteland in the Southwest is, so too are the Great Plains differently unforgiving. Where the prairie, remnant of an inland sea as it is, allows for the cultivation of some life (at the cost of other forms of life that also want to live), the desert restricts the available forms able to survive in its tremendous, seemingly uniform blankness. Yet, as will be shown through a discussion of Leslie Marmon Silko’s and Cormac McCarthy’s representations of the Great American Desert, this uniformity and emptiness is troubled and challenged by the presence of forms of life that do indeed survive there. To say that these life-forms thrive would be an overstatement of the case, but nevertheless, life digs deep, clings to the land, and holds on—a stay against the future and a reckoning with the past.

We find in the representations of the desert discussed here—in Silko’s *Ceremony* and McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*—two different kinds of reconciliation with the land, with both the land’s past and the human pasts left there to be preserved or to rot or to be destroyed. Both Silko and McCarthy grapple with what the past means not only to human presents and human futures but also to the ecological present and future of the region. The theme of reconciliation in the novels is tied directly to the land and the ways that the principal characters interact with it; reconciliation rests in the ways that imperial, “heliotropic” bioregional ethics encounter

Amerindian traditions and bioregional ethical systems. What McCarthy and Silko show readers is that these points of convergence—where the imposed value systems runs up against the value system already in place—exist as test cases for how humans can live ethically within a local ecosystem and whether or not rapacious damage to the ecosystems can be redeemed or regenerated. Both novels represent the kind of “hoping for” that remains present in the languages, traditions, and relationships of the dwellers in the land, despite the work of the nomadic destroyers that threaten the sustainability of such a delicate ecosystem.

So, on the one hand, this chapter discusses a novel brimming with a tentative hope for reconciliation within desert spaces and communities (*Ceremony*); on the other, this chapter attempts to make sense of a novel brimming with the exterminating tendencies inherent in a human race torn from its sacramental understandings of the world of life (*Blood Meridian*). Both authors, too, are writing in order to attempt to make sense of and chronicle the cascading failure of an ecosystem ravaged by industry, greed, depravity, and cultural-economic exploitation. In each novel, early events where one small disruption causes greater and greater disruptions seem to predict a course of ultimate demise, destruction, and extinction of a local bioregion/culture; and yet both Silko and McCarthy point to a possible reconciliation, a reordering and regeneration of the devastated thing.

This chapter, then, to borrow a phrase from McCarthy’s *The Road* is about what it means to carry the fire in the face of an impending darkness, a movement with a flickering candle through the dark night of the religious and ecological soul. It argues, thematically, that hope remains, that hope *necessarily* remains even when the metaphorical sun is actively in the process of setting on old and ancient ways of being, when the archaic violence of a human nature separated from its sacraments intends on eradicating all traces of what remains of the past. Hope

remains within the landscape, able to be found in the local places from which bioregional ethics derive. In a very real sense, then, this chapter mirrors the movement that structures *Ceremony*: it is a journey past sunset through the night and an emergence at sunrise and thereby renewal.

Both novels, however, are novels of deep mourning, which is a necessary process for healing and regeneration. Both are expressions of the blood crying out from the ground at the moment of betrayal—in the case of McCarthy it is an ancient betrayal; in the case of Silko it is an atomic witchery. The violence and trauma that mark nearly every page of both novels are not without purpose; they are not sensationalist or onanistic. Rather they point beyond themselves towards a necessary transcendent realm where sacrament remains, where responsibility and moral obligation must still be found if anything is to survive or if healing is to be brought to a people divorced from the land and the land ethics they inhabit and embody. Though at first glance the novels would seem contradictory in their visions, both McCarthy's and Silko's work is animated by a sacramental approach to the world underpinned by a religious moral framework emerging from the earth and dictating human relationships.

Attendant with both novels' treatment of human relationship with and responsibility towards the landscape is the relationship between European-Americans and Amerindian peoples. Manifest Destiny, ethnically-motivated violence, and discussion of policies meant to eradicate indigenous cultural practices are necessary to a discussion of both Silko's and McCarthy's novels, but they are not the focus of this chapter. Throughout, they will be subjugated to a discussion of human relationship to the land and the potential redemptive power of sacramental ceremony; instead of focusing on political (i.e. governmentally-oriented) dimensions of these novel, I will emphasize rehabilitated forms—both secular religious and traditionally religious—of being responsible to the world in which we are all life that wants to live. However, as I have

stated, these political dimension are not the primary focus of the chapter despite their unavoidable relevance to how people's relationship with the land has been represented by Leslie Marmon Silko and Cormac McCarthy.

Instead, I will approach these novels as examples of what effects maladaptation to the desert bioregion has on local communities, environments, and people. Both novels (but especially Silko's) demonstrate a basic tenet of a bioregional perspective: they remind us that "texts grow out of the specific places that produced them (and their writers)."²⁰¹ Because both McCarthy and Silko pay close attention not only to landscape but also to finding the proper language and structure to evoke and encounter the desert landscape, we can see the ways in which both authors have foregrounded different versions of bioregional thinking through the ecological dimensions of their work.

Furthermore, Silko and McCarthy must be approached somewhat differently than the other authors discussed in this project because they are more comprehensively concerned with the interrelationships between what Felix Guattari has identified as the three ecologies: environmental concerns, social relations, and human subjectivity.²⁰² Guattari argues that in the post-industrial, post-atomic age encroaching globalism aims to flatten out differences among people and places. Mass media—airspace—engages in a colonial project that reshapes the mental ecology of the human mind; the social ecology of the local, distributed community, and the bioregion in which the community and the human person dwell. This colonial-imperial value system to Guattari is "characterized by genera equivalence, which flattens out all other forms of

²⁰¹ Tom Lynch, Cheryl Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster. *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*, Georgia UP, 2016, p. 17.

²⁰² See Felix Guattari's *The Three Ecologies*, Athlone Press, 2000 (1989).

value, alienating them in its hegemony.”²⁰³ It becomes a clearing of the range, a removal of the native systems of value to make way for the overpowering, bloody, violent value systems represented in McCarthy and Silko by the European-American incursions into the southwest and the devastation those incursions left on the land. In McCarthy, this invasive force is the military and the gangs that press across the country leaving death in their wakes, as well as the “heliotropic” gold seekers moving west; in Silko it is the violence of the atom bomb, the oppression of the Laguna, and the ritual violence of warfare that sunders the human being from the common earth.

Guattari further argues that the homogenization represented by the imperial value system has far-reaching ecological (mental, social, environmental) detriments, that this kind of centralization ignores the needs of the local and singular; it attains power over the local by “determining the limits within which we think, feel, and live; a process of existential contraction.”²⁰⁴ Instead of allowing this to happen, Guattari argues for a decentralization of values, a regeneration of localist social relations that refuse to be cowed by mass-produced values and subjectivity. We can understand Guattari’s resistance to homogenization as a burgeoning bioregionalist approach to the world. Indeed, part of the bioregionalist perspective is to safeguard the local means of storytelling and community-building, for “[i]t is not only species that are becoming extinct, but also the words, phrases, and gestures, of human solidarity.”²⁰⁵ This multi-valent kind of extinction is a key theme in *Blood Meridian* and *Ceremony*—it becomes a representation in the novels of the consequences of not adapting to the constraints of the

²⁰³ Ibid., 65.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 9.

²⁰⁵ Guattari, 44. Additionally, Guattari argues for a shift away from scientific paradigms for understanding the world and human behavior and towards aesthetics paradigms.

landscape (McCarthy) and of rejecting the traditional ceremonies that were derived from the desert bioregion (Silko).

Though extinction is a key concern for McCarthy and Silko, both writers hold out hope and attempt to represent a means toward reconciliation with place, a reimagining of how humans can relate sustainably and responsibly to their place in the world. As Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster argue in *The Bioregional Imagination*, “[I]magination is one key to developing new and better ideas about how to live in our specific places, including a sense of how our individual bioregions are embedded in a larger global biosphere.”²⁰⁶ Both McCarthy and Silko posit worlds ravaged by violence and alienation, a nihilistic nomadism underwritten by a tacit acceptance of the imperial paradigm; however, each novel also represents how there remains the possibility of renewal despite the overwhelming violence of the age, and it is this renewal that marks the ecological force of *Blood Meridian* and *Ceremony*.

Cormac McCarthy’s Diminished Wonders

Much of the ecological discourse surrounding Cormac McCarthy has centered primarily on *The Road*.²⁰⁷ This is relatively unsurprising, considering that *The Road* is immediately accessible as an ecologically-minded text. Its post-apocalyptic setting and survival/quest narrative lends itself to readings stemming from an ecological perspective, as it is easy for critics who value ecology and ecological criticism to find in the text salient evidence for interpretations

²⁰⁶ Lynch, Glotfelty, & Armbruster, 11-12.

²⁰⁷ See *Cormac McCarthy and the Writing of American Spaces* by Andrew Estes (2013), “Embodying Place: An Ecotheological Reading of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*” by Richard Russell (2016), “The Post-Southern Sense of Place in *The Road*” by Chris Walsh (2008), “All These Things He Saw and Did Not See: Witnessing the End of the World in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*” by Hannah Stark (2013), and *Cormac McCarthy’s Borders and Landscapes* (2016).

for what McCarthy is doing with landscape, “eco-critique,” and community ethics in an ecologically devastated world where traditional social orders no longer necessarily apply.

However, in recent years, attention on the ecological components in Cormac McCarthy’s writing has begun to shift to his other works. Much more attention is being given to the connections between landscape, borders, and themes as varied as frontier violence, bioregionalism, nomadism, and liminality in McCarthy. *All the Pretty Horses* is now being read in terms of creatureliness, justice and what Dave Gugin has termed “environmental stylistics” (wherein the syntax and diction of the novel lead readers through a theme of nomadism towards a sense of what McCarthy’s environmentalism can look like in the novel).²⁰⁸

Attention has also been given to *Blood Meridian*, which is the focus of this section in this chapter. Much of the focus on *Blood Meridian*’s ecological components has been on the mystical and mythic themes in the novel, reading the symbolic qualities of the landscape and the characters’ actions instead of the landscape as landscape, as in Petra Mundik’s argument in *Cormac McCarthy’s Borders and Landscapes* about the natural evil at the core of the novel that symbolically “constitutes the cosmos” as Gnostic-Buddhist void.²⁰⁹ This mystic evil, according to Mundik, applies “not only to the macrocosm of the solar system, but also to the microcosm of mankind’s inner life.”²¹⁰ This focus on the cosmic and mystic elements leaves out an understanding of a landscape that has the potential for life and regeneration in the idiosyncrasies of a localized place. We can indeed interpret McCarthy’s project in *Blood Meridian* to be purely cosmic, to be purely concerned with the endemic violence existing in the nature of man and

²⁰⁸ See Gugin’s essay in *Cormac McCarthy’s Borders and Landscapes* (2016).

²⁰⁹ Mundik Petra. “Terra Damnata: The Anticosmic Mysticism of *Blood Meridian*.” *Cormac McCarthy’s Borders and Landscapes*, Bloomsbury, 2016, 36.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

being played out on a landscape constantly being erased and remade by both that violence and the natural forces of the Great American Desert.

However, we must also contend with the intense localization that McCarthy engages in as he constructs a seemingly empty desert landscape in which to set this quasi-historical story of what Michael Herr has called “regeneration through violence.”²¹¹ What McCarthy sets up in this landscape is nothing short of a battle between man and nature, a classic conflict as relevant to the human today as it was in antiquity. Part of the novel’s themes is thinking through origins and destiny, beginning and ultimate end. Early in the novel, as the kid approaches the desert of the southwest, McCarthy tells us that “not again in all the world’s turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay.”²¹² The battlefield upon which this contest of values will be played out is not merely the battlefield of teleological destiny. Instead it is intensely local and will the conflict will test whether or not renewal is possible, and as I argue shows readers that in fact it is.

Though he opposes the cosmic with the local, expansiveness with limits, McCarthy does not clearly or decisively tell readers how to interpret this tension; he does, however, appear to suggest what happens when humans coming from outside the ecosystem fail to adapt themselves to the local environment in which they find themselves. Of course, that phraseology likely seems too passive for *Blood Meridian*, where the coming of European (Hispanic and otherwise) people to the desert is anything but passive. In fact, as is clear from the novel, this arrival is a colonial

²¹¹ Cover, *Blood Meridian*.

²¹² McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*, Vintage International, 1992 (1985), 5.

enterprise, one which is enacted with incredible violence and incredible extermination; its effects are felt over time in battle with not only indigenous peoples but also with the landscape itself.²¹³

If Cather and Rølvaag and Kesey, as I discuss in other chapters, represent positive examples of how people have, can, and do adapt themselves to place and to a set of values emerging from a particular landscape (at the very least holding out the possibility thereof), then McCarthy represents one of the most negative examples in the extant literature of the twentieth-century. Even so, we can still glean from *Blood Meridian* a notion of what dwelling ethically in this landscape looks like. A major concern related to dwelling in *Blood Meridian* is a consideration of what, exactly, this desert landscape is. Though the desert is bleak and blasted the possibility for regeneration still exists within the small life that persists and continues to inhabit the land in the face of human imperialism. The small and docile creatures and plants that still survive despite the supposed emptiness of the land represent a system of values that run counter to those of human cultures, especially those bent on the destruction of native and mestizo cultures and the inability to interpret the desert's scale of living. That they still survive and thrive and continue the cycle of life reveals that McCarthy's vision of the conflict between good and evil is insistently hopeful, even if that hope is a quiet one. The virtues that emerge are insistent upon renewal in the blasted land.²¹⁴

One of the first instances in which McCarthy begins to build the conflict between values in the novel comes when the kid first enters the desert. We are told,

²¹³ Of course, it should be noted that the Hispanic colonial project resulted in the marriage of Hispanic and indigenous blood and culture. The Mexicans encountered in the novel are primarily mestizos, people of Spanish-European and Amerindian heritage.

²¹⁴ Jeffery Bilbro writes at length about the relationship between morality and renewal in his book on Wendell Berry, *Virtues of Renewal* (2018).

He's left behind the pinewood country and the evening sun declines before him beyond an endless swale and dark falls here like a thunderclap and a cold wind sets the teeth to gnashing. The night sky lies so sprent with stars that there is scarcely a space of black at all and they fall all night in bitter arcs and it is so that their numbers are no less.²¹⁵

McCarthy draws the reader's initial attention to the sudden and drastic shift in the ecosystems through which the kid has traveled and will travel. The country that the kid enters is immediately described as being hostile (especially to the kid since he's traveling from the densely forested Tennessee to the sand, scrub, and pine of the desert). The land is described as being antagonistic to the human nomad moving through the landscape. In contrast, McCarthy tells us the land the kid has left is full of "dark turned fields with rags of snow and darker woods beyond that harbor yet a few last wolves."²¹⁶ In the desert, the kid will find no dark woods or turned fields, but he will find wolves and endless land broken only on the horizon by mountains.

The desert's endlessness connotes emptiness—something that humans often read into the landscape, a vastness that is uninhabited except by stars, which, too, seem without end. Readers are meant to understand this vastness as a difficult place to inhabit, a place where the dark is like a thunderclap and the wind sets the teeth not to chattering, as might be expected, but to gnashing. This gnashing of teeth is Biblical in the sense that this landscape is associated with Gehenna, the place where the sinful are thrown out into the darkness, exiles from the kingdom of God. The gnashing also represents an expression of human anger and pain, and in this case it is anger at the external world, specifically at the behavior of ecosystem external to the human body.

What it appears we are meant to conclude is that this is a hostile ecosystem; it actively resists human habitation—at least habitation from the European-Americans unfamiliar with the

²¹⁵ McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. Vintage International, 1992 (1985), 16.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

place. Indeed, as Katja Rebmann has argued, McCarthy “writes devastating landscapes, vast hyperreal voids without feature, undistinguishing optical democracies in which man, animal, and land condense into one.”²¹⁷ Though Rebmann is primarily correct in her description of McCarthy’s landscapes as devastating and without feature, I will trouble the claim later, suggesting that the landscape is also *devastated* and actually contains a plenitude of features that serve an important ecological function amidst the quasi-nihilistic violence of the desert. The tension here is how readers and characters can develop the ability to read (and understand) the landscape. The dark falling is loud and sudden (like the thunderclap), an aggressive arrival of the bitter stars, a bitter emptiness like the darkness into which Jim Burden comes in *My Ántonia*. Of course McCarthy does not include any meditation on the smallness of man or the futility of prayer at this point in the novel (though he does later in a questioning, uncertain way). This does not seem at all relevant to the kid, an agnostic bordering on nihilist. Nothing about this landscape the kid has entered is comforting, nothing induces him to linger or to dwell. The landscape itself, as the plot of the novel appears to suggest, encourages the kind of colonial nomadism embodied by Glanton’s gang because of a misperception. The imperial culture (as the novel shows) misreads the landscape, misreads what it actually encourages. Through the misreading the European-American culture sees the land as blank, an emptiness to be filled by the imperial nomads that travel through it and leave their mark (through violence, erasure, and settlement).

Furthermore, as the novel shows throughout, this landscape is relatively unchanging. Unlike Cather’s representation of landscape in *My Ántonia* (wherein the land becomes welcoming to the settlers once they discover how to properly farm it), McCarthy presents readers with an unchanging, quasi-eternal landscape. Human things pass away, certainly, but the

²¹⁷ Rebmann, Katja. “Cormac McCarthy’s Topologies of Violence.” *Cormac McCarthy’s Borders and Landscapes*, Bloomsbury, 2016, 107.

landscape remains constant, remains full of stone and dust and scrub and the hidden things beneath the dirt. The passing of human things is attributed to the all-consuming nature of the landscape, of the desert region. “This is a hungry country,” McCarthy writes in the mouth of nameless character who tells the kid not to leave his saddle lying out.²¹⁸ Its hunger is synonymous with consumption—it has no limits emplaced or enforced on what it will consume; it takes everything into itself, wears it away until not even a remnant is left. “[D]eath seemed the most prevalent feature of the landscape,” we are told.²¹⁹ If we remain here and read the entire novel through this understanding of the landscape, we reach a highly nihilistic reading of how land functions in the novel. It would suggest that when one comes to this landscape, one finds and brings only death. Furthermore, if death is an actual *feature* of the landscape, it would take on a physical dimension, emphasizing the bodily and ecological fact of death, inescapable no matter how far or fast we flee. Death would seem to be everywhere, and certainly the landscape is hungry; however, McCarthy questions this intense presence of the void, presenting it as both something inherent in the landscape and something characters impose upon the desert land. It is not enough to simply accept the fact of death as a landscape feature; we must also question *why* it has become a feature beyond death being the natural and necessary end of life. In other words, as I argue, death serves two functions in the novel: it is a necessary step to renewal (when “used” in accordance with the bioregional ethics the landscape establishes for those who would inhabit the desert), and it is the consequence for those who attempt to impose their alien bioregional ethics onto this thirsty land.

²¹⁸ McCarthy, 18. This appears to be clear, especially if we consider Judge Holden as a function of the landscape, its human representative of the final eradication of everything in the revealed cosmos.

²¹⁹ McCarthy, 50.

Death in both of its functions in the novel leads to decay and slipping into and out of the dark recesses of memory. This passage into nothingness is the ethical center of McCarthy's interest in what the human relationship to the landscape is in the desert region of the United States, but what McCarthy shows us is that erasure is not always permanent and that death can be a transformation as present becomes past and future. McCarthy emphasizes the sucking away of things into the topological, ecological, and anthropological pasts of the landscape throughout the novel. Early on, once the kid has entered the desert we are told that even weather phenomena are prone to the effects of the desert washing away time: "Distant thunderheads reared quivering against the electric sky and were sucked away in the blackness again."²²⁰ The clouds and the storms quiver above the landscape and are prone to the blackness of the night, something that permeates the novel; often scenes are set during the night with the campfire being the only source of light and tenuous comfort in the midst of the black vastness.

What the characterization of the landscape and the characters in the novel shows, as far as the bioregional ethic is concerned, is that living in this place is a fraught endeavor. The unpleasantness and the anxiety caused by the kid's attempt to survive in the desert (because even describing what the people do there as living is maybe saying too much) must find an outlet, and McCarthy shows the different ways that this anxiety finds its expression in extreme, indiscriminate, genocidal violence. The landscape becomes the victim of this thirst for violence as a result of anxiety, a progressive need to conquer and subdue and subjugate those cultures that would dare to still exist in the face of nomadic imperial progress. Katja Rebmann has recognized this tendency and suggests that the "unforgiving topologies are riddled with violence and the

²²⁰ McCarthy, 20-21.

agents of violence that roam the space are divorced from morals or mercy.”²²¹ The Glanton Gang, egged on throughout by Judge Holden—whose role as tempter and whose relation to the landscape will be discussed later—commits to the clearing of the range, to making space for the imperial, colonial mechanisms of Westward Expansion, and as the Judge continues to lead them through the reaches of sand and scrub, we see an intensification of that divorce from morals and mercy.

Indeed, this lack of morality in the humans nomadically passing through the desert is immediately at odds with the pre-established and eternally present bioregional ethic that derives from the constraints of the desert, the constraints that are essential to its functioning as the desert currently exists as an ecosystem.²²² And yet, just as the desert seems to desire the clearing out of the invading humans, so too do the humans seek to exert their power and control over the landscape itself. This becomes an insistent and horrifying denial of death by wreaking destruction on everything that passes and moves—in some way they think they have convinced themselves of their own immortality. Rebmann has argued as well that McCarthy’s portrayal of “the dichotomy between humanity’s fascination with death and their simultaneous subjective denial of it” examines “mankind’s vain failure to understand that in the grand scheme of things the soil upon which they build their self-importance is indifferent to their very existence.”²²³ As will be shown, this vanity stems from colonial perceptions and the Judge’s temptations to commit more and more horrifying and disgusting actions, which of course leads all of the characters to their eventual deaths and erasure in the landscape.

²²¹ Rebmann, 107.

²²² Presumably, in the distant geological past, the desert was an inland sea or some far more lush ecosystem that, through the common climatic changes our earth has passed through over the eons, has now become a desert.

²²³ Rebmann, 119.

In addition to the denial of death here, part of clearing people and the past out of the desert is an attempt to make the landscape survivable, to provide a comfort to those who will follow after the clearing to fill the space that “ought” to be empty. At least, this is the perception, that the landscape is and should be empty to be filled by the white settlers. Of course, as we know, this project ultimately fails, founded as it is on the vanity that Redmann has found in the characters’ behavior. Yet the slaughter is an attempt to tame the land, to impose alien systems upon its rocky sand reaches, to force it to follow the will of the city-dwelling man. This results in a relation to the land that is inherently oppositional, a total enmity stemming from the men’s commitment to the imperial project, which itself stems from the urban and cosmopolitan colonial apparatus represented by the city—its axiological systems, its imperiousness, its ignorance of differing (and potentially better) ways of life.

And yet the land itself resists the human attempts to tame and to conquer and to impose their imperial value systems and imperial practices upon it. By its very nature, by its very dearth of speciation, the landscape is prone to and primed for opposition to those who come to it. It resists practices of human survivability, requiring extreme alterations in agricultural, economical, architectural, and everyday practices of life. McCarthy’s adjectives for the landscape are the clearest example of humans’ perception of the land’s confrontational violence directed towards humans, and they should leave no doubt about how McCarthy is thinking about the landscape. Though of course we could code the description of the landscape as characters’ perceptions and responses to it, we also ought to acknowledge that the narrator’s voice is giving readers an objective, detached means of seeing the blankness and the hellish nature of the landscape. In other words, we are meant to trust the narrator’s description of things as corresponding to the real environment of the novel.

At one of the many points when the kid and Sproule are riding across the desert, escaping the Judge and the gang, McCarthy tells us that they “struggled all day across a terra damnata of smoking slag, passing from time to time the bloated shapes of dead mules or horses. By evening they had drunk all the water they carried...they walked the cinderland till they were near to fainting.”²²⁴ The smoking slag, the cinderland, emphasizes the hellish nature of the desert, the hunger and thirst that emanates from its dry and damned soil—a thirst mirrored by the kid and Sproule’s drinking all the water they carried by the first evening. Through the image of the bloated horses and mules, we are viscerally reminded that death is the prominent feature of this landscape—something that the kid and Sproule learn constantly throughout the novel. The intensity, the length, and the abject violence of struggle throughout *Blood Meridian* positions the novel to consider one of the more essential questions the human person has to answer: whether or not to continue on and how to continue if the choice is made to do so. Obviously, the kid presses on because McCarthy writes that he does. Thematically-speaking though, part of the kid’s choice to continue moving through the desert rather than lying down and dying is motivated by an attempt to discover what kind of person he wants to be. Treated as a hero because of deeds of unspeakable violence and reviled when the horror of those deeds is turned away from Amerindians, the kid begins to understand the sinful, total depravity of human living without virtue, especially as concerns bio regional and ecologically responsible living. McCarthy shows that the twisted heroism throughout the novel derives from the fallenness of human beings: that though goodness does exist, humans have become corrupted with a proclivity for violence, depravity, and sin of the religious and social varieties.

²²⁴ McCarthy, 64.

The novel is void of love and charity, engaged in the voiding of faith and hope from the land and from the people. What we find is a twisted notion of “virtue” throughout the novel, as embodied in the behavior of the gang in the failing desert communities.²²⁵ The various stands the men make against Apache, Spanish/Mexican, and U.S. forces can in some sense be seen as courageous. Their invasions of supposedly hostile enemy campsites can also be seen as courageous, coded as it is in a discourse surrounding the glory of war and the necessity of sacrifice as the most heroic of acts. Yet, readers, especially those aware of nineteenth-century United States history, would see immediately that the gang’s behavior in the desert compromises any sense of consistent ethic. Their actions are void of virtue; scalping and massacring the Apache and Comanche and other Mexican noncombatants can in no way be seen as truly courageous, even though the men initially want to see it that way. They are doing their duty for their nation—some, at least feel this way; many, of course, are simply in it for the money, which if we are being honest with ourselves becomes a kind of duty in the context of the American consciousness.²²⁶

Of course, describing the land as a *terra damnata* creates a tension between the supposed virtue of the men and the totality of the landscape’s violence and emptiness and complicated bioregional ethics that humans derive from it. Effectively, the “*terra damnata*” translates from the Latin as doomed, convicted, or condemned earth. From the perspective of the human mind, the

²²⁵ I editorialize virtue here because what shows up in the novel is in no way virtue or virtuous and is no way valuable. Yet, we don’t quite have a good word for it, especially considering that McCarthy is indeed in conversation with the traditional Catholic virtues and is interested in the tenuous Catholicity of the both the people in the desert landscape as well as the landscape itself.

²²⁶ This acquisitiveness within the American axiological system is part and parcel with national duty, connected directly to certain conceptions of the American dream. To acquire, to gain, and to do whatever it takes to accomplish those things is certainly presented as a duty in the novel, something external to the men that impels their action. The need, the drive, the desire to get drives the action of the novel. It becomes a compulsion.

land is indeed doomed: doomed to the imperial expansion of European-American and Spanish-Mexican settlers (and even these latter are passing away before the massive efforts of the United States' imperialism). It is convicted and condemned as a hostile land, not just because it harbors and provides shelter to many supposedly barbaric, hostile Amerindian tribes.

Of course, we know and McCarthy knew at the time of this writing that the anger and violence effected by the Apache and Comanche is justified, forced from their homeplace as they were by legal, political, and moral systems imposed upon them from without, from a centralized governmental authority. The operation of displacement from the homeplace is an attempt to force the Amerindian tribes into the same displaced, transient modes of being as the gang and the United States army. However, as the novel shows this project ultimately fails—the Americans have to leave the landscape, they die, or they simply disappear. The gang passes numerous abandoned villages and ruins of old battlements, finding artifacts of European imperials who have long since failed in settling and conquering. The Amerindians, however, adapt and readapt to the demands of the landscape, as have the mestizos with their inclusion of native practices and values into their daily systems—not that either group lives in harmony or peace with the land. Yet their resistance to the permanent transience imposed upon them by the Americans represents a way of attempting to live in synchronicity with the landscape, listening to and responding to its vagaries.

Unlike the Northwest (the topic of chapter 3), and to a lesser degree the Prairie, the landscape is the god of its region—its authority over the human body and the human society is total. The Northwest is forgiving, the Prairie less so but still characters in Cather and Rølvaag were able to eke out a survival until they discovered practices that functioned appropriately in the landscape. However, here in the desert, along its blindingly white pans and wastes, there can

be no mild attempt at survival. The failure will be swift and violent. This is where we see McCarthy's repeated insistence on conserving natural resources and energy.

We are reminded that the kid and Sproule "struggled all day across a terra damnata of smoking slag, passing from time to time the bloated shapes of dead mules or horses. By evening they had drunk all the water they carried...they walked the cinderland till they were near to fainting."²²⁷ As I mentioned above, the consumption of natural resources and the exhaustion of the characters mirrors their perception of the land they are moving through as cinderlands gives readers the idea of a burnt, scarred, and consumed place. This desert is what remains after a conflagration, still retaining the potential for combustion, but remnants nonetheless. As we see throughout the novel, time and again, the metaphorical and literal cinders do burst into flame with disastrous results for the people who inhabit and travel through the landscape.

The bursting into flame, whether taken literally or metaphorically, represents the intensity and total permeation of the novel by consumption, something inherently tied to the landscape. Consumption is tied primarily to the outsiders coming into the landscape and not to the native (and mestizo settler) populations; it is thereby also tied inextricably to a mindless version of the imperial project. It becomes a feature of a transported value system arriving in the desert from a far more settled eastern United States. It is a value system that, through the mechanisms of violence and oppression, attempts to replicate itself in the desert, an attempt that ultimately fails.

So in one way we can read the journey and behavior of the gang as an act of ultimate defiance; if the desert is the god, the ultimate judge who separates the sheep and the goats, the survivors and the damned, then the imperial attempts to impose order and to clear the range of people becomes a rejection of the authority of the landscape, an unwillingness to even attempt to

²²⁷ McCarthy, 64.

adapt one's value systems and practices to what the landscape requires and will allow. Even though their mission is temporary and even though it seems like Glanton's gang "thrives" in some sort of depraved way, the moral imperatives and bioregional ethics in the novel demonstrate that this is just an appearance rather than any kind of real thriving. The Glanton gang's violence can then be understood as a kind of warped retributive violence—at least from the characters' perspectives. This is where the warped understanding of courage comes about—they must strike forth and cannot make a flimsy attempt to survive here; they must reassure themselves of their strength and their ability to survive through the violence and extremity of their actions.

This notion of consumption and defiance in relationship to the ethics presented by the landscape is tied directly to a reading of Judge Holden that positions him as an embodied personification of the landscape, a priest of its methods of erasure and hostility. As I will demonstrate, the Judge's acts of erasure mirror those of the land's, a personification of the land's ultimate authority to direct and govern the fate of mankind. Mark Steven has argued that McCarthy connects the Judge directly to both Milton and Blake, especially the Blakean misreading of *Paradise Lost*'s Satan. Through Blake we see that Satan became an "aesthetic glorification of Evil" and that Judge Holden "in many ways duplicates the Miltonic Satan."²²⁸ This is of course confirmed by the horrific predations of the Judge throughout, especially the oblique representation of his pedophilia, his brutal eviscerations of children, and his dehumanization and marketization of "the fool" in the cage. Furthermore, Steven argues that Judge Holden becomes the "literary-historical rebirth of the Miltonic Satan," seen most clearly in McCarthy's dovetailing of the scene where the Judge shows the gang how to make gunpowder

²²⁸ Steven, Mark. "High Road to Hell: Milton, Blake, McCarthy." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2, October, 2016, 150.

by plundering the resources of the earth and expending the resources of their bodies with the creation of both Pandemonium and the cannon in *Paradise Lost*.²²⁹ This is part of the ecological devastation practiced by the gang on the landscape like the demons in Pandemonium, but it carries with it a double valence. The land provides, but the land can be exhausted. The Judge shows them how, but eggs them on, making them complicit in the devastation of the land but also answerable to its proper, retributive violence, aligning further the creation/provision with destruction/exploitation.

If we alter Steven's reading ever-so-slightly to refashion the Judge as a more anarchic version of the Miltonic Satan, the Judge becomes one who acts not out of a wounded pride and self-righteousness but out a chaotic desire to control and eradicate. He becomes a tempter whose motives are unclear (if he has motives at all) but which have disastrous effects for the more clearly human figures. Of course he represents death as well; traditionally, we interpret the *Et in Arcadia Ego* on the stock of the Judge's rifle as a reference to the presence of death in paradise, but we can also interpret McCarthy's recontextualization of the phrase as the presence of the real desert landscape in an ideological vision of Arcadia: the west is the land of opportunity, an imagined space where paradise can be found, a refuge from the blight of the city and the oppressive east.

Judge Holden too becomes both the prophet of the landscape as well as the tempter who leads men to their ultimate doom: a reminder of our own human mortality and our necessary dependence upon the landscape as both the ground in which we have our being and the ground in which we find that which sustains human life. All throughout the novel, the Judge eggs on the gang, motivates their action and assists them in the intensification of their violence. He gains

²²⁹ Steven, p. 151.

Glanton's ear like a horrifying and incomprehensibly proportioned Iago attempting to corrupt this cowboy Othello, which of course he does.

Throughout the journey, however, Judge Holden also collects and destroys the artifacts that the land has covered over and subsequently brought again to light. The function of these artifacts is that they are meant to serve as a reminder to the people who see them that they are not forever, that they too will pass away into dust, that warfare is the base state of man, his salvation and demise. And yet, one of the most horrifying and impenetrable of the Judge's speeches about time, the universe, and everything comes in the latter third of the novel. Throughout, Judge Holden has carried a notebook into which he writes, sketches, and presses objects. Interestingly, McCarthy tells us that Holden

would dress expertly the colorful birds he'd shot, rubbing the skins with gunpowder and stuffing them with balls of dried grass and packing them away in his wallets. He pressed the leaves of trees and plants into his book and he stalked tiptoe the mountain butterflies with his shirt outheld in both hands, speaking to them in a low whisper, no curious study himself.²³⁰

He acts as though he is collecting these flora and fauna for future study or for preservation. And indeed, he marshals the produce of the landscape in order to enact this process of preserving those things he has collected. The bullets he used to kill the birds were fashioned from the nopal, and the stuffing is made of the native grasses in the desert. And yet, this process of taxidermy is fraught with complications. Taxidermy is inherently concerned with display, the holding up of an object for observation outside of its native space. It is in a sense performative—even so, the Judge appears to keep the birds hidden, stuffed away in his wallets and never to be seen again.

²³⁰ McCarthy, p. 206.

Even though (or perhaps because) they are killed by and stuffed with native flora, they seem to disappear entirely from the desert ecosystem. In this reading, the Judge and his action becomes not so much a proponent for ecological devastation or a tool of the imperial project; rather, his action becomes a lesson for the men to observe and understand, which Toadvine and the kid attempt and perhaps ultimately fail to (at least at this point in the novel).

Toadvine asks the Judge what his purpose is in recording and pressing things in his notebook. To which Judge Holden ominously replies,

Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent....These anonymous creatures, he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth.²³¹

The Judge's insistence that total knowledge can make man the overlord of all things (though they be internally autonomous) is full of irony, especially regarding the full implications of the American imperial project. These implications began fully to be seen as the U.S. came out of the 1960s and 1970s, culminating for McCarthy in the place-outside-of-time we see represented in *Blood Meridian*. The base state of man, the basic drive of man is towards control, especially control of the autonomous, without which the control cannot be total. Yet the irony in the Judge's statement is that this mechanism of control through knowledge leading to suzerainty is ultimately vain and will always fail.²³² This is how the Judge functions as a tempter: he seduces

²³¹ McCarthy, p. 207.

²³² As McCarthy uses it, the suzerain refers to a sovereign state having some control over an internally autonomous state.

and has seduced the gang into this process of uncovering, of coming to knowledge of everything so that they can control everything.

Rebmann has taken note of this trend as well—though she does not characterize the Judge as either tempter or personification of the landscape. She claims towards the end of her essay on “topologies of violence” in not only *Blood Meridian* but also in *No Country for Old Men* that McCarthy through Holden “arrives in a future landscape of his own making, in a hostile country that is no longer host, but battleground for the few survivors...space has retrieved its full force and its original purpose as stage for the battle for survival.”²³³ This retrieval is itself a representation of the sundering of the contract between man and land required in a comprehensive understanding of bioregional ethics.

That contract is inscribed by the Judge in the tension between consent to allow things to exist and knowledge of those things. If the thing can exist in the ken of the Judge, the representative of the landscape, then it can exist in the total suzerainty of the desert. Of course this claim about the ability of man to step into the strong position in the contract is ironic and not just because the dominion of man will always succumb to the immensity and power of the landscape. The Judge becomes the assassin of the living, giving the men a tentative hope that they will succeed in imposing imperial order onto the landscape and then brutally crushing it with all kinds of depravity and violence. His acts of erasure mirror the land’s; they are the desert’s assertion of its proper authority over humankind and all things, including the animal and vegetal kingdoms. We are reminded that the land is the only suzerain over man, the only thing in the final tally that can truly enslave humankind, direct its destiny, and end it utterly.

²³³ Rebmann, p. 119.

Curiously, Judge Holden uses the term “routed” to describe the process of coming to know everything that exists in the world and the universe. In this context, the word becomes the opposite of deeply and tightly grounding oneself to a particular place like a plant. Instead, the Judge aims to pull things up by their roots, to tear them from the ground, to sever them from their vitality and the nutrients that enable them to grow and survive and thrive. This process does not end with the organism’s permanent removal—this is not an act of transplantation. Judge Holden preserves many of them in his notebook, complete with annotations and commentary on the things preserved. Of course thinking of this as preservation comes with a complication: if preservation is an attempt to keep something in its original state, the Judge’s placing of life into his notebook (especially as drawings) becomes ironic. While he does preserve the leaves of trees and plants by pressing them between the leaves of his notebook (they will last and not decay as quickly as they would were on the ground) he does not behold them on the tree or bush and pass by leaving them be.

In perhaps another ecosystem or within a dialectic of conservation, the Judge’s removal of the leaves would certainly be seen as rapacious. But within an ecosystem with death as the preeminent feature of itself, this act is a reminder that annihilation comes swiftly and unexpectedly to any and all; the desert is indiscriminate. In order to understand this behavior within a context of an ecological reading of McCarthy’s use of landscape ethics in *Blood Meridian*, we should consider how preservation can also be used as a mechanism of control; as with museums where artifacts are placed within their “natural” or “original” context but through an entirely artificial process, complete with careful arrangement and stagnancy, so too Judge Holden’s notebook works like a private museum. It is an exertion of control of the phenomenal world, and each time the Judge takes and destroys, he suppresses the autonomy of things.

If we allow ourselves to see Judge Holden as a human manifestation of the landscape itself, this process becomes a reminder that we are tied to the landscape, that autonomy in a very real sense is an illusion. We are, in fact, *grounded*, an incontrovertible fact that humans have resisted since they first dreamt of flight. McCarthy through the Judge shows us that we cannot resist our emplacement on and in a landscape, and if we choose to exist in *this* place, this desert, (because we cannot choose not to exist in some place), we must submit to its rigorous and often deadly dictates. Exerting ownership through the nomadic violence of the gang is a perfectly doomed endeavor; this land will not be owned, it will not submit, it will only consent to a dwelling with, a cohabitation with the human person.

Though the hostility surrounds and dominates these lifeforms, these wonders much reduced, life does thrive and continue on in the desert. It clings with everything that it can, adapting as it needs to survive. Often throughout the novel this survival (it would be hyperbole to call it thriving) is tied to the threat of annihilation. When the gang reaches the foothills of the Animas Peaks, McCarthy tells us that they were “[r]iding up through wild lavender and soapweed....They came up through scruboak and they crossed the gap through a high pine forest and rode on through the mountains.”²³⁴ We see that life does dwell here, and not just life but especially lavender and piñon. Curiously, here, McCarthy shows us a plant native to the Old World that has been able to embed itself and hold on in the landscape. Though we are not given how the lavender has affected local ecosystems, it appears through its emplacement next to the scruboak and soapweed and piñon that the lavender at the very least does not have a negative relationship with the desert bioregion. Further, McCarthy has the gang ride up through a full forest of evergreens. Though this small detail might go unnoticed, it is vital to an ecological

²³⁴ McCarthy, p. 110.

reading of the novel to understand the implication of a forest of evergreens in a desert that is primarily monochromatic. That the piñon can adapt itself to remain green in a landscape with little water (thus the ironical valences in name the dry lake a mare imbrium) is an example of how life can survive here. The human organism, we can presume can undergo the same adaptation if it is able to learn conservation of resources, purposeful but reserved action, and efficient practices akin to the piñons' production of seeds as the basis for their new growth. "Life," Ian Malcolm has taught us, "finds a way." And indeed, McCarthy suggests that that way is careful adaptation to the constraints and conditions of the place in which one exists.

However, this finding of the way of survival is imbricated with the hostility of the landscape. Immediately after briefly cataloguing the vegetable life that inhabits the desert, McCarthy continues to describe the landscape as hostile: "The sun to the west lay in a holocaust...and to the north along the trembling perimeter of the world dust was blowing down the void like the smoke of distant armies."²³⁵ A description of the sun's light as a holocaust is of course rife with all kinds of associations with horrific, inexcusable, and genocidal violence. The term is indeed meant to shock, is meant to show us the scope of how deeply violence is embedded in and is exuded from the desert. The edge of the world trembles at this holocaust of light (perhaps a more accurate term for the sundown in the novel than "evening redness"). Of course this is the heat coming off the desert pan, but it can also be read as a fearful quivering at the immense power and authority of the land. The mountains too are even cowed by the strength of the desert; McCarthy calls them "crumpled" and describes them as mere "butcherpaper"—a term that both describes their color and apparently their metaphorical composition.²³⁶

²³⁵ McCarthy, p. 110.

²³⁶ Ibid.

And yet, despite this cowering power of the desert, the *terra damnata*, the *mare imbrium*, the sandy white hellscape, McCarthy shows that life does survive—and not just vegetable life. He gives us an image in the same scene of deer being pursued by a pack of wolves: “herds of deer were moving north in the last of the twilight, harried over the plain by wolves who themselves were the color of the desert floor.”²³⁷ The deer exist in multiple herds, a seemingly thriving community (we are given no indication otherwise), yet pursued still by life that also wants to live. While this is on one level a demonstration that life can exist here, it is also an acknowledgement of the necessary violence that makes up the functioning of the ecosystem. A healthy bioregional relationship the landscape, does indeed require an understanding and acceptance of the fact that violence does exist, it is necessary for the continuation of species. Further, without the pruning of the deer by wolves, they would overpopulate and overburden the vegetable organisms in the ecosystem.²³⁸ While the death of any organism is unfortunate and should properly be mourned (at least in the ethics being articulated by this project), that mourning must come with an acceptance of its necessity—death is a part of life, and in a healthy ecosystem, that death exists within its proper limits. Yet, this is placed in contrast with the unnecessary violence of Glanton’s gang; their actions overburden the ecosystem by its unbalancing. Erasure, extinction, clearing the range all contribute to a misprision of place, a sundering of the contract between land and human wherein, if that breach is maintained, no healing or flourishing can occur. The violence that has been will continue to be and nothing but the land will survive.

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 111.

²³⁸ Aldo Leopold has demonstrated this very principle in his essay “Thinking Like a Mountain,” in which he writes against the hunting of wolves in the Appalachian mountains.

We can even see McCarthy probing the possibility of relationship with the land in the epilogue to the novel. After giving us a final, cosmic meditation of the Judge dancing and never dying after having consumed the Man, we are given an image of a man digging holes for fence posts:

In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there.²³⁹

Historically, this of course brings to mind the enclosure of the prairie and the deserts into parcels of property—made so through a legal process imposed on the landscape, a process that the Judge as the land’s emissary and agent of alterior order resists utterly. Contained within this scene is McCarthy’s posing of a question about cause and effect, about sequence. Each of the post holes is seen as owing its existence to those that came before it in a long line that stretches to the horizon. This appears as the inexorable march of progress, a horrible evil in the novel, but something that appears to be unavoidable.

Yet, McCarthy does reign the reader in from the cosmic and grounds them in the local ecosystem, on the earth with scavengers and workers moving across it. Even though the digging of post holes is a mark of enclosure, we can still find the faintest spark of the possibility of healing. McCarthy writes that the digger throws his implement into the ground and “enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there.”²⁴⁰ This contact between stone and human mediated by an implement is able to bring forth from the stone its inner essence, which in McCarthy is fire. Seeing the striking of the stone

²³⁹ McCarthy, 351.

²⁴⁰ McCarthy, p. 351.

as the instress, and the spark from the rock as the inscape flaming out “like shining from shook foil” allows us to see the most tentative of hopes forwarded at the very end of this bleak novel.²⁴¹

The fact that McCarthy uses a relatively tender verb “enkindles” to describe how the rock lights up from contact paired with the gerund “striking” suggests a complementary kind of contact with the sparse desert is possible. This contact comes with an acknowledgement of the land as tied intimately with the divine—indeed we might say that the desert is itself part of the divine. If God has put the rock there or put the fire within the rock, we must also see that fire in connection with the metaphorical, spiritual fire that has been placed in the breast of man, the common soul that passes between humankind and the earth upon which it must inevitably carve out an existence. “For,” as McCarthy reminds us, “each fire is all fires, the first fire and the last to ever be.”²⁴²

Silko’s Ceremony of Hope and Healing

If McCarthy’s novel ends with the dovetailing of man and earth through the image of a common fire in order to suggest the faintest of possibilities of redemption, reconciliation, or adaptation, then Silko’s novel thematically picks up where McCarthy left off.²⁴³ Her novel *Ceremony* makes much of the relationship between humans and the desert they have historically inhabited, though this should come as no surprise to readers of a novel interested in the

²⁴¹ Hopkins, Gerard Manley. “God’s Grandeur.” *The Major Works*, Oxford UP, 2009, p. 128. In this poem, Hopkins demonstrates the God-embedded uniqueness of all created things (inscape) and how it can be recognized from an intensely directed energy from the human self towards the created thing (instress). For Hopkins, these twin concepts direct us towards Christ, the ultimate underwriter of language and experience, which allows us to preserve the hope of the future tense. Also see the late George Steiner’s *Grammars of Creation*.

²⁴² Ibid., p. 255.

²⁴³ Obviously, from an historical perspective the chronology doesn’t work here. However, thematically and tied to the narrative structure of this chapter, *Ceremony* “follows after” McCarthy.

reintegration of a traumatized man with his native community as he returns from the United States' war with Japan.²⁴⁴ Tayo's return to the Laguna community after a horrifying stint in an American Army hospital becomes an example what Carrie Johnston has called "postwar narratives of reentry;" in other words, Johnston refers to the ways in which Silko has crafted a story surrounding returns to the homeplace.²⁴⁵ Of course, this return narrative is not a new thing. Since Homer's account of Odysseus' homecoming to Ithaca, the attempts of artists to grapple with what it means to return to home, to answer the question of whether or not one can actually go home again, have loomed large in the literary consciousness.

Johnston would argue, and I would agree, that one can indeed return home again—if one is open to allowing that return to look differently than one might expect it to be. The *nostos*, as portrayed by Silko, is not a return to innocence, not a coming back to some kind of nostalgic Arcadia. Rather, Tayo's homecoming is a return in the present to the present realities of his people and the place that he had left. Johnston argues that the key to understanding how Silko grapples with the "postwar reentry" is

resituating the region as a point of reentry....Tayo's story of homecoming and the ceremony that restores him to health, allowing for his reentry into the Laguna community, makes clear that the West is a region that is always being reinvented through retellings. Silko demonstrates that central to the successful ceremony of regeneration is the act of *storytelling* that incorporates multiple viewpoints and even competing allegiances.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ I formulate the sentence this way intentionally to distinguish between the fact that the United States, as an artificial political entity, carried on a war that was not and did not have to be the concern of the Amerindian peoples who originally inhabited the places that the U.S. later imposed its own order upon.

²⁴⁵ Johnston, Carrie. "Postwar Reentry Narratives in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2017, p. 400.

²⁴⁶ Johnston, p. 401.

Though I prefer the term “regeneration” to Johnston’s use of the idea of reinvention with reference to retellings, the notion that she forwards is strikingly similar. The fact that things, that places, that perceptions of places can be reorganized and reinvented through the act of retelling stories that have, for all intents and purposes, always been told about the place one is in. And yet, Silko’s emphasis on the power of retellings to heal and reintegrate are not a simple-minded return to some imagined state of innocence. It is not the perniciously toxic kind of Romanticism found in the trashiest of pop fiction or movies; however, I would argue, the novel and the process of healing through retelling is a Romantic notion—it holds out hope for the better things of life, it believes unfailingly in the transcendence of the human spirit and the natural world. It is the demonstration of both the possibility and process of regeneration through close encounters with both place and with traditional ceremonies in place—it is the definition of a localist, bioregionalist approach to living within a community in a particular ecosystem.

Though Johnston does not go as far as I aim to, she does consider *Ceremony* as providing “models by which language organizes experience, thus rethinking the ways that we read the West as a geographic and conceptual point of origin” for reconciliation rather than as a point from which we depart or as an origin point for the “forces that propagate war.”²⁴⁷ Furthermore, she argues that “this regional lens avoids the pitfalls of reading Native American literature as exemplary because of indigenous people’s adherence to traditional ways.”²⁴⁸ By emphasizing the centrality of retelling to the story of *Ceremony*, Johnston makes clear that both her analysis and Silko’s novel resist the idealization of Amerindian culture and mythopoiesis, that instead of seeing the West (particularly the New Mexico desert) as “the location of intractable truths,”²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Johnston, p. 401.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

we can instead see the region as a place where new things can grow from and with and because of the old. The new growth does not replace the old things but builds a new, invigorated relationship with the old, bringing both past and present into the same temporal and geo-ecological place as we can see through Silko's grafting of the creation poems with the prose narrative—the old becomes attached to and informs the new. Following after Johnston, the resistance to intractable truths means that Silko can demonstrate how reinscribing story onto landscape allows for a new relationship between things, between people, culture, and the place in which they live. However, I resist the term reinvention because it suggests a bringing forth again out of nothing, a building of something from scratch. Instead, we should think about what Silko does in *Ceremony* as a regeneration, a regrowth of something that has died or stultified or stagnated.

The thematic concerns of *Ceremony*, then, can clearly and easily be seen as “curative,” a term that Jin Man Jeong uses to describe the novel's relationship to storytelling in his article “How and What to Recollect: Political and Curative Storytelling in Silko's *Ceremony*.” Unfortunately, Jeong attempts to colonize how Amerindian peoples, by and large, understand time. He does articulate that typically Amerindian tribes see time as circular, a kind of constant spiraling around a central point from which meaning and story emerge. However, he attempts to subject Amerindian conceptions of time to the control of Western pseudoscientific ideologies. Jeong argues that Tayo's healing process is simply the “conscious return of the repressed,” which “free[s] Tayo from the burden of his unconscious return of the repressed.”²⁵⁰ Despite the circularity of his argument, Jeong wants narrative to be a function of deferred action, wants it to be a representation of the Laguna pueblo as repressed. In point of fact, they are not repressed but

²⁵⁰ Jeong, Jin Man. “How and What to Recollect: Political and Curative Storytelling in Silko's *Ceremony*.” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2016, p. 2.

oppressed by the larger, imposed western culture brought to them through progressive imperialism. The gathering and enclosing of Amerindians in a politically limited reservation is a bastard version of localism, an artificial machination that attempts to suppress Laguna expression of culture. It is a closing off, a hiding away so that the American imperialists don't have to confront the horrors of their war on those who have lived upon the land for time immemorial. The oppression of Laguna storytelling, of methods through which the Laguna organize the world and draw meaning from it, serves as background for Silko's attempt to resist this oppression. The fears, the pain, the trauma, the sorrow of the Laguna are not oppressed—any close reading of the novel would demonstrate that these things exist clearly and necessarily on the surface.

Ceremony is a novel about landscape itself. It is a novel wherein stories come from the desert, wherein they are recycled throughout time to remind the people of who they are and what the meaning of their place on earth is. Each time the story is recycled—whether on particular holy days or because the story has been forgotten, as is the case for Tayo—the past and understandings of the world that emerged in the past are rehabilitated for the present. Silko is not interested, as Johnston noted, in taking the present backwards into the past by simply recreating an idealized world; she is, however interested in bring the past into the present, aligning them together, making a union of them at the very moment that they meet—which is the exact opposite of deferral.

Other writers from various traditions and places have also recognized the elision of past and present as a means of regenerating tradition, of bringing the past into the present. By way of a brief detour through Eliot, we can see the universal intersection of all the “lines of cultures and worlds” that meet at the point of convergence in the American desert where tradition has the

possibility of regeneration.²⁵¹ One sense through which we can read this recycling of tradition and story is Eliot's elision of time (past, present, and future) in *Four Quartets*. Rather than removing Silko's work from an Amerindian context, we should understand that Eliot and Silko's elision of time share universal similarities and give us a shared language to read them intertextually. In the first section of the poem, "Burnt Norton," Eliot's gambit about time begins with a bringing together of all time: that past, present, and future are all caught up in each other—each is imbricated within each. And yet, he insists that "What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present."²⁵² Past and future ought to point us back to the present, not because we ought to yearn for an imagined past or an imagined future but rather because as Eliot later argues we ought to yearn for an embeddedness within a present that is a confluence of all time. In other words, we ought to search for "the still point of the turning world" where there is reinvigoration and regeneration, uncovered by what Eliot calls "a grace of sense."²⁵³

Employing a vision of regeneration and grace very similar to Eliot's, Silko revivifies Tayo's perception of and relationship with the desert landscape by helping him learn two things through traditional ceremonies, stories, and real connections with people and the earth: 1) how to have that grace of sense and 2) how to direct it towards the desert and those that live in it and on it. The first instance readers are given of how this grace of sense emerges for and in Tayo, as well as how it operates in the novel comes in the poem that opens the novel. We are told that Ts'its'tsi'nako, the Thought-Woman, created all of the five worlds with her sisters; we are told "whatever she thinks about / appears....Thought-Woman, the spider, / named things and / as she

²⁵¹ Silko, p. 228.

²⁵² Eliot, T. S. "Burnt Norton." *Four Quartets*, Mariner Books 1968, p. 13.

²⁵³ Silko, p. 16.

named them / they appeared.”²⁵⁴ The speaking into the void, into the five worlds, allows the Thought-Woman to make through language the things of the world, and she makes them through story—story becomes a way in which the novel exemplifies how a grace of sense towards things operates within the ceremonies that Tayo underdoes.

He is taught how to extend that grace towards things outside of his own heretofore-solipsistic approach to the world of things. Indeed, in one sense, *Ceremony* is a novel concerned with proving once and for all the ecologically devastating nature of solipsism and philosophies that argue that the world is not an objective place but only a projection of the mind. *Ceremony*, through the act of storytelling, becomes an articulation of a philosophy that approaches the physical world as it is, as it can be sensed without judgement or impression—which is further reason why the ceremonies are essential and non-negotiable for the healing of the relationship between man and earth. They are not “just entertainment.... They are all we have, you see, / all we have to fight off / illness and death. / You don’t have anything / if you don’t have the stories.”²⁵⁵ Fighting off illness and death becomes central to what the novel’s thematic and ecological concerns are, and this process of fighting is tied to the meaning of the world and the meaning of the story. This is the cultural and religious force of the speaker’s insistence that stories are all we have; they are the things that keep us grounded, keep us connected to the earth and the people and to the life around us that wants to live.

And yet, this is the very thing that the witchery, the evil wants to destroy and oppress.²⁵⁶ “Their evil is mighty,” Silko says, “but it can’t stand up to our stories. / So they try to destroy the

²⁵⁴ Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. Penguin Books, 2006 (1977), p. 1.

²⁵⁵ Silko, p. 2.

²⁵⁶ It needs to be noted that for Silko and for *Ceremony* the evil and the witchery she identifies is not at all white, even though it is often manifested in white people in recent centuries. It preexists all people and all things, emerging from a mythopoeic space that then bleeds into the fifth world

stories / let the stories be confused or forgotten....Because we would be defenseless then.”²⁵⁷

This process of the evil attempting to destroy stories is not simply to destroy narratives or language. It is nothing less than the destruction of an entire culture, an entire way of being that is being erased by the invasion of exterior value systems and practices that are imposed upon an already “developed”²⁵⁸ place and people. Stories for Silko create, reinforce, and sustain *relationships*—between people within a culture, between people across cultures, between people and their place on earth. Yet, the evil working in the novel takes warfare as its method for destroying and confusing the stories, and the effects of World War II on the Amerindian population is widespread; Silko notes that “since the Second World War a pattern of drinking and violence, not previously seen before, is emerging among Indian veterans.”²⁵⁹ By pointing out that it is specifically those Laguna who participated in the war that are behaving in such a way that is counter to the community-oriented values of the people, Silko attempts to draw attention to the power of war to sunder relationships—its trauma is that which negates and temporarily destroys the tightly knit connection, forged through story, that the Laguna have between themselves and the land that they inhabit.

Without story, without ceremonies, there can be no creation—of tradition, of meaning, of healthy ways of interacting with the world in which we live. The novel further suggests that without the creation of traditions through ceremonies, there cannot be a buffer between warfare (the willful imposition of values/witchery from outside the place) and community (the continually established relationship with the world of things that emerges from inside the place).

and infects the people and their behaviors, drives them to destroy the stories that give and sustain life.

²⁵⁷ Silko, p. 2.

²⁵⁸ I editorialize “developed” because it is an industrial term with no clear ecological, organic term that communicates what I am trying to communicate.

²⁵⁹ Silko, p. 49.

The people, as the opening story tells readers, will be defenseless without them. Furthermore, it is not simply the people who will not be able to defend against the invasion of the warmongering pawns of the ancient witchery; the land itself will not be able to defend against it. The land will not be able to defend a people who have forgotten the ceremonies that tie them to it, for the people and the desert are mutually sustained through the traditions and stories that have been told and retold, the story in which each retelling re-forges and regenerates that complex and fragile relationship between the human organism and the land. This is a mutualism endemic to Amerindian literature and religious practice; it is a mutualism that is reinforced through the telling and passing down of story with disastrous results if the stories are not passed on because the stories are meant to teach the Laguna how to live—both with each other and in relationship to the land.

Readers are shown the disastrous effects of rejecting the ceremonies within the opening scenes of the novel. In one of Tayo's fever dreams about his past, he recalls carrying his cousin Rocky along the Bataan Death March, in the midst of the jungle's densest rains. Silko tells us that Tayo "damned the rain until the words were a chant, and he sang it while he crawled through the mud....He wanted the words to make a cloudless blue sky, pale with a summer sun pressing across wide and empty horizons. The words gathered inside him and gave him strength."²⁶⁰ This cursing of the verdancy of one ecosystem has lasting effects on his home ecosystem—the one he left to participate in a far-off war which was itself the product of the ancient witchery that attempts to confuse and destroy (or curse) the stories. The kind of sky he desires appears as an image of home, the desert with its sand and scrub brush and wide, blue skies.

²⁶⁰ Silko, p. 11.

But Tayo's use of language here—specifically language that is underwritten or guaranteed by the presence of the divine and by the story of the words' pasts—has far-reaching and ecologically devastating effects. Silko tells us that Tayo is praying against the rain, as an Amerindian fighting a war on a jungle island in the Pacific ocean. He is temporarily existing displaced in a foreign ecosystem, but quickly comes to learn that his chant at the weather upon the death of Rocky appears to be one of the major causes of the drought in the Laguna desert—he learns that language used as a curse always has further consequences than he at first might have been able to imagine.

Here Silko ties the cursing of the rain to the health of the people, the health of the land, and the health of the ceremonies—in no small way Tayo's cursing of the rain is a breach in the contract established between the people and the land by the stories, insofar as the stories represent a revelation, a quasi-theodicy, of what the land requires of the people who live upon it and seek a relationship with it. Silko tells us that Tayo

had prayed the rain away, and for the sixth year it was dry; the grass turned yellow and it did not grow. Wherever he looked, Tayo could see the consequences of his praying; the gray mule grew gaunt, and the goat and kid had to wander farther and farther each day to find weeds or shrubs to eat....and he got the choking in his throat again, and he cried for all of them, and for what he had done.²⁶¹

The ecological devastation that Tayo feels responsible for is tied to his trauma from the war. Silko here complicates the scientific approach to ecosystems and culture, adding the religious to understandings of how specific bioregions can be restored. Outside the scope of the novel, we have not discovered a way to measure the global ecological effects of prayer (except at the level

²⁶¹ Silko, p. 17.

of the human soul). Silko suggests here that there is indeed a connection between the ecological devastation Tayo feels responsible for and the crying out in shame for praying the rain away. Even if there is no scientific basis, this realization and act creates in Tayo a sense of communal responsibility for healing the human relationship to the land and working to restore it in the wake of the atomic tests.

Additionally, his loss of Rocky, his internment in a Japanese POW camp, his return to the U.S., and his classification as psychotic by the government hospital system all contribute to the absolute need to undergo the traditional Laguna ceremonies. Of course part of what makes Silko's novel a significant literary text is that it complicates the success of the ceremony and does not make Tayo an ideological pawn who only serves to prove Silko's point. Rather, because Tayo has to see both Old Man Ku'oosh and Old Betonie, we see how the solution to both Tayo's trauma and the ecological devastation in the drought-ridden desert necessitates not a simple return to the old ways of being and doing but a regeneration of the old ways, a bringing of them into the present—conserving the traditions as they are and subsuming the present into them.

The first attempt of recreating a bioregional ethic of living responsibly in place through is ultimately a necessary failure—and one of the most important localist points Silko makes in the novel. When Tayo attempts to undergo healing from Old Man Ku'oosh, readers find that Ku'oosh cannot make sense of the modern world, the ways of doing things that are highly impersonal. We see this inability of Ku'oosh to incorporate the present into his way of understanding the world as Tayo recalls the horrors of the Pacific theater: “the old man would not have believed white warfare—killing across great distances without knowing who or how many had died. It was all too alien to comprehend...the old man would not have believed

anything so monstrous.”²⁶² Because the old man cannot understand the cause of Tayo’s wound (even though part of that cause is a muddling of the traditional ceremonies), the old man cannot offer Tayo or the land the healing that they need. However, the old man does get one thing correct, one of the essential themes in the whole novel wherein we are reminded that Tayo’s healing is not just for himself or even only for his own people. “You understand, don’t you?” the old man asks, “It is important to all of us. Not only for your sake, but for this fragile world.”²⁶³

In choosing to read Ku’oosh’s “all of us” as a global claim referring to both Amerindian and European peoples, we can understand the theme of “ceremony as rehabilitation” as a means of healing all people in all places; the desert simply becomes the ground zero, the focal point and prime example of the healing. We see the stakes contained in this ground zero of healing as Tayo climbs towards the Acoma boundary:

The tall yellow rice grass and the broken gray shale ridge were undisturbed by outlines of darker objects that did not belong with the junipers and yuccas. Nothing moved up there. To the west the yellow sandstone cliffs were beginning to catch the light....It was too early to think of bones...but he realized that all along the valley the cliffs were full of shallow caves and overhangs with springs. But there were other caves too, deeper and darker....All things seemed to converge there....”²⁶⁴

Opposing the grasses and the trees with the “darker objects” allows Silko to show that the local ecology is the convergence point for the final reckoning between competing value systems. By bringing junipers and yuccas alongside the foreign objects on and in the landscape, Silko emphasizes the embeddedness of the conflict for restoration or destruction of the landscape. The

²⁶² Silko, p. 33.

²⁶³ Silko, 33.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 220.

cliffs full of bones, the deeper and darker caves that Tayo doesn't want to confront—all of these are emblems of the “circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter.”²⁶⁵ The destroyers “had taken these beautiful rocks from deep within earth and they had laid them in a monstrous design, realizing destruction on a scale only *they* could have dreamed.”²⁶⁶ What Silko shows us in the landscape of this mesa at early dawn is that it is the use—the how, the means—of what the land gives the people that determines whether or not reconciliation or exploitation becomes the final result of living in a particular place. The extraction and weaponization of uranium becomes that monstrous pattern, the antithesis of the ceremonies that have allowed the Laguna to live in relative sustainability in the desert bioregion. The point of convergence is the redrawing of the circle of life and the circle of death.

It is no accident that the point where all things seemed to come together is called Enchanted Mesa. As the landscape catches the sunlight of a new dawn (an inherently hopeful image of restoration) the deeper darkness of uranium exploitation and death intrudes, emerging out of the deeper caves Tayo senses in the distance. And yet, because it still catches light and remains Enchanted Mesa, the desert becomes a kind of antithesis to the devastation wrought by the Trinity bomb tests. If the exploding of the nuclear bomb in a supposedly empty barren place can be read as the origin point of evil and witchery and the forgetting of ceremonies, we can see Tayo's personal and representative healing must necessarily begin the process of healing that evil and erasing that witchery from the earth. It is vitally important to understand that what happens in *Ceremony* is *not* a reversal of the drought or the atomic bomb tests; these things

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 228.

²⁶⁶ Silko, p. 229.

cannot be undone, the consequences cannot be avoided, but they can be made sense of and factored into present and future and past experience. This process is essential to an understanding of the bioregional ecology of the desert. Since there is no going back in terms of ecology and biology, the choice presents itself to either reject entirely the past or use the consequences of past choices to heal the damage to the land.

This process of healing is seen most clearly in Tayo's visits to Old Betonie. The core of what Old Betonie teaches is best articulated by the Tayo's memory of killing a deer with Rocky. After Rocky slits the deer's throat, the two undertake a ceremony with the deer. By feeding the deer's spirit (even though this makes Rocky uncomfortable) the boys and the men at the killing of the deer understand an essential thing about man's relationship with the land, especially considering that the desert is a complex heterogeneous ecosystem full of life and not totally desolate and empty. Silko tells us that the meaning of this experience is that "[t]hey had to show their love and respect, their appreciation; otherwise, the deer would be offended, and they would not come to die for them the following year."²⁶⁷ Love and respect are essential to how the Laguna in Silko's novel understand their being in the world—each thing has its place and function, and each thing must be loved and respected. This is the imperative of the phrasing "had to" Silko uses to structure her explanation of the meaning of the ceremony with the deer. The proper functioning of the ecosystem, of the humans-in-place, depends upon respecting the body and the spirit of each living thing; without this ceremonial respect and love the entire system falls apart.

Betonie, unlike Old Man Ku'oosh, not only understands this orientation towards the world as essential to the health of the land and the people on the land; he also understands for

²⁶⁷ Silko, p. 47.

that healing to happen, for that healing to break the pattern of violence and destruction, the proper way of thinking about ceremonies must be remembered. Upon one of Tayo's first visits to Betonie, the medicine man tells Tayo,

The people nowadays have an idea about ceremonies. They think the ceremonies must be performed exactly as they always have been done, maybe because one slip-up or mistake and the whole ceremony must be stopped and the sand painting destroyed. That much is true....But long ago when the people were given these ceremonies, the changing began, if only in the aging of the yellow gourd rattle or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle's claw, if only in the different voices from generation to generation, singing the chants.

You see, in many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing....things which don't shift and grow are dead things.²⁶⁸

This understanding of ceremonies as always changing—even if it is just the voices of the different people performing them—reveals to readers that what Silko is attempting to show us is how the past necessarily must be *regenerated* for them to retain their meaning; they must be refreshed by being brought into the present, performed again inside of the context of present time, and of past time and future time joined with the present. It is vital for an ecological/ecoregional reading of *Ceremony* to understand Betonie's words a call for and insistence upon regeneration and not reinvention or anything so mechanical.

The ceremonies are not being made new; the content and purpose remain the same, as they should; this is only good and true and the only way for the ceremony to retain its meaning for the people. However, the means of performing the ceremonies, the instruments involved with the ceremonies, *change* as time passes. The gourd wears out, as does the human voice. These

²⁶⁸ Silko, p. 117.

things are the surface, they are the interchangeable parts of the ceremony, and this allows for growth and renewal—which is essential to the health of the human organism and the health of the landscape.

If the desert, a fragile thing, is allowed to suffer drought, its declination in health with inevitably lead to the decay of the human biological and communal health. The solution as Betonie understands it, the way to properly apply a salve to the wound caused by war, witchery, the profanation of tradition, and detachment from the ecosystem, is to move forward into a new day, through the sunset and into the sunrise. This is the religious and ecological force of Silko structuring her novel as a prayer for sunrise. The chants sporadically included throughout and the ending of the novel with the phrase “Sunrise, / accept this offering, Sunrise.”²⁶⁹ demonstrate that Silko is moving the reader towards an acceptance of the consequences of the devastation and of the trauma but also that Silko is moving readers towards the dawn. The sunrise is an acceptance of hope, a time of day that always means renewal, especially in the mythopoiesis of the Laguna ceremonies. It is an acceptance of the way things *can* and *must* be while recognizing that things are not that way at the present time.

Readers are shown by the novel itself (plot, character, structure) that the ceremony *does* work to make healing possible—if we understand that ceremonies are not inherently entropic, that they are not essentially stultifying or oppressive. Because ceremonies are not those things, we can see that Tayo’s healing is also the rediscovery and regeneration of a healthy relationship with the land, that man and desert can indeed exist in a mutualism that does not destroy or erase or exhaustively exploit the given resources of the land. Indeed, as the revelation of the Thought-woman shows us, the land provides for people—it gives unto them what is necessary for survival

²⁶⁹ Silko, p. 244.

as long as there is love and respect (not hate or war), and the ceremonies are created in response to it in order to preserve, foment, and carry forward that love and respect.

In addition to the verbal and tribal ceremonies that make possible the regeneration of the land and man's relationship to it, there is also the ceremony of love between man and woman. The union between two halves make a whole that literally allows for the creation of new life, the growth and change of a regenerated lifeform, the physical and spiritual evidence of love and mutual respect that is patterned on the necessary union between man and land that Silko forwards. Silko's inclusion of these two unions—the community and the land, the man and the woman—gives the theme of regeneration a dependence on love and forgiveness. Both ceremonies do the work of healing in Tayo, giving him a clearer way of seeing how the Laguna relationship with the land has been sundered and how it can be regenerated—but not through violence. This is the greatest difference between Silko and McCarthy: violence in Silko cannot be regenerative, only reconciled with present realities. Love alone heals the community and the land. Out of love for the bioregion and for the community, Tayo learns he can discover proper behavior towards the land by listening to what it tells the people.

After sleeping with the unnamed woman at the ranch, Tayo awakes and speaks the ceremony of sunrise in acknowledgement of the gift of life and love, in response to the literal making of love with the woman. Together they become an intimate image of how the human organism should be in place with the landscape, as the woman teaches Tayo on their walks among the desert flora. The act of love depends upon mutual respect and careful attention to the needs of the other person involved in the act. So too does the act of the human upon and with the landscape depend upon careful attention to the land's needs so that the action does not

overextend the capacity of the land to support the human organism. Thus the extreme devastation wrought upon the desert ecosystem by the atomic bomb.

Because the Trinity tests were in a way predicated upon a misunderstanding of what exists in the ecosystem, of how our relationships to that material can be more organic and of what the bomb does to the human being, part of Tayo's healing is made possible by learning about the landscape, its flora and fauna, with the woman he lives with briefly at the ranch. Tayo goes with her

to learn about the roots and plants she had gathered. When she found a place she got comfortable, spreading her blue shawl on the ground after she had cleared the area of pebbles and little sticks and made sure no ants were disturbed. She sat flat on the ground and bent over close to plants, examining them for a long time, from the petals sprinkled with pollen, down the stem to each leaf, and finally to the base, where she carefully dug the sand away from the roots.²⁷⁰

Tayo's attending to the woman's attention and care for the plants given by the earth allows a shift in his perception; it makes possible his eventual choice to abstain from violence towards Emo, even though it comes at the cost of Harley's death. Furthermore, because Silko draws our attention to how the woman sits down and makes herself comfortable ensuring that she doesn't disturb the ants so that she can observe closely every aspect of the plants in order to understand them, to know what they mean and how they are in the world—as she is in the world. After paying close attention to the plants she has gathered, the woman tells Tayo about one of them, saying, “This one contains the color of the sky after a summer rainstorm. I'll take it from here

²⁷⁰ Silko, p. 208.

and plant it in another place, a canyon where it hasn't rained for a while."²⁷¹ Her attention to the plant allows her to understand what is within the plant itself, what its ceremonial function is, and how it can participate in the healing of the land. By uprooting it with care, she is able to respect and love the plant as a given thing from the land, and by replanting it she is able to spread the ceremonial regeneration across the ecosystem in an attempt to ensure that the *whole* is healed and not just a part of the landscape.²⁷²

For Tayo, this becomes an authentic reconnection with the ground of his own being, with the ancestral land from which the people emerge and to which the people return—something which Tayo learns about from attending to the mountains in the desert. As he looks at and dreams about the mountains, Tayo has nightmares of terror and things lost forever, things lost due to the overlogging and overhunting by the white landowners. Yet as he dreams, he realizes that “[h]e had lost nothing. The snow-covered mountain remained, without regard to titles of ownership or the white ranchers who thought they possessed it.”²⁷³ What Tayo discovers is that notions of possession are an illusion imposed upon humans by the evil and the witchery, embodied in the novel by the European settlers who have and continue to (in the guise of Americans) come to the desert to live there.

The land remains uncaring about law (except its own) or titles or fences. These are an imposition from without, not derived from the limits inherent in the particular bioregion in which the human organism lives. As evidence, Silko tells us that despite the ultra-exploitative rapaciousness of progress “the mountain was far greater than any or all of these things. The mountain outdistanced their destruction, just as love had outdistanced death. The mountain could

²⁷¹ Silko, p. 209.

²⁷² This recalls my earlier discussion of the Judge's violent, world-consuming uprooting as a counterpoint to Silko's representation of this process.

²⁷³ Ibid., p. 204.

not be lost to them, because it was in their bones....”²⁷⁴ Silko connects love and land here as inextricable from each other—as we bury each other in the earth, so too do we become part of the earth. Our love for those who have been placed beneath it extends to the land beneath which they are buried, which Tayo feels for Rocky and Josiah. Furthermore, recognizing this about the mountain specifically inculcates in both Tayo and readers (or ought to in readers) a need to approach the land with extreme humility, which is itself the ground of being for love and respect.

Both love and respect are antithetical to any discourse, dynamic, or dialectic of power, both love and respect cease to be themselves when power is included in them or any discussion of them. Only in the absence of power, in the giving up entirely power and its assumptions and discourses and ideologies, we find the presence of humility, an awareness of the other person’s own being and agency and feelings and so on. The same is true of the land, as the above passage demonstrates. The love and respect we feel for our human brethren, the love and respect that necessarily derives from humility, must also extend to the landscape if there is to be any hope of renewal or healing, any hope of sunrise.

Indeed, Tayo recognizes this and enacts the ceremony for sunrise by extending love and respect for his fellow human beings at the end of the novel, after understanding that his trauma actually can be moved through and beyond. Silko tells us that Tayo’s trauma and the destruction enacted upon the landscape through the confusion of the ceremonies by the witchery had never approached the love and respect that Silko emphasizes is necessary for renewal. She tell us that “[t]his feeling was their life, vitality locked deep in blood memory and the people were strong, and the fifth world endured, and nothing was ever lost as long as the love remained.”²⁷⁵ Making the love that remains a part of himself allows the ceremony, for now, to be completed in Tayo,

²⁷⁴ Silko, p. 204.

²⁷⁵ Silko, p. 204.

allows him to enact the kind of grace that Silko knows is the only way to save and regenerate land upon which the people have suffered in drought. Significant, then, is the location of the final confrontation between Tayo and Emo, who is the embodiment of someone how utterly rejects the ceremony and the land and the people.

Setting this conflict near the Jackpile mine where the Trinity bomb tests took place allows Silko to demonstrate the effects of violent action on the healing ceremony between human and landscape. Had Tayo fallen back into the dialectic of power and violence, everything Betonie and the woman at the ranch had done to help Tayo heal would have been undone. Even though the destructive power of the atomic bomb had rendered the landscape uninhabitable due to the weaponization of the natural by human hands. The effects of the bomb have dangerously damaged the human being, and Emo becomes its scion and disciple.

To give into the temptation of violence is to reject the rehabilitation of tradition and the ultimate reconciling of the human person with the land. Within the context of the novel, the Laguna people would have been ultimately cut off from a healthy relationship with the land had Tayo—regeneration's representative—attacked Emo. In other words, there would be no re-entry into community, no reintegration of the past into the present. He knows that to do violence would be to let go of the love and respect he has begun to feel, to further extend the shock wave of the nuclear explosion that irradiated the desert. To do so would be to give over as lost the fifth world that has been given to the people, that provides for them and sustains them—as the people help sustain it. What Tayo learns to do, as he rejects the violent course of action (and accepting its disastrous consequences), is to reject entirely power, giving himself over to a holistic love, a love that makes the people and the land endure in eternal, mutualistic relationship—for as long as that

love endures. And that love can only endure through the regeneration offered by tradition and ceremony.

The endings of the two novels, though they hold open the possibility of reconciliation with place, resonate quite differently. Both novels do end with fire—the sunrise with which *Ceremony* both begins and ends and the sparks flaming out from the stone in the post holes—yet the contexts surrounding that fire mean differently in each novel. In McCarthy, if each fire is all fires, and if we connect the fire in the stone to the fire in the heart of man we see the faintest of hopes for the reemergence of love in human social and ecological relationships—a return to aesthetic paradigms, as Guattari would say. Despite the fact that *Blood Meridian* ends with an image of the coming enclosure and renegotiation of the notion of ownership by those coming from outside of the bioregion, McCarthy is sure to remind readers that fire sparks out from each hole. He reminds us that fire will continue to spark out from each hole the post digger digs, leaving open the possibility that even as enclosure comes to the desert there still is time to reconcile the ways of man with the ways of earth.

In Silko, ownership and enclosure have taken on different valences by the end of the novel. It is clear that the novel is circular in structure—the grandmother at the end tells Tayo that she has heard this story before but the names were different, and the novel ends with the word “sunrise.” This circular nature of the novel brings into focus the very act of telling stories, that in the end is the beginning and in the beginning is the end. Too, this circularity helps readers understand what enclosure means to a people historically tied to the land the way the Laguna have been. Whereas McCarthy appears to present enclosure and different kinds of ownership as inevitable, Silko presents this process as negotiable: Tayo does recover the cattle, Tayo does move about freely on enclosed land (including U.S. government property); even when he is

found by ranch security, he suffers no lasting consequences for his “invasion” of the ranch. What Silko demonstrates, however, is that real ownership, the kind of ownership that matters is not what a deed says or where your fence is. Real ownership in Silko is responsibility for the traditions, ceremonies, and stories that the people have; it is responsibility not only for how you treat others but also the earth because the earth too is an other.

Love may not be the animating force of *Blood Meridian* but endurance, regeneration, and a vision of a what world utterly devoid of love and compassion looks like have a stranglehold on the novel’s moral core.²⁷⁶ Silko too shows what a world without love, compassion, and connection looks like; though hers is far less graphically bloody, the threat to community and bioregion and person are no less dire than the threats in McCarthy. If Emo and the Judge are allowed to persist in their violence and acts of erasure, traditional ways of being and doing would be lost forever. The means of reconciling the past with the present would be controlled by the imperial forces that have corrupted the relationship between human and place. And yet, despite the bleakness of this outlook, both novels hold out hope that action can still be taken to restore love, to see the life that wants to live in a landscape that seems at first so barren and hostile.

²⁷⁶ The word “love” appears only five times in the novel and the word “compassion” only once, and each time the words are used in a negative, apophatic context.

Chapter III: Looking Dead At It: The Confrontational Ethic of Seeing in Sometimes a Great Notion & One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Introduction

The Pacific Northwest is a vast and verdant region of intense ecological diversity, lush and vibrant and crowded with various vegetal and animal species. Nicholas O'Connell in his study of the development of place in the Pacific Northwest has described the limits of the region as extending "from the Pacific Ocean in the west to the Rocky Mountains in the east, from Washington State in the north to the Siskiyou Mountains to the south."²⁷⁷ This conception of the region results more from a matrix created by political, geographical, and ecological analyses of what people have generally claimed about the region's limits. O'Connell continues by clarifying that the Northwest "exhibits astonishing geographical diversity, ranging from rain forests to high deserts to alpine meadows....the region shares a similarity of climate, flora, and fauna."²⁷⁸ The diversity of the bioregion is certainly something we ought to reckon with as we begin to understand the decentralized aspect of culture and ethics for living in place. However, as I have argued about bioregions in the United States in my introduction and preceding chapters, a political, geographical, and ecological understanding of the region does not take into account the vast differences that exist *within* a politically-influenced understanding of region. Within this larger biome, there exists a diversity of smaller ecoregions that exhibit idiosyncrasies that need to be taken account of in order to understand both literary aesthetics representing the region and ethics of living in place within the region.

²⁷⁷ O'Connell, Nicholas. *On Sacred Ground: The Spirit of Place in Pacific Northwest*. University of Washington Press, 2003, p. xi.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

Under the heading of the Cascadia Ecoregion, the EPA outlines over a hundred microregions within the Northwest, including the Marine West Coast Forest—a temperate rainforest more similar in operation to the tropical rainforests we find in Central and South America (though, obviously, not in the temperate climate). This ecoregion will encompass the specific focus of this chapter, as it is represented in the novels of Ken Kesey. While the specific species within the region may indeed be similar, as O’Connell notes, the ethics of living in place vary widely—especially if life is to survive and thrive there. Because the climate is so moderate, a variety of species was able to evolve in the Marine West Coast Forest and find ways of thriving together as a biotic community.

Indeed, the capacity of this region to support life is far greater than many of the other American ecosystems, in part because of the consistent rainfall and the ocean air that regulates the temperatures year round. O’Connell briefly outlines the kinds of species that do exist commonly across the bioregion and demonstrates that it includes “trees like western hemlock, Douglas fir, and western red cedar; animals such as cougar, elk, black bear, and mule deer; and several species of trout and salmon, which run in many of the region’s streams.”²⁷⁹ Kesey, too, articulates in *Sometimes a Great Notion* this diversity of species all throughout his novel. Describing the dunes that exist as a barrier between the ocean and the forest that abuts it, Kesey tells us

Out in the dunes, under the roof a lodgepole pine, a fly agaric pushes up through a pine needle floor like something sneaking out of hell. In the deer-grass meadows the long last of the summer’s flowers take long last looks at the fall’s first frost at the dark garden of stars and wave their windy good-bys: the spiderwort and blue verrain, the trout lily and

²⁷⁹ O’Connell, p. xii.

adder's tongue, the bleeding heart and pearly everlasting, and the carrion weed with its death-scented bloom. In the Scandinavian slums at the edge of town bloodroot vines reach garroting fingers for knotholes, warpholes, and window sills.²⁸⁰

The catalogic nature of this excerpt includes a multiplicity of flora that grows wild and by the end of the passage has crept into the margins of Wakonda, attempting to strangle the town's human habitations. While the passage points to the verdancy of the region—moving from the scrub grass near the sand dunes through the flowers and herbs to the thick vines at the edges of the town—the passage also points to the confrontational quality inherent in bioregional relations within the biotic community of this region. It is almost smothering, Kesey show readers, as it attempts to overwhelm the settlers that have come and carved out a place for themselves here (and have remained there through the twentieth-century). One of the main characters, Leland (Lee) Stamper describes this as the “black cacophony” that dislocates him in both time and place.²⁸¹ Its closeness, its intensity of presence, though hierarchically ordered as nature always is, has the feeling of disorder from the position of the human perceiver.

Where Cather, Rølvaag, McCarthy, and Silko emphasize exiles adrift in the “empty” landscape of the prairie within an alien ecology, Ken Kesey clearly emphasizes the closeness of the natural world with the built environment in the Marine West Coast Forest. Both the authors of the plains and the temperate rainforest that I have discussed present an aesthetics of being overwhelmed by the natural world. However, in Kesey's Marine West Coast Forest, the feeling of being overwhelmed is different than that of the plains; The previous chapters emphasize being overwhelmed by the distance of the landscape and its features from the human perception. Kesey on the other hand presents the overwhelming *closeness* of the different organism of the biotic

²⁸⁰ Kesey, Ken. *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Penguin Books, 1964, p. 157-158.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

community to the human perception and human habitation. Different from other forested regions in the United States (like Appalachia), the aesthetic of the Pacific Northwest as Kesey presents it requires a much more intense methodology of attention to the elements of the natural world. Kesey forwards this idea in order to represent a bioregional ethics that recognizes that each organism is both an individual thing and a member of a larger community. In his novels, this aesthetic sometimes reaches the point of claustrophobia; he presents the natural world as not merely the setting for human habitation and doing. He also represents it as an active participant in the process of building and making life happen. This particular bioregion is to Kesey a collection of individuals operating both communally and individually. This is one of the major forces in *Sometimes a Great Notion*.

Instead of privileging the inability of humans to simply comprehend the alien-ness of the place in which they are, Kesey substitutes an intensity of presence for utter absence. Giving precedence to the variety of species immediately observable and able to be encountered in the bioregion allows authors like Ken Kesey to represent how they or their characters came to know the place, how they came to separate the individual from the whole and factor that individual back into the community with a fresh understanding of that individual's place within it. In this aspect, these writers of the Marine West Coast Forest share some significant similarities with Cather and Rølvaag in that the biotic/biological world must be attended to in order for humans to come to terms with it; also, no organism or landscape feature can be taken for granted if one is to make sense of, interpret, or make peace with the local place one finds oneself in. This latter truth became especially clear in my discussion of McCarthy and Silko in the preceding chapter.

However, rather than finding in the landscape an openness that allows characters the space (and time) to come to terms with what the landscape is trying to teach them, Kesey

forwards themes of containment, hyper-locality, and the inability to see the multifaceted world clearly (and thereby interpret it correctly). Following characters and ways of thinking that miss opportunities or forget to consider the miniscule organisms or looked-over processes of the natural world, Kesey presents readers with various attempts to see clearly the place of the individual organism within the mass of organisms (and inorganic things) that make up the bioregional community. Rather than simplifying the interaction between characters and place to a simply “man-vs.-nature” conflict or reductively writing about the world under the impression that there is no such thing as nature,²⁸² Kesey attempts complicate the various relationships within the biotic community to show both their complementary and confrontational natures—both its human/built aspects and its nonhuman/organic aspects.

While each aspect of the community is meant to be a participant in the work towards the health of that community (and is therefore obligated to other members in the community), they each retain their individual natures, as they very well ought to, part of a community but also as individual organisms. None of the writers discussed here subsume the individual organism into the collective, even as they demonstrate how each member strives (or doesn’t) towards the common goal of the general health of the local biotic community. In Kesey this demonstration works out to be an intensely close reading of the events and ecosystems that make up both everyday experience and the elements of the locality about which he writes; what he finds is the almost Romantic (yet not remotely naïve) understanding of the natural world as holy, sacramental in its very nature. Kesey is able to effectively demonstrate this both in the complex structure of his works and in the conflicts between characters and the natural environment.

²⁸² Wendell Berry writes persuasively against this idea in his recent essay, “The Presence of Nature in the Natural World,” published in his book *A Small Porch* with the subtitle, “A Long Conversation,” which is an effective metaphor for how Berry perceives the relationship between not only writer and reader but also an individual’s interiority and the world outside of it.

Readers are shown clearly what happens when some organisms work alongside the ecosystem and when some work against it; the conflict and consequences suggest how seeing the natural world as holy or as a moral authority is a necessary component of living in place. The natural world in Kesey has both agency and a kind of transcendence seen most clearly in his specific rendering of that world as his characters move through and muse about it. Through this practice, he foregrounds the confrontational aspects of humans' relationships with the natural world, especially as they attempt to make sense of an ecosystem dependent upon a willful and eternally fluctuating river.

Because the fullness of life and its immense, intense crowdedness are immediately present in Kesey's work about Marine West Coast Forest, there can be no doubt of confrontation as humans enter into, settle, and stake a claim on the bioregion alongside (or in place of) native species, both in terms of flora and fauna.²⁸³ Encounters between human and animal/vegetable life in the Marine West Coast Forest must be on some level a confrontation, not only with otherness but with one's own way of living and being. Finding space to move about in becomes difficult in a bioregion already full of a variety of species crowded as it is with forms of life already working together closely to sustain an ecosystem that operates in its own idiosyncratic ways. This becomes especially complicated as humans arrive in the bioregion and begin to make a place for themselves, a place in which they can dwell and sustain themselves throughout time. If, however, they take up too much space, the bioregion will no longer be able to support their inhabitation; it will collapse and become unable to sustain itself.²⁸⁴

²⁸³ To clarify, "confrontation" here is being used to suggest neither harmful nor productive interactions. Rather confrontation simply is; the moral, ethical, and bioregional consequences of that confrontation shall be coded as negative or positive, as Kesey intended them to be.

²⁸⁴ As is the case with major urban centers, which become colonial leeches on the resources of the bioregion.

Because this coming into a place often enough involves clearing a space for oneself and one's way of life, it is often in contradiction to the already established ways of life that the ecosystem would support. A reconciliation and melding becomes necessary for the community to survive. Thus confrontation is central to many of the considerations about the natural world and bioregional living that Kesey attempts to grapple with in his novels set in the Northwest.²⁸⁵ While the entailed effects of these confrontations will become much more clear upon consideration of the individual prose and poetic works, what the approaches to the natural world that these authors foreground suggests that in a place of crowdedness, the difficulty of living in proper relation to place is not so much a question of hermeneutics (as it was in the prairie). Rather, living in proper relationship to place is a question of seeing the world clearly, through the crowds of life trying, themselves, to live.

This act of *seeing* is more a question of what interpretations are available and thereby what behaviors can be derived from those interpretations. In a place where proper hermeneutical responses to the natural world are readily apparent (or should be to any who takes the time to look and not only look but see), the task of the human coming into, growing, and sustaining a relationship with that place is to negotiate a right relationship with that place. Part of that negotiation involves discovering and enacting the mutual obligations between human participant in the bioregion and the spirit of the place, the *genius loci*. As the human makes sense of the immensity of the presence of nature in the place, the human must also rediscover and negotiate the entailments of their own smallness due to the different demands of the bioregion—not as an

²⁸⁵ In addition to the two discussed in this chapter, I would add *Sailor Song*, a novel set in a post-apocalypse environment wherein traditional ways of life are being confronted with exploitation and collapse.

insignificant organism prone to being blown away or lost in the immensity but rather as a meaningful and necessary part of the whole.

In order to demonstrate this complexity, I will consider Ken Kesey's second and first novels—*Sometimes a Great Notion* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, respectively. After a brief discussion of Kesey's ignored (and superior) second novel—a novel about reconciliation with family in place and whether or not a person can go home again—I will turn to relatively overlooked elements in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The allusion here to Thomas Wolfe's sequel to *The Web and the Rock* is not accidental; complicating Wolfe's assertion that *You Can't Go Home Again*, Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion* dares to propose that estrangement from community and family is not insurmountable, that brothers may again be brothers and friends, and that families and communities may again be made whole. William Stafford, likely the most famous Pacific Northwestern poet alongside Sherman Alexie, argues similarly in his prose poem that

All events and experiences are local, somewhere. And all human enhancements of events and experiences...are regional in the sense that they derive from immediate relation to felt life....the more local the feeling in art, the *self* that art has, the more all people can share it; for that vivid encounter with the stuff of the world is our common ground.²⁸⁶

It is Kesey representation of encounters with “the stuff of the world” that makes reconciliation in the novel possible—not just within the Stamper family but also with the various non-human elements of the Marine West Coast Forest bioregion. It becomes, as the novel suggests, that common ground where we can more properly position ourselves in relation to the larger

²⁸⁶ Stafford, William. “On Being Local.” *Northwest Review*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1973, p. 92

community around us, become once again an individual within a community of life that wants to live.

***Sometimes a Great Notion* and the Confrontational Ethic**

Ken Kesey's novel *Sometimes a Great Notion* presents the best extant example of Kesey's understanding of ecology and bioregional ethics. The major question that the novel asks, at least the one most relevant to my discussion of the novel is: "How do we make sense of mankind's place within a complex ecosystem composed of other organisms, human and non-human memories, and the necessities of survival for all organisms in the ecosystem?" By composing the novel around these concerns, Kesey poses a confrontation between humans and the landscape: the human position must constantly be negotiated in a contract with the bioregion; this leads to prescribed action, both in line with how the ecosystem supports human life and against the grain of what the ecosystem will allow. Furthermore, to enhance these themes, Kesey structures the novel to mirror these ecological themes as it passes from character consciousness to character consciousness and across both time and space.

It is a sprawling novel about a broken backwoods family, the Stampers, whose estranged son has come home from the American East to help his older brother with the family logging business. The family's patriarch Henry, his son Hank, Hank's wife Vivian, the cousin Joe Ben, and Hank's younger brother Lee make up the main cast of a book that can be initially difficult to wrangle with, disorienting and immersive as it is. Charles Bowden claims that the novel "demolishes all the ways we have of defining life so it will become tame," a notion he supports by arguing that "[c]ollectivism comes across as living death, individualism as actual death,

resources as disappearing as the family gnaws through a last virgin stand.”²⁸⁷ In this sense, as the Stampers ignore an ineffectual union’s demands that they stop cutting down trees (including the intrusion of a slimy, hate-filled outsider from the paradisiacal metropolis of California), *Sometimes a Great Notion* considers how everything is at once necessarily autonomous and inescapably connected to each other. It reveals that isms and institutions and organizations (especially those imposed upon a place from the outside, as an idea unconnected to place) cloud the ability of people who have to live together to see a place clearly and actually do the work of living together.

As a novel that reinvents ways of seeing and being in a place within a community, *Sometimes a Great Notion* is also a novel about the complex biotic ecology of a fictional Oregon town called Wakonda—a name Kesey presumably derived from the name several Amerindian tribes gave to their creator spirit. Creation as a linguistic act results, in the novel, in the creation of a complex, imbricated world with its own set of rules that its characters abide by, run up against, and come to terms with. In fact, if we consider Kesey, as both narrator and author, as a creator spirit from whom the novel is given, we see that indeed Kesey’s first act in the books is an act of creation. Beyond the obvious fact that the first line of a novel always creates the novel’s world, it is significant that Kesey’s first act is the creation of a locality, a distinct place, from the water up to mammalian organisms, in a process mirroring the evolutionary development of all beings. The opening of the novel is unique in that Kesey insists upon implanting readers deeply into the natural world his characters (and readers) will later move about in. He writes,

Along the western slopes of the Oregon Coastal Range...come look: the hysterical crashing of tributaries as they merge into the Wakonda Auga River...The first little

²⁸⁷ Bowden Charles. “Introduction.” *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Penguin Books, 1964, xiv.

washes flashing like thick rushing winds through sheep sorrel and clover, ghost fern and nettle, sheering, cutting...forming branches. Then, through bearberry and salmonberry, blueberry and blackberry, the branches crashing into creeks, into streams. Finally, in the foothills, through the tamarack and sugar pine, shittim bark and silver spruce—and the green and blue mosaic of Douglas firs—the actual river falls five hundred feet...and look: opens out upon the fields.²⁸⁸

The location of the reader in place, locating the readers alongside of the landscape itself, the reader is made to move as the river moves: swiftly, hysterically, building great strength until the final five-hundred-foot fall where the river then disseminates itself. The cumulative effect of this opening is an alignment the reader may feel (and what I think Kesey intends readers to feel) with the landscape itself. We, as readers, are invited into a landscape, an inhabited world with its own rules, its own ways of being and surviving and doing. We are invited to take up the position of observer here, as Kesey's exhortation to "look" suggests. This theme of looking (and by extension, if we are open to the movements of the novel itself, seeing) permeates the novel, as readers are given access to character consciousnesses, pasts, and private speeches, and sometimes readers are addressed directly or through proxy characters.

We are immediately emplaced by Kesey: we follow the tributaries as they merge into the larger river; we pass a variety of herb plants, weeds, berry bushes, flowerless plants, and hardy trees as we move towards the falls with the open fields below. All of the brambles and shrubs Kesey mentions have medicinal or practical uses; the bearberry, salmonberry, blueberry, and blackberry are eaten and able to be used in teas and jams and other products necessary for human survival. What this suggests for this reading of Kesey's novel is that he is specifically interested

²⁸⁸ Kesey, p. 1.

in representing an environment that can and does support human life easily—that there can be a mutualist (or at least commensalist) way of living in place. Furthermore, that he gives readers in the first page of the novel representations of sheep sorrel, ghost fern, clover, nettle, fir trees, and berry brambles, tells us that the life here is not only present in a material, organic, and specific way. It also should suggest to readers that the representation of life in this novel's ecoregion is ecologically significant and essential to how Kesey views the relationship between humans and landscape—the specificity suggests parts entangling together to make a whole while also remaining individually distinct within that whole. It is clear too that this is an emplacement not only within a particular ecoregion but also within a particular watershed of that larger ecoregion. The variety of detail Kesey includes in this opening section of the novel prepares readers for the crowdedness of the biotic community they will be presented with throughout the remainder of the novel's 250,000-plus words.

That this initial emplacement as one organism amongst a crowd of many begins at the edge and moves towards the center suggests that we are meant to see this movement as a mixing, from the disparate far-flung places towards a place of joining and moving together within a common medium (the water). This is not the centralization of an artificial system, as it would be in *Cuckoo's Nest*; rather by the nature of the different water sources mixing into a larger water source, this movement towards a center is natural and serves a mutually beneficial function: the movement of the waters prevents stagnation and ensures the eventual movement of the waters to the sea. By placing readers alongside the movement of the waters and by placing such diverse botanical life alongside the river, we are meant to see that *everything* (not just the streams) tends towards the water.

If everything tends toward the water, then it is easy to understand how everything in this ecosystem is connected. As the tributaries rush through the flora, not only is everything connected, but every person and everything commits the act of connecting, whether or not they are aware of it, whether or not they can see it. In such a crowded ecosystem, it becomes very clear (though this can be easily missed in the sense of missing the forest for the trees) that everything is co-dependent with everything else. Everything crashes together; everything rushes towards a common outlet—the Wakonda Auga, which is itself rushing towards the Pacific Ocean.

This crashing of everything together (both environmentally and culturally) should leave readers with a sense of awe at the opening to the novel. This sense of everything together is meant to be one of awe at the thickness of Kesey's presentation; however, equally important are the descriptors and metaphors that Kesey uses to give readers a sense of the place. Initially, Kesey describes the way things move in this world as "hysterical," a type of movement (in this case) related to being uncontrolled and excessive, though perhaps, in a way, ordered or predictable—something borne out by Kesey's additional representation in the rest of the excerpt. The hysteria, at first look, is meant to disorient and overwhelm the reader, to shock them out of lazy consumption of background data, to force attention to the specific and present elements of the ecosystem. The hysteria, once borne out, enables the reader to see sharper and more clearly the individual organisms that make up the whole; stylistically, too, the information Kesey gives about the ecosystem is ordered: he moves the reader from the font of the water towards the river itself and the town where the action of the novel will take place. Through this movement, he prepares the reader to look and hear and understand what happens in his representation of a lush temperate rainforest.

This movement continues through the flora, all of which actually grows in the Oregon Coastal Range, what Kesey calls the Marine West Forest. Kesey's inclusion of such particularities is meant to give readers a concrete sense of place, certainly, but also the inclusion of everything from herbs to berry plants to weeds makes readers see and feel the overwhelming diversity of the Wakonda Auga Valley, as well as how everything is joined with everything else, how everything is dependent upon everything else. Of course, things are also crushed on top of everything else, which is part of the confrontational ethics in the novel. We are introduced to a place, like a stranger we have just met but someone we both already know and can come to know intimately over the long course of the acquaintance. We are invited with Kesey's "come look" to join the community of the Wakonda Auga and all of its people, animals, waterways, and plants.

In fact, thinking more particularly about sheep sorrel for instance allows readers to anticipate the ecological work Kesey does in the novel, especially in the context of how the botanical detail contributes to the rootbound nature of the novel's ethic. Sheep sorrel is a perennial weed. Its stem is a rhizome, and it is notable for being an aggressively-growing, hard-to-control weed. By including such a plant alongside the ferns, herbs, berries, and acacias, Kesey insists on the wildness of the place, the reality of the place. This is no idealized setting (either utopic or dystopic); it is instead real and operates according to natural "laws" under which the various species present in the ecosystem grow and thrive without need of human concepts like control or centralization or power. These species, Kesey tells us, are free to move as they need, and that movement is towards the water, towards that which is naturally life-giving.

Kesey's metaphor for the water's movement in the passage is a rushing wind, something that moves other things. This comparison emphasizes the interconnectivity of all things in this watershed since wind moves everything (water, plants, animals), touches everything, pushes

everything to follow where it is leading. Wind, then, is a good comparison for the tributaries of the Wakonda Auga: everything being pulled towards a common outlet, a common place where life goes, to which life is oriented. This place is not a source or an ending but is instead a waypoint in the natural cycle, a drain, an escape into something larger, and eventually a way back into the place where the water, the plant, the animal once began.

Indeed, each tributary functions in this way: all things need water to survive, to thrive, to be what Albert Schweitzer has famously described as the “life that wants to live, among other forms of life that want to live.”²⁸⁹ These streams eventually flow into the larger river as occurs with all smaller bodies of water within every functioning watershed. Too, these tributaries carry with them gifts, like tributes from the organisms that come to the streams and make contact with the water. A man comes to the stream, rinses his hands in it, throws a stone into it, urinates in it, throws his waste into it, or (in the case of Kesey’s novel) dumps felled trees into it. The oils and dirt from his hands, the stone he throws, the waste removed from the blood by the kidneys, the external waste products, the tree—all these serve as tribute to the river. Of course, this “tribute” is complicated when the kinds of refuse that pollute or damage the functioning of the river are introduced into it.

We need not follow pagan ceremony, spiritism, or animism to see and understand the relationships at stake here. It is nothing less than the entire watershed, the entire ecosystem that depends on the water for survival. What Kesey shows us by giving readers the sheering and cutting of the streams as they hysterically race to the Wakonda Auga—the creator, the water—is that the waters carry with them (wildly, uncontrolled) a part of everything that the waters touch. They mix it all together as they flow far afield from their sources, towards that massive mixing

²⁸⁹ Schweitzer, Albert. *Out of My Life and Thought*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2009 (1931), p. 159.

we call Pacific, only for the cycle to repeat: for the water to evaporate, be carried by the wind, and to fall once more upon those that first gave tribute to the water.²⁹⁰

This cyclical interconnection of the natural world flows throughout the entire novel. Characters frequently meditate and travel upon the surface of the river, remembering encounters with both the water and the natural world in their pasts—these moments lost in time become heuristics for how the characters behave in and respond to the world around them. We are shown characters who wander (finding themselves rootless), who battle the land and take from it, who love Wakonda but who log its forests, who distance themselves from the biotic world—all these characters come to mirror the diversity found in the densely forested ecoregion through their various personalities, value-commitments, and characterizations by Kesey. They can be seen as individual components of the ecosystem in which they are emplaced. Though, yes, many watersheds will follow this same progression—the smaller draining into the bigger—what is significant about this particular watershed (in the novel, at least) is the sheer number of tributaries that Kesey shows us. Because the Marine West Coast Forest is a temperate rainforest, we are able to see the verdure of this region—distinctive to both the real world outside of the novel and Kesey’s imaginative engagement with the ecology of this region. The world here is crammed full of life—of water, of trees, of such variety that even seeing and looking at the land becomes a complex act. All of this lushness of life is made possible by the water’s expansive and pervasive nature, the way it spreads throughout the ecosystem, giving the possibility of life to its different places.

²⁹⁰ This message is quite similar to the ones evinced by both plains and desert literature. However, with the Marine West Coast Forest, it is the sheer intensity and multiplicity of lifeforms that communicates the message: rather than emphasize the few that do exist, like Cather, for example does, Kesey chooses to show the stakes through an overload of sensory data: we can’t help but see how all things are connected and depend on each other.

The cramped nature of this bioregion as Kesey perceives it and represents it to readers is immediately seen not just in the opening rush of wind and water as readers follow the course of the Wakonda Auga but also in the first description of human *habitation* in place that Kesey gives readers. It is, of course, the Stamper's house, their home built overlooking the river below. It is from first sight an anomaly, something ripped out of the forest and made to exist there, much like the Sutpen estate is ripped out of the swamp in *Absalom, Absalom!* As the introductory perspective approaches the Stamper house along the course of the river, Kesey introduces a note of tension into the hysterical rush of the river. He shifts the description of the Wakonda Auga to a "river seeming calm, hiding the cruel file-edge of its current beneath a smooth and calm-seeming surface."²⁹¹ By repeating the notion that the river seems calm ("seeming calm," calm-seeming"), Kesey suggests that the river's character is one that both sustains life and has the ability to harm and end life. Its current is a file-edge because it wears away at the banks, at the things in it, and makes it difficult to build over it or up against its banks, as will be seen later at a few critical moments in the novel.

Once Kesey has established both the centrality and the cruelty of the river to the Wakonda Auga valley and the crowdedness of the bioregion, readers are told that the highway runs along the north bank of the river and that no bridges span the first twelve miles of the river in the valley. "And yet," he writes, "across, on that southern shore, an ancient two-story woodframe house rests on a structure of tangled steel, of wood and earth and sacks of sand, like a two-story bird with split-shake feathers, sitting fierce in its tangled nest. Look...."²⁹² The contradiction Kesey sets up at the beginning of this sentence with the "and yet" informs readers that in spite of the river's cruel file-edge current, a house has been built here in resistance of the

²⁹¹ Kesey, *Sometimes A Great Notion*, 1.

²⁹² *Ibid*, 2.

bioregional evidence that it perhaps should not have been. It is a mongrel house, shored up against its own ruin. Its construction is tangled, a mixture of earth and sand and wood and still; this conglomerate nature of the house, in addition to its ancient status suggests that its builders have built and rebuilt in defiance of the river's erosive encroachment on the human habitation here. We learn as well that hanging above the river, tied to a pole of wood is a severed arm with, as we learn within the first ten pages, all fingers except the middle tied down is to serve as that "rigid and universal sentiment lifted with unmistakable scorn to all that came past."²⁹³ The house becomes, in contradiction to the river's cruelty, a symbol of sheer defiance, taking on the character of its inhabitants.

It is also out of place, like its inhabitants. Reflecting on the history of human habitation in the bioregion, Kesey lets readers hear what has become common practice in the bioregion by the present time of the novel: people moving away from the banks of the river. Kesey narrates that the old houses built "at the turn of the eighteen-hundreds"²⁹⁴ were moved back from the river or were swallowed up by it if they couldn't be moved. Kesey gives agency to the houses themselves; like the human inhabitants in the bioregion, they too are caught up in the functioning of the ecosystem, capable of learning and of losing. Further, it seems that the houses themselves, the built things, have a better understanding of how the ecosystem works than the people who live in it. Kesey tells us, "The houses know about riverside living. Even the modern weekend summertime places have learned."²⁹⁵ The houses themselves know that the river will erode the bank and eventually swallow up the houses; to prevent such a thing (or at the very least to preserve the illusion that they have forever halted the approach of the river), they have moved

²⁹³ Kesey, 10.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 4.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 4.

and been developed in what Kesey calls the “zone of respect for its steady appetite,” noting specifically that no law was needed to enforce or create this zone.²⁹⁶ The inhabitants here and their structures are in tune with the bioregion and acknowledge the natural hierarchies that exist within it. They depend on the river, it is their “Highway of Water,” their lifeline for commerce and community, and to resist its absolute-yet-quasi-benevolent dominance over the biotic community is to court disaster and destruction. Out of respect of the river’s authority and centrality to their bioregion, the homes and their inhabitants retreat and cede territory, knowing that any supposed mastery is temporary.

Not so the Stamper household. It “protrudes out into the river on a peninsula of its own making, on an unsightly jetty of land shored up on all sides with logs, ropes, cables, burlap bags, filled with cement and rocks, welded irrigation pipes, old trestle girders, and bent train rails.”²⁹⁷ The Stamper house gives no zone of respect to the river; it is represented as doing everything it can to hold off the river’s intrusion into the house’s territory, and the result is a “haphazard collection” of refuse, natural materials, and sheer cussedness that will give not an inch to a river who will also never give an inch.

The Stampers themselves can be coded as intruders as well in the novel, and the things they build and do stem from a philosophy that Henry, the patriarch, has made into a grotesque plaque and hanged above the bed of his son Hank, articulated in all caps: NEVER GIVE A INCH!²⁹⁸ The exclamatory nature of such a philosophy represents the defiance out of which the Stamper clan learns to act, though this manifests itself in a variety of ways within different

²⁹⁶ Kesey, 4. Further, if we compare this to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, we find that this personification is a distinct shift from the artificiality of human systems presented by the Ward. In *Sometimes a Great Notion*, Kesey instead layers the houses with the less constructed elements of the rainforest ecosystem.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 5.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 35.

members of the family. Additionally, the deviation from standard grammar and speech patterns, emblazoned forever onto a plaque, marks Henry Stamper as one against the grain, one who see it as his mission to stake a place out in the world and hold onto it as far and as long as he is able—to stick to a course of action despite the consequences or the opinions of others. He is, in the novel, the arch-individualist,²⁹⁹ set against the crowd and community in the town of Wakonda.

Henry Stamper's art of living is best evidenced in the way that he acts towards the local ecosystem, the way he perceives the natural world in and around Wakonda. In a half-drunk monologue in the presence of his family, Henry praises the virtues of mechanized logging, especially as mechanization has enabled the Stamper family to hold out as an independent and thereby successful logging family. He raves, "You can't whup the swamps with a animal. A animal is on the other side!...You got to have a *machine*."³⁰⁰ Henry, though he is part of the natural world's ecosystem (i.e., he is an organic being, living on and in the phenomenal world, participating in the biotic community), takes the attitude and position of master over the natural world, aligning himself firmly with the world of man and human innovation. An animal for him is on "the other side" in the sense that it is on the side of nature and therefore something to be mastered, something that he can "whup," even though this thinking that he can "whup" the natural is a fiction of his own perception. He perceives the whole of experience as opposition: the phenomenal world has sides, with man and machines on one side and the natural on the other. It becomes the responsibility of the human person to choose to align himself with the mechanical and the human rather than the natural.

²⁹⁹ I have borrowed this term from Don DeLillo, a term he used in an interview with Vince Passaro in *The New York Times* in 1991. In that interview, arch-individualist referred to one of the thematic and character extremes of his novel *Mao II*.

³⁰⁰ Kesey, *Sometimes A Great Notion*, 269.

Kesey tells us as well that Henry's "eyes brightened"³⁰¹ as he begins to talk about this issue of how to behave towards the environment and the mechanization of labor. Henry's attitude is towards the future and all that it promises the loggers; he has no patience for those people looking back to the "good old days" as Henry describes them. Instead, he relies on his experience with the Oregon woods to inform his position towards the natural world. He says, "I know better. I *seen* it. I cut it down an' it's comin' back up. It'll *always* come back up. It'll outlast anything skin an' bone. You need to get in there with some machines an' tear hell out of it!"³⁰²

This disposition towards the almost pyrrhic task of logging the crowded, seemingly everlasting woods signifies in the novel one of its contrasting ways of approaching living within community. It is the relentlessly individualistic way of living and doing that carries with it no regard for others or for the consequence of one's actions. Yes, in the novel, Henry Stamper has seen the forests grow back, and yes, his entire life has been a struggle to keep the things he has built from being consumed by the river or the forest. However, what Henry cannot see, and what Kesey demonstrates in the novel, is that the forest does not always come back, that the small, individual organisms that make up an ecosystem are not forever even though our relationship with the natural world may necessarily be confrontational, at least in an ecosystem as crowded as this one.³⁰³

Similarly, Kesey presents one of the main human antagonists to readers as a Henry-Stamper-like character, one who has seen and experienced the relentless growth of the Marine

³⁰¹ Ibid., 269.

³⁰² Kesey, 270.

³⁰³ I should clearly note here that Kesey's novel is not in any respect a polemic or political tract against logging as a business. Such low-hanging goals are not part of Kesey's aesthetic or thematic project; except in these particular instances, the novel is not really about logging at all and as such will not factor much into how Kesey positions ethical and bioregional behavior in the novel.

West Coast Forest and is poorly disposed towards it. Readers meet Jonathan Draeger early in the novel and several times throughout, as Kesey's narrative scope finds him again in the tangled mess of the novel's ecosystem. We immediately learn that he is the loggers' union's regional representative and that he is based in California, a place where "that good old California Vitamin D [can] dry up this blasted skin rash. And athlete's foot all the way to the ankle."³⁰⁴ When we first see Draeger, he is driving his powerful car along the highway adjacent to Wakonda Auga looking forward to the day ahead "with pleasure and dismay—pleasure because he will soon be leaving this waterlogged mud wallow" and dismay because he is contracted to spend Thanksgiving with a local family.³⁰⁵ Kesey's characterization of Draeger's attitude towards Wakonda (its habitat and its people) reveals an oppositional relationship with the place, similar to that of Henry's, though founded upon different preconceptions about both the world and place.

Draeger's response to the environment is one of complaint: he has athlete's foot and a rash from the damp weather and can't wait to return home to the temperate, entropic climate of California's near-constant sun. Whether the rash and the athlete's foot are a result of his resistance to the place (wherein the Wakonda ecosystem responds in mutual resistance to the intrusion of an outside, hostile organism) or a contributing factor in how Draeger sees the place, what is clear from his character is that he cannot adapt to the conditions of the Wakonda ecosystem.

His perception of the place, grounded in his experiences with it, is one of decay. A relentlessness of growth exists in this ecosystem, a growth that tends towards the inevitable rot and decomposition that is part of the natural process in the Marine West Coast Forest. Draeger's experience with and prejudice for the temperate California ecosystem, where the weather is

³⁰⁴ Kesey, *Sometimes A Great Notion*, 3.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

almost always the same, cannot accommodate the ever-present moisture and the insistent, visible reminder of change and decay in natural processes. This inability to accommodate a difference in place, this inability to adapt to the community in which he finds himself leads Draeger to cynically say, “It’s no wonder that this area has two or three natives a month take that one-way dip—it’s either drown your blasted self or rot.”³⁰⁶ He is the outsider, as the Stampers once were, and his attitude betokens not only an inability to adapt himself to the locality but also the outsider’s condescension and sense of inherent superiority to the organisms of the place.³⁰⁷ This binary—between rotting and drowning—that Draeger constructs represents further an attitude toward place that allows no room for local difference, in terms of value, or the possibility of dwelling in place. The ratio that Draeger establishes suggests a continual practice (whether or not he is correct in his estimation remains uncertain in the novel), that he believes suicide is a frequent thing in “this area.”

The alternative, in Draeger’s reckoning, is to continually deteriorate until nothing is left; however, decay serves an essential function in any healthily sustained ecosystem—this is widely known. To decay is to be subsumed back into the organic base-matter of the ecosystem one is a part of. Once an organism has decayed, that organism becomes nutrient-matter for other organisms and contributes to the general health of the soil, the insects, the flora, and the fauna. Of course, the word “rot” carries with it an especially negative connotation, and this is certainly meant by Draeger. For him, to rot is to end, to cease to be the functioning, conscious being that he is, and his resistance is also a rejection of death and of subsumption into a larger bioregional

³⁰⁶ Kesey, *Sometimes A Great Notion*, 3.

³⁰⁷ Draeger does acknowledge that the place does have its charms and its bounty, but he always compares it to California and linguistically contextualizes it within terms of “survival” instead of dwelling and in terms of how well the rural conforms to his sense of both taste and modernity. His motivation remains, throughout the novel, to get out and back to California as quickly as he can.

organism. His resistance here is somewhat ironic, considering that he, as a union representative, is asking and demanding that the Stampers and the rest of the loggers in the area allow themselves to be subsumed into a larger, inorganic, constructed system. By rejecting the organic ecosystem (i.e., the system in tune with the natural processes of place) in favor of an imposed systemic relationship, Draeger violates the bioregional contract always already established with the land and the natives living in commensalist relationship with it. Additionally, by classifying the natural process as rot, Kesey reveals that Draeger is unable to see the small and infinitesimal organisms operating in the crowded forests—he is unable to attend to the place and misinterprets it to his and its detriment.

Unlike Henry Stamper, however, Draeger's reaction to the relentless rush of life is to retreat, and this retreat is founded in that misinterpretation of the place and how to effectively live in the community already established. His opposition to the place and to the people in the place creates a similar disunity that Henry's negatively exploitative and mechanistic practices of logging create. The disunity is that Draeger feels an imported order would benefit the proper functioning of the ecosystem. Whatever the social benefits of a unionized workforce in the Wakonda Auga bioregion, the methods that Draeger and his local representative, Floyd Evenwrite, attempt to impose onto the people in the locality are shown to be all bluster without any real positive action or result.³⁰⁸ Both Henry's and Draeger's misinterpretations of the bioregion derive from their inability to see the small and the insignificant within the crowded ecosystem of the Wakonda Auga—they are unable to see the single trees for the forest, as it

³⁰⁸ Certainly, a live-and-let-live mentality would not make economic sense for the union boys, but coercion, as in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, is a mechanism of institutional oppression of the individual organism and sustainable community formation—and, in the ecological vision of the novel, antithetical to free choice plays in the sustaining of a bioregional community.

were. This lack of sight leads them to both practice unsustainable ways of being and doing in community with the place and the people of the place.

Kesey's novel, however, presents readers with ways of seeing that are more effective in sustaining community in an ecologically dense region. In the character of Hank Stamper, Henry's eldest son and one of the principal characters in the novel, Kesey builds a way of seeing and interpreting the natural world that reflects the methodologies of survival enacted by the townspeople in and around Wakonda. Because of an event from his youth, Hank is able to comprehend the complexity involved with seeing the landscape and making sense of it, especially in an ecosystem with a deceptively placid river as the main sustainer of commerce and livelihood in the bioregion.

Early in the novel, Hank reflects on several disasters that occurred to him because of the river, sinking deeper into time and memory in order to synthesize his methodology for living in place, derived from a consistent interpretation of his experience with the place. His is not the orgiastic, mechanized way of doing that his father extols; nor is it the disgust and retreat forwarded by Draeger. Instead of an anxious, furious hatred of the place and its vitality, Hank's knowledge of how to be and do in place comes directly from a kind of disappointment that he is able to come to terms with.

In a multi-layered voyage into his own past, Hank speaks directly to readers, asking them, "Yeah...you want to know something about rivers, friends and neighbors?"³⁰⁹ Directly bringing the readers into relationship with him, Hank proceeds to meditate on the old channels of the river that are marked by "switchbacks and oxbows, sloughs and backwaters" that are "kept clean by small currents from nearby streams, making them a chain of clear, deep, greenglass

³⁰⁹ Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, 113.

pools where great chubs lie on the bottom like sunken logs.”³¹⁰ Kesey places Hank’s memory alongside yet another catalogue of ecological and vegetal detail: “chevrons of brant geese,” “pole willows” that stretch their limbs over the water, anglers fishing for “tiny fingerling salmon and steelhead,” “cattail and skunk cabbage,” “loons and widgeon,” bogs filled with “maple leaves and eelgrass and snakeweed,” “two-story-high berry thickets.” This list and its thick detail give readers a deep, immersive sense of the place we are being shown.³¹¹ It demonstrates to us that Hank knows this place by having walked within it and paid attention to it, and though the detail is indeed overwhelming, it is not off-putting; still, the details are interrupted by Hank asking if we would like to know something about rivers.

By having Hank speak directly to readers, Kesey again invites us to “come look” at the unfolding of time and place that takes up much of the novel’s foundation. The invitation this time is coded in the perspective of a single character, something done for the purpose of allowing readers to step deeply into the consciousness of a character so that we may interpret effectively how that character sees the world. Like Hank’s attempt to interpret the crowded landscape in which he has staked out a place for himself and his family, readers are able to get a good sense of the complexity of the human organism and what makes up a person’s choice in how they approach the world.

Hank, after asking if readers want to learn something about rivers, proceeds to recount when he first came to a meeting of the local loggers’ union chapter being run by Floyd Evenwrite. Hank decides to take his boat upriver to the town in order to try out a new motor for the boat. As he approaches the municipal dock, Hank tells readers he “whanged into something floating out of sight; probably an old deadfall washed loose, and the boat and motor went down

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Kesey, *Sometimes A Great Notion*, 113.

like a rock and I had to swim it.”³¹² The river hides danger beneath its placid surface, serving as a reminder of its unpredictability, its ever-changing nature and course, and its unreliability as a dependable constant.

Arriving to the labor meeting wet and angry, Hank descends into reverie about a similar childhood incident, where the river intrudes suddenly upon an otherwise normal existence in the backwoods of Oregon. As a child, Hank discovers a blackberry thicket up the hill from the Stamper house into which rabbits and raccoons had “tunneled an elaborate subway system next to the ground.”³¹³ Coding the burrowed tunnels as a “subway” is an interesting intrusion of the built environment into the natural. Hank understanding these warren-like passages as a subway enables him to encounter the natural world on a somewhat neutral ground.³¹⁴ His observations show him a system of tunnels made by animal; his childhood consciousness gives him access to ways of understanding these tunnels that he is familiar with. The natural and the human-built interpenetrate each other in this discovery by Hank, bringing him (at the very least) closer to a positive relationship with the natural world than that of his father.

Hank, like any curious child would do, entered the thicket and explores its many twists and turns and “frequently came face to face with a fellow explorer, an old boar coon” who over time “came to regard this hooded intruder [Hank] as something of a partner in crime.”³¹⁵ This initial encounter suggests the kind of familiarity with the natural world that Hank develops overtime throughout his childhood—the relationship curated and sustained throughout his life

³¹² Ibid., 114.

³¹³ Ibid., 114.

³¹⁴ As should become clear later, the intrusion in this novel is a reversal of the way it is dealt with in *Cuckoo's Nest*, wherein the Ward is coded through natural and farming metaphors. The interpenetration of the natural and the artificial is meant here to suggest a neutral meeting ground for perceptions; in *Cuckoo's Nest*, it becomes ironic since the Ward attempts to push out the natural—even though it still “gets in.”

³¹⁵ Kesey, 114.

(even though he does inherit and continue the Stamper family logging operations). As Hank continues to meet this boar coon in the thicket, he eventually discovers a bobcat's den where he finds three crying bobcat kittens. Little thinking about the full consequences of his actions, Hank takes all three kittens and builds a kennel for them up against the Stamper house.

Over the coming months up until Thanksgiving, Hank cares for the bobcats and domesticates them—as much as bobcats can be domestic creatures. Hank eventually brings them inside the house to play with his family. By taming the bobcats both through his habits of caring for them, Hank develops and alters his relationship with the natural world. His attempts to bring the beings of the natural ecosystem into the highly constructed domestic space of the Stamper house demonstrates one direction the interpenetration of man and nature moves in the novel. Though this is not an example of the interdependence of humans and the natural world (the bobcats would have been cared for by their mother, certainly), Kesey does demonstrate how both domains are commingled with each other. They are distinct, they are proximate to each other, but they are (or remove they) tightly woven, capable of influencing and changing each other for good or ill.

As the winter approaches with its storms, Hank is clearly shown (as are readers) the tenuous relationship between nature and humans. The river, through the natural processes of tides and storms, frequently rises, causing the erosion of the bank where the Stampers have staked out their place in the world. As the river does rise in a strong storm, Hank is certain that it won't rise the fifteen or so feet necessary to reach the bobcat enclosure, and yet it does. The cage is washed into the river and the bobcats drown, despite the fact that Hank and Henry spend a few

hours outside in the storm shoring up the bank with wood and sand and earth.³¹⁶ The entire bank is washed away and Hank experiences the trauma of loss in a way he has not experienced before. Life has perished from the earth, understood here in a way that Hank is unable to understand when it comes to the logging his family does. In the moment of the trauma, Hank attempts to stop himself from tears, and in the present of the novel, as he recalls the event, he presses it down and meditates on how he is supposed to view both the event and the river (as one major cause of the event).

He analyzes the event over time “[u]ntil the pain and guilt and loss are replaced by something different, something larger...replaced for good by something far stronger than guilt or loss.”³¹⁷ Rather than imbue the event with undue meaning, Hank intensely investigates the nature of the event in order to understand it and to renegotiate his relationship with the river, the most-present representative of the natural world in the bioregion. What he concludes reaches the heart of the novel’s ecological vision: a contractual relationship with the ecosystem based on an awareness of the confrontational elements that exist between the human and the landscape. Directly addressing readers, Hank says, “It was like me and that river had drawn ourselves a little contract, a little grudge match, and without me knowing exactly why.”³¹⁸ Because the river, in Hank’s estimation, acted out of some human motivation attributed to it, he begins to think confrontationally.

His relationship with the natural world becomes less immersive; it grows at one remove from the kind of relationship he had with it as a child. The separation Hank experiences by the intrusion of contractual thinking influences the way he behaves towards both the river and the

³¹⁶ This is one of the most tragic moments in the novel and presages the death of Joe Ben, Hank’s cousin, due to the river and a logging accident.

³¹⁷ Kesey, 122.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 124.

world. Here, Kesey suggests that contractual thinking prescribes actions due to an oppositional relationship between the signatories—Hank and the river have drawn up terms between themselves, a grudge match lasting throughout their lives. This results in Hank taking more pains to ensure the bank of the house is shored up more effectively than it perhaps needed to be. The intense reaction Hank’s trauma provokes returns to the surface of his mind when his boat runs aground on his way to the first union meeting—the moment when the tension between the Stampers and the union begins.

Hank begins to understand the river as a thing that “wants its fair advantage,”³¹⁹ a thing that demands an equal share of the life within the ecosystem. Of course, attributing desire to a river can be read as an anthropomorphization of the water, even though it is still contractual, and the natural processes of tides, currents, and erosion. Rather than refute this reading, I want to suggest that Hank sees in the river’s consistent movement and erosion of the banks a kind of natural consumption, which he codes within a human discourse. This sort of interpretive frame leads him to tell the readers, “So as close as I can come to explaining it, friends and neighbors, that is why the river is no friend of mine. It’s maybe the buddy of the brant geese and the steelhead....but it is still no personal friend of *mine*.”³²⁰ In this instance, due to his personal experiences with it, Hank further distances himself from the river, creating a contentious, confrontational relationship with several elements of the natural world that don’t have his level of self-consciousness (at least as he knows it).

Aligning himself firmly against the river allows Hank to see it more clearly, to see it without romanticizing it. However, as I will show, this hardnosed materialist point of view has

³¹⁹ Kesey, 124.

³²⁰ Ibid., 124.

specific and personal consequences in the death of Joe Ben, one of the few utterly *good* characters in the novel. Hank tells the reader:

I know, for an instance, that if you want to play this way, you can make the river stand for all *sorts* of other things. But doing that it seems to me is taking your eye off the ball; making it more than it is lessens it. Just to see it clear is plenty.³²¹

In the same moment that Hank constructs a confrontational, contractual relationship with the natural world, he challenges the coding of the river within a human discourse of desire. He acknowledges that even though the river is precisely something he despises, coding it within a human discourse and interpreting it thereby alters or distorts the meaning of the river in such a way that it and its meaning become clouded and difficult to see. It becomes, in other words, not the river itself but an amalgam of interpretive lenses at one remove from the actual river as perceived and experienced by people. Further thinking about his own encounters with the river, Hank attempts to outline what it means just to see the river clearly, and concludes that the way to live alongside a force that draws all things, eventually, to itself is

“[j]ust to feel it cold against you or watch it flood or smell it when the damn thing backs up from Wakonda with all the town’s garbage and sewage and dead crud floating around in it stinking up a breeze, that is plenty. And the best way to see it is not looking behind it—or beneath it, or beyond it—but dead at it.” (125)

To look dead at the river, to narrow one’s focus, as the means to see something clearly gives life in this place a clear direction, an attempt to peel back the interpretive frames imposed upon a locality from without. It is the effort, Kesey suggests, to see the small details of small things in the midst of the many—to see the relationships (here, confrontation) between small things, to see

³²¹ Ibid., 125.

how they come together both to make a whole and to remain individual. Not just seeing either: Kesey suggests that immersion is also a necessary element in this methodology of looking dead at things. The river must be experienced by all the senses, felt and smelled at both its best and its worst. Only by doing this—and doing this without attempting to interpret the experiences (i.e., not looking behind it, beneath it, or beyond it)—only by doing this can we get at what the river means in all of its being-there.

An additional component to the way of seeing the local in Kesey's formulation is the recognition of how the river collects the disparate elements of the ecosystem into itself. It is the highway and central focus of the local economy. The source of life and verdancy in this bioregion is tied to the way people approach living and being to the point that the river as a river cannot be disentangled from the river as a utilitarian thing. And Kesey is clear that everything ends up in the river: garbage, sewage, and indeterminate crud, all refuse from the town. The imbrication of the people's cast-offs with the river's cyclical course into the sea further creates a tightly knit relationship between the individual elements that make up the ecosystem. What we are meant to see from this interpenetration is that to make claims about change, about an actionable ethics in the world, we must start from this bottom, this place of mixing. What we *see* when we look dead at the river instead of behind it (imposing some meaning upon it from without) is all the things that compose and change it: the flora, the fauna, the human waste, the water, the play of light on its surface and depths. Hank's confrontational way of approaching the river leads him to this understanding, and we are, at the very least, meant to consider how Hank might be right about how to best observe things outside the mind. The river, as synecdoche for the Marine West Coast forest as it appears in the novel, resists human attempts to impose

interpretations onto it, especially single-minded ones, as we can see when Hank attempted to interpret how high the river would rise, and as we can see in the prefigured death of Joe Ben.

Kesey represents Hank's cousin throughout the novel as a character of impeccable good. He also appears throughout as a character whose way of living in the world is inseparable from his heterodox, Pentecostal faith. An innocence unmarred by naïveté—founded rather in an unshakeable faith in the infinite grace and provision of God—drives his behavior throughout the novel. His faith and outlook on the world have grown from his consistent attendance at and participation in Pentecostal tent meetings, a fact that is not as forgettable as it may seem, at least for my analysis of ecological ethics in the novel. The fact that the tent is erected and taken down without the people needing to establish a permanent edifice upon the land suggests a possibly deeper connection with the land than a traditional congregation might have. In a typical church building a foundation, flooring, carpeting, walls, and windows separate the people from the movement of air, the dirt, the grass, the weather, and the animals of the local ecosystem. In a sense, the congregation inside of a church building could be anywhere in the world when they enter the doors—they could be anywhere or nowhere, absenting themselves from the world for the hour-and-a-half that marks a typical church service.

The tent meetings however are like a moveable feast; with no permanent location, they are free to occur wherever there is space for them, space that is circumscribed by the elements of the natural world. Wakonda is constructed in the novel as a very small town, evidenced by the fact that there is a failing single movie theater in town run by the same person who owns the laundromat next door. Characters, as well, appear to know everyone else in town—or at least know about everyone else in town. And the tent meetings appear to be one of the main sources of religious practice in Wakonda—characters' absences from the meetings are remarked upon

throughout the novel. Within these spaces, these transient spaces, believers are subject to the vagaries of wind and rain and heat; the tent's canvas sides are much more permeable than the brick-and-mortar of a traditional building. This permeability, from the perspective of the believer, allows them a closer connection to their God who has made the world they inhabit, which leaves them imbricated with the natural world, part of it and not insulated from it as they might be in a church building.

In fact, Joe Ben so fully trusts in God's providence and willingness to reveal both the future and his will that he looks to the natural world for signs and wonders, for predictions about everything from the weather to how many children he will have and how long he will live. As Hank, Joe Ben, and Hank's errant brother Lee travel upriver to where they will begin a day's logging, Hank remarks on how lucky they have been with the weather and how it will allow them to make up for the previous winter's harshness. Joe Ben is quick to reply, "Oh yeah, oh boy *yeah*. Didn't I tell you it was gonna be that way? Oh yeah, we're in the good Lord's pocket. Lot's of good log-cutting weather...say, didn't I say so this morning?"³²² Through this behavior, Joe Ben concocts a sort of hodgepodge version of the liturgy of the ordinary. For him testing the weather—reading in it the signs for the day—prophesies the future for him, giving him the structures by which he can live out his day rightly as well as giving him the assurances of participating in the ritual worship of God the creator, as Joe Ben understands him. It is no coincidence that Kesey allows him to be mostly successful in his predictions.³²³

³²² Kesey, 247.

³²³ The gentle irony here, of course, is that he still participates in the logging business and in the complicated negotiation between people and the natural world that the novel engages with. Despite the fact that Joe Ben does feel more ecologically sustainable in his relationship with the natural world, his participation in logging indeed complicates how the novel thinks about bioregions and devastation. He doesn't recognize logging as destructive, though Kesey does.

Joe Ben is an optimist in this sense. His methods for relating to the natural world is opposite that of Hank's. Whereas Hank seeks not to look behind or beneath the phenomena of the world, Joe Ben is always looking behind it when he seeks out knowledge of God and God's providence. This allows Kesey to set up significant contrasts between the available ways of looking at the world, of seeing and interpreting the crowded spaces of this ecosystem. Rather than confrontational (like Hank's) or violently antagonistic (like Henry's), Joe Ben's way of looking is more akin to an attitude of conformity. Here I use conformity as a value-neutral term to describe the way that Joe Ben suborns himself and his practices of looking at the world to the authority of the world itself (a theological authority to his mind). In this way, he conforms his practices to the revelation he sees in the daily presence of the world. This liturgy of the ordinary allows him to live in relative serenity: he only has to act the way the world tells him to act. If there is good weather, he can be assured of the promises he has felt have been made to him. If the weather is bad, he can sense deferral and wait patiently for the weather to clear.

An obvious example of Joe Ben's faithfulness comes in the middle of the novel, when he wakes early one morning at the mongrel Stamper house. He see his children sleeping on the floor, and they "had quite unconsciously aligned themselves so that a single trickle of sun leaking through a single tear in a shade could skip from brow to glowing brow."³²⁴ Joe Ben reacts with haste and impulsively baptizes the children while they sleep with his own spit "since no coincidences marred [his] auspicious world."³²⁵ Kesey directly informs readers that

this wondrous arrangement of faces threaded like little pink pearls on the one tiny strand of sunshine was *exactly* the sort of datum he usually parlayed into a riot of prophecy, but

³²⁴ Kesey, 330.

³²⁵ Ibid., 330.

this time the plain visual beauty of the sight so overwhelmed him that he was blinded to its metaphysical significance.³²⁶

Joe Ben's reaction here, without as much beauty, would have been to turn this event into a kind of prophecy, a kind of divine revelation that would have guided his actions for the foreseeable future. Kesey tells us that after this event Joe Ben "recited a prayer of thanks in a reverent whisper"³²⁷ to signal an enactment of his faith in the daily order of his world.

As an additional hierogram of his heterodoxy, Joe Ben ubiquitously carries with him a small transistor radio that constantly blares the current popular music—predominately Burl Ives and the like. Kesey weaves these lyrics into the prose of the novel as a way to give readers time and space to reflect and reorient themselves back into the narrative movement of whatever section they appear in. For Joe Ben, this music is a defense against despair or weariness. At the logging sites, his vitality is unmatched, and both Hank and Lee comment on their confusion at his seemingly indefatigable work ethic. By carrying with him the articles of his faith into the wilderness, Joe Ben metaphorically signals his attempts at harmonizing the inherent destruction involved in mass logging operations with the reverence and humility before the authority of nature and nature's creator. Of course, Joe Ben doesn't expect nature to fight back; his optimism would not allow it, and ultimately, this continued participation in the logging game results in his death.

However, Joe Ben's well-meaning innocence and faith make his death possibly the most moving and tragic event of the novel. Through it, Kesey gives readers an insight into the kinds of questions-without-answers that Kesey poses throughout the novel. As I stated at the beginning of this section, the foremost question Kesey asks is, "How do we make sense of mankind's place

³²⁶ Ibid., 330.

³²⁷ Ibid., 330.

within a complex ecosystem composed of other organisms, human and non-human memories, and the necessities of survival for all organisms in the ecosystem?” Kesey attempts to reconcile the conflict constructed by mankind between man and the natural world with the collateral damage that can result from such a conflict—that goodness can be erased from the world through this mechanistic violence, even if the death of goodness is a prerequisite for healing.

Hank, Henry, and Joe Ben travel upriver to log a section of the national forest for Wakonda Pacific under contract from the federal government. In this scene, Kesey clearly indicates that it has been raining and is continuing to do so as the group gets to the location where they will conduct their work. If Kesey has not been explicitly clear in the novel up to this point about nature’s response to the logging, he narratively lets loose here:

The forest fought against the attack on its age-old domain with all the age-old weapons nature could muster: blackberries strung out barbed barricades; the wind shook widow-makers crashing down from high rotten snags; boulders reared silently from the ground to block slides that had looked smooth and clear a moment before; streams turned solid trails into creeping ruts of icy brown lava....And in the tops of the huge trees, the very rain seemed to work at fixing the trees standing, threading the million green needles in an attempt to stitch the trees upright against the sky.

But the trees continued to fall, gasping long sighs and kawhumping against the spongy earth....In spite of all nature could do to stop it.³²⁸

What Kesey shows us here is not a passively spiteful river into which human constructions sink. What Kesey shows us here is an agential forest, a part of an ecosystem that attempts to take a stand for itself against the invading force bent on its destruction. Everything is mustered for its

³²⁸ Kesey, 567.

defense; even the rain is complicit in the attempts of the forest to stop Hank, Henry and Joe Ben from clearing the hillside of its conifers. And as the men work, their forces are mustered and unified; their energy is directed toward the single purpose of cutting down trees. Kesey tells us that each character feels this unification and even goes as far to characterize it as a mechanization of the human bodies into one machine.

Yet, the men are only aware of the supposed beauty of this joining and not “the pitiless drive. Not of the three of them building toward a peak the way a machine running too fast too long accelerates without speeding up as it reaches a breaking point”³²⁹ that will result in the fracturing of the machine itself, which it inevitably does. So incognizant of what they are doing and unaware of each others’ presence in the forest, Hank and Henry collide, as Henry is setting a jack beneath the log that Hanks is trying to saw limbs off of. The resulting force sends the chainsaw flying from Hank’s hands and catapults the tree upright, to topple end-over-end down the slope toward where Joe Ben is shepherding already-fallen trees into the river. Henry’s good arm (he’s been in cast up to this point in the novel) is twisted beyond recognition as the screws in the jack he was placing are torn loose from the force of the tree’s movement. The tree itself Kesey describes as a last valiant effort of the forest to fight back against its destruction; it springs on downhill massive upright like the bastard is trying to stand up again and find its *stump!*...like the bastard is so mad getting chopped down it jumps up chews off the old man’s arm clubs me [Hank] one now tearing off downhill after “Joe! Joby!” the last of us and Joe Ben’s hand parts the fern there’s this *blunted* white circle fanged jagged spreading towards him larger and larger....³³⁰

³²⁹ Ibid., 569.

³³⁰ Kesey, 572.

The tree lands across Joe Ben's legs, half in the river and half out, and Joe Ben is up to his shoulders in the water. Kesey's narrative dissolution in this section continues on for the remainder of the page and onto the next page in a single narrative moment, indicated by the lack of end-stopping punctuation and the attempt to include a multiplicity of narrative perspectives and reactions to the event itself. As Hank assesses the situation, he realizes that there is nothing that he can do and that it would take too long for him to go back up the hill and drive for help—not to mention that he acknowledges that he would be too exhausted to do so, regardless of the time it would take. Instead, Hank stays by his cousin, leaving his father unconscious and bleeding farther up the hill.

This act of human solidarity becomes a representation of Hank's own guilt and feeling of responsibility for what has happened: his self-mechanization removes his awareness from the present moment. It becomes a self-alienation from the world that results immediately in disastrous ecological consequences. And yet the consequences are not immediately apparent to Joe Ben. Despite his situation, Joe Ben takes it well initially. He tells Hank that "[s]he [the log] lit on my legs, but the mud under me there's soft. I don't feel like I broke anything. Didn't even bust my radio."³³¹ Yet the water rises, as the river does—as the forces of nature array themselves against the humans—Joe Ben's hope begins to dissipate when his radio is submerged and dies in the river. When Joe Ben finally succumbs after an hour of Hank giving him mouth to mouth beneath the surface of the water, Kesey describes Joe Ben's mouth as "open in the dark there, open and round with laughing. And huge; like an underwater cave...like a drain hole at the world's deepest bottom, rimmed with cold flesh...so huge it could empty seas."³³²

³³¹ Kesey, 573.

³³² Ibid., 582.

This transposition of human flesh into something like the functioning of a watershed (the area to which all water moves and drains into), connects Joe Ben to the natural, non-human realm at the same time as it indicates a loss. Joe Ben's innocence and goodness have gone from the ecosystem, and religious implications aside momentarily, this loss creates a variety of problems for how people can relate to the ecosystem in the novel. One of those issues is the potential reactions that people have in the face of tragedy: Hank and Henry could respond by projecting their anger and guilt onto the natural world and negatively sublimate both anger and guilt into even more vigorous destructive action. This of course would destabilize and potentially irreparably damage how the ecosystem does and can function.

Hank, however, seems to have all the fight taken out of him, so to speak. Joe Ben's death appears to have ended (or at the very least, permanently altered) his confrontational relationship with the Wakonda Auga River. He still attempts only "to look dead at it," using this as his methodology for interpreting, seeing, and living in place. Yet his attempt to do so changes, as tragedy is wont to do, his vision and what he views as important. Rather than rail at the river or shout at the skies or blaspheme God, Hank, like Job, grounds himself beside his cousin and turns all his attention toward Joe Ben, staying with him and trying to keep him alive even unto the very end. Hank does not blame the river for this tragedy—how could he when his own self-mechanization and lack of attention to the world around him are to blame. The tragedy, responsibility for which Hank accepts, is brought about by Hank's lapse in seeing the world clearly; by not looking dead at it, he misses the signs of the impending accident and the dangers in the energy singularly directed as ravaging the forest.

As can be seen from the long selection above, where the tree lifts up as if it is trying to again find its stump, the forest is still somewhat complicit in this tragedy. One *could* read this

instance and completely and utterly the fault of a fully human orgiastic and consumptive drive to take from the natural world without ethically giving back to it. However, this reading sidesteps how Kesey characterizes the event, as well as his insistence that the forest fought, however vainly, against its seemingly inevitable destruction. We are meant to understand, of course, that within the fiction the forest has its own agency *not* because of a human author's narrative choices, but accepting that Kesey has given the forest its own agency gives us room to consider a deeper interpretation of the event than one wherein this all Hank's fault.

If the forest has agency and if the humans do as well (this is clear throughout), we can come to an understanding of the complexity of this ecosystem—at least within Kesey's novel. In a place lush with life, filled to overflowing with the glorious variety of plant and animal life that makes this earth a place of beauty, it becomes difficult to see clearly, to separate things into their comprehensible parts on their respective scales. This is something characters struggle with throughout the novel, as I have shown with Hank and Henry and Draeger. Whereas Henry and Draeger fully and totally zero in on a single way of seeing the Marine West Coast forest, Hank attempts and occasionally succeeds in looking dead at the place, letting it appear to him as it chooses to, giving him the sights (as it were) that it wants him to see. Like the prairie, this is a slow revelation, taking place over many years and requiring significant sacrifice. Draeger leaves, unable to see or cope with the absolute difference in the wet and lush rainforests, desiring to return to the entropic sameness of California. Henry, once he loses his arm (it is amputated after being crushed by the tree), dies. Finally succumbing to the forest, finally giving an inch at the last (though he would insist that this is not the case, the old cuss), Henry comes to believe that his single purpose has evaporated and there is no more meaning to trying to live in this place from which he and his family have wrested a place for themselves. A less evil and somewhat

more likeable Sutpen from Faulkner's novel, Henry gives way to the final dissolution; as Sutpen's dream for a dynasty fails, Henry Stamper's dreams of "whupping" the forest return to the river, to be carried out to sea, where they will become again part of the natural cycle of clouds and rains and growth and life.

Hank resides in the middle. Kesey positions Hank between the foolhardy stubbornness of his father and the wilting and moldering of Draeger. Hank's strength comes not from his defiance, and it does not come from any sense of political or moral authority or power. Rather, Hank's strength lies in his negative capability. Resting in a sometimes-easy, sometimes-hard tension with the river, Hank is able to observe, respond, and do without needing to resolve any of the uncertainty or confusion brought about by the river's seemingly callous and destructive behavior. Upon Joe Ben's death, the tensions are not resolved but simply renegotiated. Living in place in the novel becomes not a simple process of leaving nature alone but a way of doing and living that both gives and takes, that privileges life in all of its complexity. We see the need for creatures to carve out a place for themselves in the world—we have seen this in the bobcat den in the blackberry bramble. We have seen this in the building of human habitations on the river, away from the river, in a town, and on the mudflats by the sea. The novel seems to suggest, though, that it is the way in which we carve out our places that matter—that it is what we do that helps us understand the quality of a person's life, not who we are or what we think. Liberty is a fiction, except as it is found in obedience to the laws of the natural world, the immutable laws that give the stones the power to speak, the river to rise, the rain to fall, the trees to grow. It is not all for our use; some is, but it is for our continuance and the continuance of those organisms with which we live. Yet, the forest does not belong to the people living amongst its various organisms. The forest more properly belongs to those that came before, and it more properly belongs to

those who are to come after. It is the duty of those living in it now to safeguard a welcome bequest, a gift for the unborn given to them by the dead.

Therein lies the final value of Hank's ethics of "looking dead at it." If we can see clearly, if we can interpret properly, if we can effectively and ethically live bioregionally with both the human and the non-human, we can have successfully sustainable communities. We can adapt our lives to the place in which we find ourselves, to the place in which we have chosen to dwell. Our relationship with place does not have to be as tendentious or combative as Hank's (in the final tally), but the novel suggests that this may be the necessary place to begin, the point we start from so we can more meaningfully end where we have begun. Kesey's ideas of localism revolve around this point. We are all imbricated with everything else. All things overlap in their relationships with each other. We are used to thinking that "the world" is a unitary other that we can access in toto, but this simply is not the case, as is obvious to anyone who spends time thinking about what we mean when we say "the world." Rather, the world is composed of places, of creatures, of plants, of things, all of which exist in the plural—both linguistically and phenomenologically.

If we are to look dead at that plurality, Kesey's novel suggests, and not behind it or beneath or beyond it, we may be able to begin to make sense of how to live in particular places, places that are ecologically distinct and sustain different ways of being. We may come to realize how crowded the ecosystems we live in are. We may come to realize how difficult it is to see the individual organisms and our effects on them and their effects on us. We may come to realize that everything eventually winds up in the river, which itself winds up in the sea where the cycles begin all over again. We may begin to realize that we are life that wants to live amongst other life that wants to live.

An Ecological Reading of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Though the ecological focus presented by *Sometimes a Great Notion* and the angle I have taken is not quite as prominent in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, it remains present and suggests an interesting connection between how Kesey deals with ecological questions in his different novels by turning us toward the clearly intentional constructions represented by the mental hospital where the action of the novel mostly takes place. Reading the novel in this way can provide us with a new and compelling way to deal with a novel usually understood as couched within discourses of masculinity, paranoia, power, and (more recently) disability studies and Amerindian studies. Though important, these kinds readings can quickly become tired and repetitive, having to resort to obscurantism and exclusionary gymnastics in order to keep dealing with issues written about to death. By emphasizing the bioregional components of the novel, this reading can provide new ways of coding the ward and the relationships created, tested, and destroyed within the institutional oppression symbolically represented by the Big Nurse.

In contraindication to the way Kesey presents successful human interaction with and dwelling within a bioregion, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* presents the distortion and dissolution of more natural ecosystems through the imposition of artificial power—however, the artificial power remains a twisted version of an ecosystem that the characters (especially the narrator) attempt to resist throughout the novel. They attempt to reintegrate themselves into the natural world by escaping the terror and isolation of the Ward. *Cuckoo's Nest* stands as paragon of that shift: a rising paranoia about and feeling of entrapment by institutional systems, especially those run by the state, mark one of the novel's central conflicts. McMurphy's anarchist attempts to tear down the machine of the hospital system, to bring the men on the

mental ward out of what Chief Broom calls “the fog”³³³ and return their humanity to them, represents the post-1945 struggle to resist the mechanization of the human body and the human mind. Trapped within an institution, a box made of concrete and steel, McMurphy, Bromden, and the others vacillate between herd-like obedience to a therapy meant to cure them, because from a certain perspective (the perspective of the “professionals” and the society that has built the institution) societal norms have been violated by the inmates.

On the other hand, the therapy to the inmates stands as a fog that gets in the way of them living and thinking as they must in order to survive. Of course, there is no denying that some of the men represented by Kesey in the novel are indeed ill, that some are in fact afflicted with mental illnesses and disabilities. However, the clarity that McMurphy attempts to help the other inmates achieve is a kind of clarity that requires a rejection of the socially-approved approved cures administered by the mental institution. Though McMurphy ultimately fails, Chief Broom does indeed attain the kind of clarity that stands over and against a “get with the program” type of social system, which assists in his eventual escape back into a world where plants and animals are relatively free from societal controls.

In one of the two extant publications (at the time of this writing) treating the environmental questions Kesey raises in *Cuckoo’s Nest*, Ashley Reis argues that the while the novel chronicles the “concurrent breakdown of environmental and human health” among its Native American characters, the novel “ultimately positions the state of one’s homeplace and environmental surroundings as fundamental to human wellbeing.”³³⁴ Reis also suggests that by doing so the novel allows us to expand our thinking on how damage to the environment affects

³³³ Kesey, Ken. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Penguin Books, 1962, 7.

³³⁴ Reis, Ashley C. “The Wounds of Dispossession: Displacement and Environmentally Induced Illness in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2016, 712.

human mental health. Beginning her argument with a discussion of the revelatory impact Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* had on American culture upon its publication in 1962, Reis considers how *Cuckoo's Nest*, published in the same year, forwards some of the same concerns Carson had about the slow poisoning of the land and its people. Comparing governmental use of DDT with the Department of the Interior's hydroelectric damming of the Columbia River, Reis demonstrates that one aspect common to both Kesey's novel and Carson's book is the evil of centralized authority, especially when it intervenes and changes the natural processes of growth and decay as well as the natural courses that rivers have themselves carved out over time.

Reis zeroes in on the scene in *Cuckoo's Nest* when Chief Broom narrates his childhood growing up in Celilo Village, where his tribe would fish and has fished since the tribe first entered the area to dwell. Reis notes that Broom (then Bromden) has an "inherent fearless and carefree relationship with his home environment" and that he would engage in "obliviously standing up to the Government officials who came to scout the village for development."³³⁵ Of course, as the Government officials dispossess the Native American tribe, Bromden sees his father's strength collapse and as a consequence so does Bromden's. After a tour of duty in the U.S. military during World War II, Bromden returns to Oregon and later enters a mental institution, in part, according to Reis, because of the psychic wound cause by the damming of the tribe's ancestral fishing grounds.

Dispossession from one's homeplace is certainly a cause for psychic distress, even psychic trauma, especially when one is removed by a centralized authority from a place integral to the cultural, religious, and daily practices of a tightly knit people. Unlike the displacement featured in some of Cather's work (notably, *One of Ours*, in which Claude Wheeler self-

³³⁵ Reis, "Wounds of Dispossession," 713.

displaces in order to find some meaning outside of his homeplace, a quest which ultimately fails), the displacement in *Cuckoo's Nest*, according to Reis, functions as a trauma that affects not only the human body but also the human mind. Reis extends this observation to suggest that because environmental degradation (especially at the hands of an outside, centralized authority) has both physical and psychic effects, that damage to the natural world also affects “behaviors, conducts, and epistemologies,” thereby advancing an environmental ethic that “asks us to resist the ideologies that unrelentingly alienate us from the natural world.”³³⁶ Instead, we should understand human-environment relationships as “co-constitutive” and therefore necessitating respect and reverence and responsibility from us towards the world. Similarly, Christopher Leise argues that “the act of community restoration, of reestablishing [Bromden’s] synecdochic interiority” is the pathway in the novel to the Chief’s mental healing.³³⁷ To be factored back into the world and the place one has left by living with those who were dispossessed as well is the means by which the mind can heal (and perhaps stay sane) in the face of rampant degradation of one’s homeplace.

The communal element of the world outside of the ward is highlighted in both of these articles, almost at the expense of noting the community that forms *inside* the ward, institutional nightmare though it may be.³³⁸ Healing, at least for Chief Broom, begins to happen *inside* the ward, which is after all a place, an ecosystem with its own rules and ways of living that work

³³⁶ Reis, “Wounds of Dispossession,” 727.

³³⁷ Leise, Christopher. “Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*: Damming the Columbia River and Traumatic Loss.” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2018, 75.

³³⁸ Reis’s article is the only one of the two that talks at length about the environmental degradation *within* the novel. Leise’s article focuses more on verifying the historical and cultural practices of the Native American tribes that have historically lived in and around the Columbia Plateau rather than how this operates holistically within the novel. Interestingly, both focus on the single instance of the Chief’s childhood rather than his encounters with nature as an adult.

towards the sustainment and continuance of that ecosystem. Certainly, none of us would make a value judgement that would call the mental hospital—as it is presented in Kesey’s novel—good in any way, shape, or form. Nevertheless, it is an ecosystem operating according to its own rules, for its own health and survival, which the men under McMurphy’s vibrant and violent guidance begin to resist, using their own tactics to remain within the system and alter it to fit their needs.

However, despite the presence of human organisms, the ecosystem of the ward is completely artificial, a manufactured system *par excellence*. Even the fog—a naturally occurring phenomenon that appears when a temperature difference between ground and air exists—is manufactured by the machinations of the system. The Big Nurse, too, is described mechanistically; she carries around the “thousand parts she aims to use in her duties today—wheels and gears, cogs polished to a hard glitter” among others items like pliers and copper wires.³³⁹ So uncanny and frightening to Chief Broom is the Big Nurse that as she passes in the halls, he tries to “foul up her equipment,”³⁴⁰ suggesting to readers that the nurse—the representative of the mechanized, alienating institution—is not quite altogether human. She has been either consumed or created by the system to serve a specific function within that system.

Further, Chief Broom repeatedly calls the centralized powers moving in the background the Combine, whose mission is to cloud the ward with the fog and to oppress the men there on the ward. Having both an agricultural and economic-political allusiveness, the notion of the Combine cinches together the artificial ecosystem represented by the ward.³⁴¹ And if an organism that lives in this ecosystem, that co-constitutes the ecosystem (to borrow Ashley Reis’s

³³⁹ Kesey, *Cuckoo’s Nest*, 4.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁴¹ A combine harvester (also known simply as a combine) represents industrial harvesting, allowing farmers to harvest more product more quickly. Additionally, a combine can refer to a group of people or companies acting together for some commercial purpose. Either way, what appears as the reigning mechanisms of the ward are efficiency and exploitation for profit.

terminology), does not conform to the rules that allow the ecosystem to thrive and to be sustainable, then the Big Nurse will punish that organism until it does conform to the rules.

The ward serves as an allegory for the dissolution and elimination of natural ecosystems in the face of centralized, governmental expansion; it demonstrates the fragility of both the artificial and natural ecosystems within the novel.³⁴² Different of course from how Kesey shows the same fragility in *Sometimes a Great Notion*, the ward shows an extreme confrontational way of constructing relationships between the system and the component of the system—in *Cuckoo's Nest*, this relationship necessitates subjugation and imposed acceptance of preordained ways of being in the world. Consequences for working to the detriment of the ecosystem are immediate and severe: the facilitators drag offenders away, strap them to their beds, sedate them, electrocute them, and so forth. The authoritarian nature of such a centralized system, an institution maintained by mechanistic avatars of the mysterious Combine, should frighten (and is meant to frighten) readers, especially because it demonstrates the fragility of both artificial ecosystems and power as a paradigm of discourse analysis. Power depends on obedience (willful or coercive) and is predicated upon an imbalance between two or more parties. Without an imbalance power has no function, existence, or purpose. Analyzing ecosystems and human interrelationships, therefore, on the basis of power will only result in recapitulating and reproducing the problems and imbalances already present. The Combine represents this dynamic on the ward. Because it is founded on power and on control of others (directly opposed to? self-control), it is fragile and will break: if out of the many mechanisms of control within the system they can make a bricolage fit for their own daily uses, the men on the ward can begin to recover

³⁴² Certainly this binary is not perfectly tight. In the extra-fictional world, the artificial and the natural interpenetrate each other to a nearly inextricable degree. However, in the world of the novel, the separation is necessarily absolute and the two kinds of ecosystems are distinct.

their own autonomy thereby shattering the illusion of order the Combine imposes upon their world. In the context of the novel, this happens repeatedly, culminating in two instances: when McMurphy breaks the glass of the nurses' station, rips open the Big Nurse's uniform, and reveals that she is human after all and when Chief Broom stares out of the window at the world beyond the ward.³⁴³

While Leise and Reis focus solely on instances from the Chief's narrated past to ground their readings of environment, trauma, mental health, and personhood within the context of the novel, they miss a significant moment in the middle of *Cuckoo's Nest*: the first time in the novel's present that readers are shown the world exterior to the ward in any sort of detail. It could be argued that since this is the first instance in the novel where readers can more or less "verify" the representation of the natural world outside the ward that this encounter is somewhat more pertinent to discussions of what *Cuckoo's Nest* is trying to do with human relationships with local ecosystems. As my discussion in the previous chapter about unreliable narrators demonstrated, I will not argue whether Chief Broom is reliable or not—since he is our only access point to the events of the literary present of the novel (i.e., the time spent on the ward) we should be generous and charitable towards what is shown to us through him by Kesey.

Chief Broom's memories—the time-scape of the novel's past—are part and parcel of this same strand of argumentation: we have no reason to distrust his memories since we cannot verify one way or another whether or not they are actually his memories, at least within the context of

³⁴³ Though I will not discuss the former at length here, it is interesting to note that in the politics of the novel this instance of McMurphy's violation of the Big Nurse's bodily privacy represents McMurphy's attempt to remind the men on the ward that they are still autonomous humans, not the gears of a larger mechanism; they are more meaningfully individual, willful organisms codependent with a larger organism (the Earth). While it would be tempting to read this scene as one of so-called "internalized misogyny" and as a prelude to sexual assault, the themes and structure of the novel do not support such an anachronistic reading, especially since the novel is first and foremost about resisting institutionalized systems, behaviors, and epistemologies.

the novel itself. If, however, it is what happened in the past (and is presented to readers as memory) that caused the trauma that led Bromden to pretend deafness and muteness, then it is the present (and thereby more immediate) encounter with nature that begins the process of healing for the Chief. Further, this encounter assists with his eventual escape from the authoritarian (because centralized) ecosystem of the Combine and the institutional ward.

As a significant moment of resistance to the centralized authority of the Combine and as one of the culminating moments of the men using the production of the ward make something useful for their daily practice out of it, Bromden wakes up from his sleep, and instead of the usual sense that something has gone haywire (“my eyes were all crusted over, the dorm was full of smoke, wires in the walls loaded to the limit”) he experiences an unusual moment of clarity.³⁴⁴ The dorm on this night is “clean and silent....A window was up, and the air in the dorm was clear and had a taste to it that made me feel kind of giddy and drunk, gave me this sudden yen to get up out of bed and do something.”³⁴⁵ On this night, the air is free of fog because a portal to the less artificial world outside the ward has been left open. The air invigorates Bromden, making him feel like he wants to actually *act*—a feeling he has not had up to this point in the novel, preferring instead to sit and observe the doings of McMurphy.

Bromden’s emphasis on the cleanliness, silence, and clarity of the dorm and the air in the dorm suggests something new is about to happen. The machinery has gone silent, and Bromden

³⁴⁴ Kesey, *Cuckoo’s Nest*, 141. It should be noted at this point that no argument is here being made about real-world resistance to psychiatric treatment. Every positive resistance to treatment is discussed within the context of a novel wherein the surface is an allegory about centralized political control of the human person and not within the context of cultural studies or real-world practice. We still can, however, derive from the novel an ethical practice of daily living in relationship with local ecosystems. Part of that practice is seeing them as they are, which serves as an epistemological foundation for discussing how the human person can come to live (“to make do”) as an ecological person.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 141.

is the privileged witness to what that silence and clarity have to tell him. Every sense is heightened for Bromden in this scene: “I felt the tile with my feet and wondered how many times, how many thousand times had I run a mop over this same tile floor and never felt it at all...Only that cold linoleum under my feet was real right then, only that moment.”³⁴⁶ Contact with something outside of himself in this moment of clarity (i.e., this moment free from centralized control of his perceptions and his doings) allows Bromden to begin reestablishing his connections with not only the world and people outside of his mind but also the world outside of the ward. He is drawn to the open window where he “rolled his head against [the mesh] from side to side to feel it with [his] cheeks.”³⁴⁷ His entire body is engaged in this moment of heightened perception, which further allows him access to what exists outside the ward, the ecosystem from which he came and to which he returns at the end of the novel. Bromden can “smell that sour-molasses smell of silage, clanging the air like a bell—smell somebody’s been burning oak leaves, left them to smolder overnight because they’re too green.”³⁴⁸ With these sense experiences, he is able to tell that Autumn is arriving in Oregon. In other words, he has relocated himself in a particular time of the year and in a particular place. It is here that the real process of healing begins for Bromden: he begins to factor himself back into a relationship with something other than himself and other than the Combine. Indeed, he begins to understand that this relationship with the natural world (because of an encounter with the natural world) is appositional rather than oppositional.

By recognizing the season, by experiencing the change from summer to fall so acutely, Bromden is able to enter into a different way of knowing the material world, even though he is

³⁴⁶ Kesey, *Cuckoo’s Nest*, 141.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

initially frightened to encounter it. Kesey tells us that Bromden is afraid to open his eyes, that he is “scared to look outside,” but that when he does open his eyes Bromden sees for the first time that the hospital is located in the countryside:

The moon was low in the sky over the pastureland; the face of it was scarred and scuffed where it had just torn up out of the snarl of scrub oak and madrone trees on the horizon.

The stars up close to the moon were pale; they got brighter and braver the farther they got out of the circle of light ruled by the giant moon....Then, from a long way off, I heard a high, laughing gabble, faint and coin closer. Canada honkers going south for the winter.³⁴⁹

The detail that Bromden is able to observe in his moment free from institutional authority is some of the closest inspection of things that the novel gives to readers. When the human person is able to reclaim his or her autonomy from a centralized, artificial mimicry of a natural ecosystem, that human person can begin to locate him- or herself in the world, can begin to dwell and come to know a place that has existed before and will exist after the artificial ecosystems have been broken. Not only does Bromden’s close attention to the tiny, overlooked aspects of the surrounding natural world locate him specifically in place—the madrone tree is native to the Marine West Coast Forest—his *seeing* of the small facets of the world outside the ward enable him to understand that now, for him, everything is and will be different should he have the capacity to claim his space in the sky outside the circle of light ruled by the moon. Bromden’s sight, if we read *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* ecologically, demonstrates human capacity to think, be, and act outside of the artificial systems set up by centralized authorities to control or

³⁴⁹ Kesey, *Cuckoo’s Nest*, 141-142.

insulate us from the world of nature on which we, our localities, and the planet depend for survival.

What Kesey gives us in these two novels is a way of living that refuses to abide by the dictates of centralized and imposed institutions. The way of living that depends on decentralism and the rejection of blanket application of concepts from outside the community becomes for Kesey a more vital way of resisting the environmental devastation of the earth than the political machines and proposed globalist solutions. Localism and reconnection with the earth and its communities, the novels seem to say, can give us a means of living *responsibly* in place, of having a visible, concrete investment in the health of the community one lives in. Rooting oneself in a place, as Lee and Bromden do by the end of their stories, can serve as resistance to artificial systems (both political and economic) that encourage displacement, disconnection, and global methodologies of organizing people and desire. This resistance becomes especially important *because* it does not use political means to achieve its ends. The novels locate the origins of that resistance in the individual and the family as the place to begin, from the smallest scale expanding upward and outward—a movement which is vital in places that have internalized industries that are inherently prone to invasive and pervasive exploitation of natural resources.

Chapter IV: The Settled, Blasted Land: The Appalachia of James Still and Ann Pancake

Introduction

The Appalachian mountains are among the oldest geological formations on the planet. Worn by time and environmental changes, by human settlements both nomadic and permanent, and more recently by extractive industries, the Appalachian range was already old before the first human set foot in its hills and hollers. The range itself extends northward from what we call Alabama and Georgia through eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina, eastern Kentucky, West Virginia and Virginia, eastern Ohio, the majority of Pennsylvania, and on upwards through southern Maine. Primarily, when typical Americans speak of or think of Appalachia, the bioregion is either not understood as separate from the falsely homogenous political region we call “The South,” or Appalachia is conceived of as comprising only West Virginia; parts of North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky; and a sliver of Virginia.

Too, as Jeff Biggers argues in his *The United States of Appalachia*, “Few regions in the United States confound and fascinate Americans like Appalachia. No other region has been so misrepresented by the mass media.”³⁵⁰ Indeed, we have only to look at the ways that Appalachian natives have been represented in film (in *Deliverance* or *O Brother Where Art Thou?* or *Justified*) and broader culture. Too, we could even look at misrepresentations of Appalachians *within* the bioregion itself: we could think of the emphasis on the “hillbilly” stereotype embodied in the various comedy shows and attractions in Gatlinburg, Tennessee: the Appalachian person is foolish, shirtless, shoeless, and available for our (the outsiders’) entertainment and laughter.

³⁵⁰ Biggers, Jeff. *The United States of Appalachia*. Shoemaker & Hoard, 2006, xii.

Biggers goes on to identify four major ways in which outsiders have attempted to envision Appalachia and have colonized the region, its place, and its people through those visions. The four he identifies are the “pristine Appalachia,” the “backwater Appalachia,” the “Anglo-Saxon Appalachia,” and the “pitiful Appalachia.”³⁵¹ All of these we have in some way encountered, as they have permeated broader American consciousnesses and “have enjoyed incredible staying power” as Biggers puts it.³⁵² All of these representations and visions of Appalachia have some kernels of empirical truth to them—there is pristine nature there (like many places), there are strange people there (as there are everywhere), there are large ethnic groups of Anglo-Saxons there (though it is quite evidently diverse), and there is significant poverty there (due in part to extractive industry and in part to the misguided “war” on poverty). Of all the visions of Appalachia, the pitiful Appalachia has the most truth to it, something that Biggers does seem to miss: he claims that Appalachia has become the “poster region of welfare and privation...regardless of the tremendous wealth generated” by the various industries and resources within the mountain range.³⁵³ What he oddly does not acknowledge is that this wealth has not been primarily generated *for* the people of the region but for the invasive, industrials from outside of the region.³⁵⁴

However, as Biggers acknowledges each of these visions of Appalachia is not representative of what the region actually is or what it actually means for the people from the region, those who have rooted themselves there in place. Many contemporary Appalachian authors actively push against these visions as a means of giving readers a truer, more humane

³⁵¹ Biggers, p. xii.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Ibid., p. xiii

³⁵⁴ This, of course, is not a totalizing statement, as my syntax ought to make clear. However, in terms of coal, lumber, factories, other mining, and even tourism, the primary beneficiaries it can be clearly seen are few and not localized to the bioregion.

vision of an Appalachia more like the one we could empirically observe should we travel there. Ann Pancake, Barbara Kingsolver, Charles Frazier, Charles Wright, Frank X. Walker, and others have done much work to restore to the bioregion its place as central to some of the most “quintessential and daring American experiences” in the nation’s history.³⁵⁵ This chapter seeks to do the same by reading the work of James Still and Ann Pancake through the bioregional methodology that I have forwarded throughout this project.

What we stand to gain from reading Appalachian literature using this bioregional methodology is substantial and significant to studies of both regional literature and American literature more broadly because doing so will enable us to push against outsiders’ stereotyping of the bioregion and its people. If we pay especial attention to the derivation of community ethics *from* the landscape itself—i.e., what the landscape will support in terms of husbandry, virtue, lifestyles, etc.—we can begin to find better, more holistic, and grounded ways of approaching Appalachia (the place and the people) on the terms that they themselves set out. Instead of imposing our own categories of comprehension (supposedly derived from our “knowledge” of the place), we can generate healthier categories derived from love for the place and the people. That said, reading Appalachian literature through lenses of poverty, economics, politics, sociality, religion, race, and so forth have their place and remain useful ways of understanding the sociological elements to the literature of the bioregion. However, if we renegotiate the *foundation* of critical perspectives for the literature about the bioregion and find that foundation in virtuous love, a charitable reading of people and place, we can renegotiate the relationship between the landscape and the human persons who live in and on it. Doing so can give us better

³⁵⁵ Biggers, p. xv.

and more generative methodologies for understanding Appalachia and building bridges between the people being written about and the people doing the writing.

What this renegotiation of methodologies for an established field means to this chapter is fairly straightforward. Discussing bioregional ethics in James Still's *River of Earth*, a foundational novel for Appalachian literature that actually has not been much discussed through a hard ecocritical lens, I will demonstrate how Still positions husbandry—as opposed to industrial-global conceptions of economy and place—as the central and motivating concept for living in a settled, enclosed place. After discussing Still, I will turn to a relatively recent contribution to the Appalachian literary canon: Ann Pancake's 2015 collection of stories *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley*. With Pancake, I will focus the majority of my attention on one story that emphasizes how the encroachment of the urban and industrial affect and alter the available means humans have at their disposal to live in harmonious community with other humans and with place.

James Still and Appalachian Husbandry

Originally published in 1940 and largely ignored for decades until its republication by the University of Kentucky Press in 1978, *River of Earth* describes what happens to a family that is unable to stay rooted in place. Or, perhaps more accurately, what happens to a family most of whose members struggle to resist the allure of an exterior economic entity that promises material (and unsustainable) gain. Still represents an economically and spiritually depressed region, one that feels the effects of decreased demand for its highly specialized industry; we are shown what happens to a place when an outside value system is imposed on a place and a people, especially when that value system is caught up with an industry that benefits only people outside of the

region. This becomes the definition of an extractive industry, an ethically and politically compromised thing that maims and destroys and remains mostly (if not totally) incapable of healing or restoring from a centralized and relatively unassailable position.

I speak of course of the coal industry, which contracted in the late 1920s, and as Dean Cadle reminds us in his foreword to the University of Kentucky Press edition of *River of Earth*, “[t]he result was a landless, jobless, hungry, perplexed people. Ruined for a way of life they could control, they were betrayed by this new, quicksilver promise that left them idle much of the year.”³⁵⁶ Cadle’s description of the people having no longer any control over their own, local way of life is the animating force behind Still’s novel (and is something that Pancake picks up in her work, which I will discuss in the second half of this chapter): the loss of agency due to an intrusive, imperious industry wreaks havoc on the narrator’s family and their community in the novel. Even more powerfully does Still show the disastrous consequences of being un-rooted, especially if that process is accomplished by that which exploits, extracts, and comes from outside without knowledge of how land ethics have to operate within a particular bioregion.

As an informing foundation for this process of dealing with land ethics in his novel Still understood how “poverty and the escalation of coal mining [had] scarred the region,” as Martha Turner has claimed, but Still also knew that the region “remains rich in folklore, humor, and basic human dignity.”³⁵⁷ Turner further argues that in the novel’s deceptive simplicity (like the deceptive simplicity we might encounter in a cursory glance at local bioregions) masks the creation of a “complex, strangely fluid portrait of the region, one in which the geographic area

³⁵⁶ Cadle, Dean. “Foreword.” *River of Earth*. Kentucky UP, 1978 (1940), p. vi.

³⁵⁷ Turner, Martha Billips. “A Vision of Change: Appalachia in *River of Earth*.” *James Still: Critical Essays on the Dean of Appalachian Literature*, McFarland & Co, 2007, 71.

itself becomes subject to alteration and to literal physical discussion.”³⁵⁸ Even a hasty reading of the novel would demonstrate that Turner is exactly right about Still’s representation of place throughout the novel: indeed it is a land in flux in contrast to perceptions of the land as static composed of resources to be extracted.

The land being in flux infects the characters and forces them to renegotiate their notions of fixity in the phenomenal world. Despite this renegotiation, Turner tells us, the characters “cling tenaciously to a sense of place, to a sense of permanence in a world of subtle but constant flux.”³⁵⁹ Though it would be appropriate to use a stronger word than “subtle” to describe the changes that occur within the represented world of the novel, Turner is right to suggest that the characters—especially Alpha, her mother, and the narrator—do indeed cling as tightly as they can to the place on earth they have cultivated for themselves in the Kentucky mountains. What Still reveals to us, and what I will show in my analysis is a set of value systems at odds with each other: that of a bioregionally-focused common good ethic in contradistinction to the economically-oriented ethic of the coal mines and of Brack. As the Baldrige last name suggests, Still constructs Brack’s economically-oriented ethic (focused not on the local, common good) as a nod to a previous generation’s resource extraction from the region in the form of the horribly devastating lumber industry.

Between these two value systems is a struggle for permanence in a particular place where those who dwell are able to sustainably (which is here identical to successfully) husband their place on earth into fruition.³⁶⁰ Martha Turner leans on the famous Moberly sermon (which I

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ I use fruition rather than productivity in order to move away from economically-oriented notions of “use-value.” The place on earth is not good because it has a use or function. The place is good because it is good. That goodness is corrupted by use- and exchange-oriented discourses

will discuss and reinterpret later) to suggest that Still characterizes permanence “in human endurance, in the unchanging cycles of human life, and in the annual passage and renewal of the seasons” rather than “in the physical haven seemingly offered by the Appalachian mountains.”³⁶¹ As my analysis will show, this argument creates an unhelpful dualism by disallowing permanence from being able to coexist with a changing landscape. Rather than understand the physical place and the human attitude toward place as separate sides of a binary, we would do better to consider them as working hand in hand; we cannot sustainably have one without the other.

And neither does Still separate these two without he brings them back together again. Indeed, like any good literary novelist, Still does not declaim his position as if the novel were propaganda whose beauty is subordinated to political ends; rather, he holds the life of the Baldridges up for our observation and carries us through three years of their misfortune while also emphasizing the ecological aspects of the place in which the Baldridges live. One way, of course, that Still invites readers to think about the family of six who are the central focus of the novel is through the allusiveness of their name: they are the Baldridges, which is a somewhat heavy-handed way of indicating their place in the world and in economic standing. A bald ridge is, of course, a long and narrow hilltop or mountain or even watershed not covered by the usual vegetation a person would normally find in such a place. We might understand them then as making choices aligned with those of the outsiders—they are not the usual set of beings we might find in the region but an allusion to a previously extractive lumber industry.

but is preserved if people are able to sustainably and ethically able to dwell in that place in harmony, submitting to the rules that the natural world gives for human survival in the place at hand.

³⁶¹ Turner, “A Vision of Change,” p. 71.

However, though we might support this reading with textual evidence, it would be more fruitful to understand the Baldridges as human representations of a troubled ecosystem. Because it would be difficult to husband a hilltop without vegetation, so we would do well to understand the narrator's family as a human/relational ecology with its own difficulties in terms of cultivation. We should be careful to state, however, that a bald ridge is not barren, not incapable of supporting life, though it has been and may continue to be devastated—as was shown in the chapter considering the Great American Desert, the appearance of deprivation is often deceiving if not an abject misapprehension of the objective reality of the way the biotic world actually exists and functions now.³⁶² Still, too, clearly demonstrates that this is the case throughout the novel, complicating how we might expect the ways that the lack of *material* wealth might function in a novel.

As the novel opens, readers are immediately introduced to the ways that ownership will affect the characters and the plot of the novel. Ownership indeed serves as a major flashpoint between Brack and Alpha and functions as a foundational concern were we to conduct a feminist or ecofeminist reading of the novel.³⁶³ Still tells us within the first few sentences of the novel that Brack “owned the scrap of land our house stood upon, a garden patch, and the black birch that was the only tree on all the barren slope above Blackjack.”³⁶⁴ Immediately, readers should notice that our narrator separates the manufactured objects of human habitation from the landscape

³⁶² Instead we must meet the biotic world where it is rather than where we wish it were or where it has been. Restoration is as much a movement forward as it is a movement backwards, but ultimately it is a movement through now tied to what was and what will be.

³⁶³ Alpha, whose name is highly allusive too, eventually submits to Brack by giving up ownership of land (and the bigoted and urbane understandings of poverty Brack associates with farm life) in exchange for rented things and a rented life that is in fact far less capable of supporting sustainable human life and bioregional relationships than the difficult farm life the family used to have. How Still considers the loss of female agency due to industry and exterior value systems is inextricable from both ownership and the environment.

³⁶⁴ Still, James. *River of Earth*. Kentucky UP, 1978 (1940), p. 3.

itself. He tells us that Brack owns *the land* the house has been built on, but does not explicitly say that Brack owns the house—though it would not be an unfair assumption to say that Brack does in fact own and likely built the house. Regardless, the fact that our narrator decides to focus on Brack’s ownership of the land is highly suggestive of how Still wants readers to think of the major bioregional and ethical themes of the novel.

By separating the land from the house, Still indicates a dissonance has emerged within the bioregion of the novel’s setting—and indeed likely preexists the events chronicled in the novel.³⁶⁵ The land that Brack owns is already a scrap, a small leftover piece of land made even more so by the imposition (however necessary) of a constructed human habitation. We see clearly the immediate consequences that human dwelling can have on a precariously balanced landscape.³⁶⁶ It appears clear that the scrappy nature of the land—on which there remains a single tree, a single garden patch, and what appears to be a single home—is directly related to the resource extraction being done to the land at the Blackjack mine. Indeed, by locating the Baldrige house up-slope from the mine, Still suggests that the environmental consequences of human action radiate outwards from the central point where the economic world of the bioregion turns with the seasons.³⁶⁷ Like all names in *River of Earth*, Blackjack too connotes a gamble, a risk, an impermanence subject to the ever-fluctuating processes of supply and demand. It should be emphasized that this process of supply and demand is exterior to the bioregion, something that

³⁶⁵ I don’t count the garden patch as manufactured here simply because it is a thing cultivated through a coterminous relationship between humans and land rather than constructed and imposed upon the land.

³⁶⁶ We shouldn’t see this a value judgement—i.e., that the consequences are judged as bad—rather we should decouple the characterization from the value system we might use to interpret it. If anything, Still’s novel repeatedly questions consequentialist ethical methodologies.

³⁶⁷ We ought to also consider the impact of the timber industry on bioregional ethics, which did a similar though distinct violence to the land in a previous century. See for example Ron Rash’s *Serena*.

Still emphasizes in the conflicts throughout the novel. In a word the extraction of coal does nothing to contribute to the sustainability of the local, real place in which people live; all supposed “benefits” are temporary and extractive: they remain a pittance in exchange for labor that provides goods for somewhere else.

And this is the vital force than animates much of Still’s novel: Brack’s attention is always somewhere else and never on the immediate or the local. Unlike Odysseus, whose attention is laser-focused on returning to his homeplace, to the domestic spaces where he and Penelope can dwell, Brack Baldridge’s attention is emphatically turned away from home, towards leaving home behind in exchange for a labor that pillages instead of cultivates, to the larger regional place rather than a more local homeplace, an *oikos*. That pillaging is centered on the mine, and it ripples outward, making barren the rest of the hill on which the Baldridges live. The outward ripple, as Still’s novel shows, affects everything in the bioregion from the vegetal and animal worlds to the worlds of community and virtue, and its effects are sickness, barrenness, and death.

Still clearly shows readers that even in the beauty of the natural world, the devastation, this outward ripple, holds sway. Shortly after giving us the description of the scrap of earth on the hill above the Blackjack mine, Still writes,

Morning was bright and rain-fresh. The sharp sunlight fell slantwise upon the worn limestone earth of the hills, and our house squatted weathered and dark on the bald slope. Yellow-bellied sapsuckers drilled their oblong holes in the black birch by the house, now leafing from tight-curved buds.³⁶⁸

Rather than the daylight bringing only a freshness of the sadly naïve sort, the morning instead shows readers the battered place more clearly. Worn limestone serves as the foundation of the

³⁶⁸ Still, p. 7.

hills, and though it is—geologically-speaking—easily worn down by water, within the context of the novel, we are made to understand that it is not just natural processes that are wearing down the bioregion of Appalachia. The same occurred with irresponsible practices from the lumber industry, the result of which was a “river of earth” loosened as the topsoil was nigh irreparably damaged by the removal of too many trees. The house too is affected by the extraction of naturally-occurring carbonized plant matter (coal), even as it is weathered by the seasons. Its darkness and the baldness of the slope both give the sense that this is a tired world deeply affected by the lack of virtue in those who take from the region without restoring or giving back.

Even though the process of extraction is a major problem throughout the novel, a problem affected everything and everyone it touches, the process is not solely a human endeavor. The yellow-bellied sapsucker, as its name implies, extracts food from the black birch tree in the yard: it drinks the sap and eats the nuts, fruit, and insects that reside in and on the trees it pecks. What differentiates the yellow-bellied sapsucker’s extraction process from that of the coal miners’ should be fairly clear: it forages and extracts for food, not commerce. We don’t need to resort to human abstractions or academic jargon to understand that when the sapsucker needs nutrients, it uses its body and beak to find that which will provide those nutrients and allow it to continue living.

But the sapsucker shows readers (and implicitly some of the characters) the means of living in the local bioregion, a way that Alpha articulates clearly to Brack, reminding him that his way of living and doing won’t allow the family to survive: “We’ve got to live small. We’ve got to start over again, hand to mouth, the way we began... We’ve got to tie ourselves up in such a know that nobody else can get in.”³⁶⁹ She rejects Brack’s attempts to rely on the fiction that is

³⁶⁹ Still, p. 8.

credit and stick to the real things of the world and life in a difficult place to thrive in. Alpha understands that her responsibility is to her immediate family, especially in times of scarcity; she cannot support Brack's entire family—they participate in exploitation as much as the miners and the coal and logging companies operating within the region. Alpha, like Still, understands that austerity and restraint are objective moral goods, important-in-themselves, and she forwards those virtues as a means of ensuring her family's survival. In times of abundance, perhaps she would have been willing to support those others in Brack's extended family (though they are fully capable of providing for themselves and simply choose not to because they are not virtuous beings), but this is idle speculation. But because Brack is intractable and exerts power over his family, Alpha makes a choice to burn down their house so that Brack's family cannot invade and colonize their home, a decision that makes sense as part of a social solidarity ethic: one cannot care for others effectively if one starves to death. It is one of her few triumphs throughout the novel. Both the narrator and Fletch weep as the sight of the burning house and tree and the consequences of the devastation that an economically-centered ethic has wrought on the land, on the people, and on their families.

Despite the preponderance of death and sickness that permeate Still's novel, he does give readers moments of clear growth and goodness (at least early in the novel)—most of it centered on gardens and the attendant husbandry required to maintain it. After Alpha has burned the house, and after the narrator's seventh birthday, Still tells us that

[t]he garden grew as by a miracle, and the blackberry winter passed with the early April winds, doing no harm. Beans broke their waxen leaves out of hoe-turned furrows, bearing the husk of seeds with them. Sweet corn unfurled tight young blades from weed mold, timid to night chill, growing slowly and darkly. Crows hung on blue air, surveying the

patch, but the garden was too near the house. Our shouts and swift running through the tended ground kept them frightened and filled with wonder.³⁷⁰

The proximity of the garden to the house and the behavior of the narrator and Fletch help us to understand the nature of the miracle that makes the garden grow. By leaving room for the miracle to remain miraculous, we can see that the act of husbandry is taking place in the family's new home. Healing, Still insists, has come to Alpha's family because she has enacted an ethic of austerity—growth can happen because the land here is not being asked to overproduce. It is not overburdened by the demands of too many people. Alpha has reasserted her authority in the place she has attempted to tie her family to—it is their place and no one else's.³⁷¹ Indeed, it is clear from Still's description above that there is, at least for a moment, some possibility of health and sustainment here. The ground has been "tended;" the vegetables and legumes are "bearing" forth their fruit and seeds. Yes, the growth is timid and slow, but any growth in a difficult place needs must be.

And the careful growth of the plants is reflected in the care that the narrator and Fletch direct towards husbanding the garden. Both the narrator and his brother attend closely to the garden and the vegetable life growing there. They both understand its tentative nature, its timidity and fragility. Still tells us that the beans and the potatoes are "young and tender" and "thin-skinned and small," and we are told that the narrator and Fletch measured their growth tenderly and "dug under the potato stalks carefully with our hands so as not to bruise the watery roots. We picked off the potato bugs and scraped their egg patches from the leaves."³⁷² Fletch even keeps the bugs in a jar and feeds them from time to time. What all this should suggest to

³⁷⁰ Still, p. 13.

³⁷¹ Note that I invoke here a Distributist sense of property rights as the foundation for a healthy, functioning community rather than an industrial sense of ownership.

³⁷² Still, p. 14.

readers is how Still demonstrates a functioning bioregional ethic within this novel. The boys practice husbandry: they spend their time caring for the life that dwells in their homeplace; they preserve the balance and natural order of the ecosystem by assisting the garden in its natural growth. They weed it, they replenish the soil, they clear the leaves of bugs so that the plants may flourish—but importantly, they do not kill or destroy the bugs and beetles living on the plants. Their bioregional ethic is one that tends towards a whole life ethic, one that assumes the dignity of all human life and extends that to the animal and vegetable world.

Yet, as Still shows time and again throughout the novel, this kind of care cannot withstand the economic understanding of human relationships, the ethic of exchange and extraction, the ethic which replaces an ecological understanding of relationships between people and between place with a solely economic one. Once the beans are near-ripe, Brack's family and friends return again and ravage the garden leaving no beans left for the family. Rapaciousness has infected the people of the region; it has replaced the character traits (virtues) that would generate a sustainable bioregional ethic with those character traits (vices) that shape, promote, and impose an extractive ethic that has corrupted the land and the dwellers in it.

The corruption of the dwellers in the land is most clearly demonstrated in Brother Sim Mobberly's oft-quoted sermon, from which the novel takes its title. The sermon indicates that damage to the landscape, to the place where people have no choice but to live (since they cannot live in clouds or on or under the sea), has deep and nigh-irreparable consequences on human persons. Mobberly at one and the same time questions the coal industry's extractive ethic (as well as the miners' total acceptance of it) and attempts to turn the people back to God as the source of all virtuous and ergo sound bioregional behavior. He says, referring to the Bible,

I used to think a mountain was the standingest object in the sight o' God. Hit says here they go skipping and hopping like sheep, a-rising and a-falling. These hills are jist dirt waves, washing through eternity. My brethren, they hain't a valley so low but what hit'll rise agin. They hain't a hill standing so proud but hit'll sink to the low ground o' sorrow. Oh, my children, where air we going on this mighty river of earth, a-borning, begetting, and a-dying—the living and the dead riding the waters? Where air it sweeping us?...³⁷³

By questioning his own assumptions about the immutability of the natural world, Mobberly makes plain the bioregional ethic inherent in *River of Earth*. Because we cannot see (relatively-speaking) the earth change over time, it would be easy to assume that it is eternal in its visible, present form. However, by returning to the very Word of God, Mobberly realizes that the created world is as mutable as the human body or as the cities and cultures that benefit from the rapacious coal industry. Conceiving of the worn mountains of Appalachia as “jist dirt waves,” Still, through Mobberly, conveys the fragility of not only the Appalachian bioregion but of the numerous ecosystems that make up the whole earth. The fact that mountains could fall and valleys could rise reflects the ultimate temporary nature of natural features, that they are not masters of themselves but subject to the will of God.³⁷⁴ If we accept Mobberly's assertion to be true, then his question about where the people of Appalachia are going on the river of earth—i.e., the mutable mountain ranges and valleys—takes on some quite clear bioregional implications.

As Charles Duncan has argued, in addition to acknowledging the “relative insignificance of humans in the natural order,” we are made aware that the river of earth is sweeping us “toward the end-game of a sustainable way of life forged out of generations of settlers having met the

³⁷³ Still, p. 76.

³⁷⁴ We might also say “the weather” or “some other spiritual/metaphysical force” instead of God, but in the context of Mobberly's sermon, it is clear that the will directing the landscape is that of the Christian God.

environment on its own terms and yoked it productively with their needs.”³⁷⁵ Duncan is right to emphasize the shift from a sustainable way of life towards the supposedly inevitable empire of the economic and the extractive. Too, he is right to highlight that the means of living in accordance with the demands of the bioregion are a meeting between the landscape and the human person, *but on the landscape’s terms*.³⁷⁶

By outlining the decay and erasure of traditional, sustainable, self-sufficient (and ergo bioregional) means of forging life out of the local landscape, Duncan helps us see the absolutely disastrous consequences of the imperious ethic of the extractive. A radical shift occurs in how human persons meet the landscape when the ethic imposed onto Appalachia and embodied by the coal industry takes replaces the historical and ecologically-sound bioregional ethics of the long-term dwellers in that land. The end-game is that final negotiation between the local and the imposed where the environment is no longer “yoked productively *with* their needs.” I add emphasis on the preposition “with” to indicate how Duncan marks the difference between the way of life inherent in the bioregion and the economic and the extractive way of doing brought into place by the coal industry; by emphasizing how the people and the place work *with* each other and *alongside* each other, we are able to determine the stakes involved in how Still positions the central conflict of the novel and the central tensions in Mobberly’s sermon.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ Duncan, Charles. “Never Would I Be a Miner Digging in a Darksome Hole”: James Still’s Biophilic Perspective in *River of Earth*. *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 79, no. 1-2, 2014, pp. 36-37.

³⁷⁶ I do take issue with Duncan’s use of “environment” rather than “landscape” or something more specific and grounded within the particular Appalachian bioregion, and though this is not at all splitting hairs (but an important distinction we must make to improve ecocritical discourse), I agree wholeheartedly with his assertion here.

³⁷⁷ Ann Pancake, whom I take up in the second half of this chapter, furthers this value-replacement by drawing tensions between the character traits (and their attendant ways of doing) of the locals and the extractivists in the stories of *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley*.

As Brack and the other men in the area become pawns and slaves to the coal mines, they begin to reject the virtues of self-sufficiency and husbandry; they no longer attend to their farms as they would have had they remained tied to place. Further, the men cease to husband their wives and children, trading husbandry in exchange for indebtedness to an oppressive credit system of values. They no longer, by choice and by the will of the extractive, have hold on “a place certain and enduring” in the bioregion.³⁷⁸ Further, no longer do they work with the land to yoke themselves with it into sustainment *for their need*; instead, they rapaciously pillage the inner depths of the earth, tearing and slashing at the waves of dirt and leaving gaping and empty holes behind them. But, and this is essential to the point I am making here, the mining (which is too kind a term for what is actually happening) is not *for the needs of the dwellers*. The products of the mine are sent away *en masse* to serve the needs of others. The work does not provide sustainability, nor does it provide means of building healthy, distributed community in the Appalachian bioregion. Instead, the miners and their families become vagrants in their own land, solely dependent on the company, its housing, and its imported stores for any kind of meager sustenance.

There is no enduring or dwelling here, there is no good (and therefore real) community being forged between people. Even though we could read Brack’s attempts to share resources as a type of community support, we should understand that another way to read it is that Brack’s efforts are not properly conformed to husbandry of place since they often rely on industrial credit ethics, which fosters competition rather than cooperation. Without the rapaciousness of the industrial land ethic, the miners would have no need to compete for resources and would be able

³⁷⁸ Still, p. 51.

to work in solidarity to husband their land, their families, and their souls. And done properly, the resources of one place would not be exhausted and they would not be forced to move on.

The narrator's maternal grandmother recognizes the relationship between the imposed value system's necessary emphasis on the temporary and the effects of that transience on the character the miners and their families. Still mourns the lack of permanence through the grandmother's voice: "Hit's no wonder Brack's forever moving, abiding nowhere long. Only if he'd settle someplace and grow roots, I'd not be eternally worrying."³⁷⁹ What the grandmother, whom Still has clearly aligned with the natural world and the cycle of the seasons, hits upon here is how the process of settling, how the building of a sustainable way of life is antithetical to the chasing after opportunity and material wealth.

Rather, having that "place certain and enduring" requires *growing* roots. As a seed sprouts and sends roots down into the earth and eventually grows to settle itself until its death in a single spot of dirt, so too must the human person learn to grow roots, to send them down into the earth and latch firmly there. And further, it is not merely setting down roots that allows the human person to abide sustainably in place: the human person must also garden, husband, tend to, and care for that landscape, that family, and that community. It is work of a kind that Brack is not willing to put forth, even though he is capable of it; the grandmother even says that Brack is "good to work. Hain't scared to bend his back or mud his boots."³⁸⁰ Because bending one's back and mudding one's boots is the kind of work one would have to engage in to farm *or* to mine coal, Still seems to suggest that Brack is capable of work other than "grubbing his bread underground" like a "mole-feller."³⁸¹ Brack, we are meant to understand, is a man able to do

³⁷⁹ Still, p. 130.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

good work and to provide for Alpha and his children—what work he does and to whom he is reliant is an informed choice and not an inevitability resulting from economic pressures.³⁸²

In the grandmother's eyes—and we might also say in the “eyes” of the bioregion—a better way of living, a better means of searching out and contributing to the common good of the local community, is agricultural husbandry. As she tells the narrator about his mother and father, Alpha's grandmother not only makes clear her preferences for Alpha's life but also demonstrates her knowledge about how to live sustainably and ethically in place: “For gold and silks, she'd no fancy, and I was right glad for a fact. But allus I'd wanted her to choose one who lived on the land, growing his own victuals, raising sheep and cattle, beholden to no one.”³⁸³ What readers are meant to see here is a set of moral and value claims being derived from the grandmother's long life in the Appalachian bioregion. It is clear that self-sufficiency is a good to her, that not being dependant on the company scrip or company stores or the imports from places outside the Appalachian bioregion is a better means of growing the community and living sustainably.

Too, living and working above ground is seen as a virtue, as is husbanding the land upon which one lives. Embedded within this claim is an understanding of how Still sees life working well in the bioregion: people are not meant to delve deep into the earth—we cannot survive there in the dark and desolate spaces where only horror has been thought to reside. Rather, we are meant only to dig a little ways into the earth, deep enough to plant a seed that will grow food for humans and for animals and restore the soil through its growth and decay. Attendant with not

³⁸² As I have indicated in the introduction to this project, the economic is necessarily subordinated to the ecologic and the oikophilic—both yes derive from the word *oikos* meaning home, but the economic presupposes and therefore follows after the ecologic, which itself follows after the oikophilic. The choice to love the *oikos* or grow an ecology of place (family, land, community, self) is objectively more foundational to human existence than household management (*oikonomia*).

³⁸³ Still, p. 130.

being dependent on an exterior abstraction with its own contradictory ethical/value systems is the fact that if one husband the land well, one is continuously returning to the land what one has taken from it—or, rather, what one has been given by it.

The processes involved in farming are not purely extractive—in fact calling them extractive in the sense that I have been using that word throughout this chapter would be to severely misread and misunderstand the commensalist or mutualist relationship that must always-already exist between the human person and the landscape upon which the human person abides. The ethics of extraction are just that: it is all take, all removal and export; it is the taking *ex terra* the things of the earth for the benefit of those who have no personal, familial, communal, or ecological stake in the extraction. On the other hand, farming represents a more ethically sound means of living in place.³⁸⁴ For one thing, it acknowledges mankind's proper place in the created universe: *on* the earth, on its surface bathed in its light and shade and seasons, working its fields and fells, having clear and powerful stakes in the health of the land.

We see the good inherent in agriculture when the narrator asks Uncle Jolly to teach him how to use the plow on the farmland near the grandmother's home. Initially meditative this passage begins with Uncle Jolly asking, "What's folks going to live on when these hills wear down to a nub?"³⁸⁵ Acknowledging the disastrous effects of coal mining on the region's landscape (and everything that necessarily derives from its health, which, not to put too fine a point on it, is everything), Uncle Jolly strikes at the bioregional heart of *River of Earth*, as did Brother Mobberly in a different way earlier in the novel. If the extraction of coal continues, if the

³⁸⁴ It should be clear by now that this means farming appropriately on the terms that the landscape sets out. Wendell Berry's *Jayber Crow* presents an expert example of what happens when husbandry is turned extractive through purely economical and industrial motives, but here as Berry himself and Still would also attest, "farming" presupposes husbandry done the proper, right way and does not include any form of rapacious practice.

³⁸⁵ Still, p. 134.

impositional, economically-oriented ethical system maintains its stranglehold on community, family, and personal formation in the bioregion, the hills will indeed be worn to nubs and will continue to become more and more unsuitable for human life.³⁸⁶

Despite this assertion, Still gives readers a somewhat hopeful image in the midst of the bleakness and the coal dust. Giving the narrator instructions on how to operate the plow, Uncle Jolly sets the narrator into the feel to make it fallow. Readers are shown a response to the plowing from the landscape that is reminiscent though different from how the land in *O Pioneers!* responded to its cultivation. We are told,

The earth parted; it fell back from the shovel plow; it boiled over the share. I walked the fresh furrow and balls of dirt welled between my toes. There was a smell of old mosses, of bruised sassafras roots, of ground new-turned....The share rustled like drifted leaves. It spoke up through the handles. I felt the earth flowing, steady as time.³⁸⁷

Unlike in Cather, there are no satisfied sighs from the land or heroic plow; it is not personified here. There is no sense of the land fulfilling its long-awaited purpose when it comes in contact with proper human behaviors (husbandry) and attitudes (virtues) directed towards it. The earth is simply pushed aside; Still's simple verbs give readers a sense of stimulus-response; it is only when the narrator's senses are triggered by the dirt welling up between his toes and the smell of the loam and the sound of the share that we are given more than the simple act of plowing.

The narrator experiences a profound and moving moment, a turning of the earth that begins to forge a more intimate relationship between the boy and the land—he is beginning to have a stake in the health of the land in a much more real way than he has had thus far in the

³⁸⁶ Of course, the hills will be eventually worn to nubs, geologically-speaking. That is inevitable and natural. Additionally we might say that Jolly is being hyperbolic here, but the difficulty of living in this bioregion is clear as Still presents it in the novel.

³⁸⁷ Still, p. 135.

novel. His perception of the earth beneath his feet is altered through contact with its new-turned flesh; because of his attention to the dirt at the beginning of the plowing process, the narrator is able to enter a space like the space Brother Mobberly entered in his sermon: they both are able to feel the earth flowing like a river through time. The narrator begins to learn one of the two places where the people of Appalachia might be headed on the flow of the hills that have and will continue to change over time.

Mobberly's question to his congregation ("where air we going on this mighty river of earth, a-borning, begetting, and a-dying—the living and the dead riding the waters?")³⁸⁸ takes on new valences if we factor in how the narrator begins to derive his own ethical commitments from the landscape that Still has thrown the narrator into. In the very first instance, and indeed as the most common interpretation of the question, the river of earth suggests the land itself, the Appalachian bioregion in which all the miners, farmers, and vagrants live. This does not come as any surprise, but it does have much bearing on a bioregional reading of Still's novel. The question is invested with Christian teleology: what is the ultimate destination of the people who scrape and scabble to survive here? And yet it should be noted that Brother Mobberly invests the landscape with the agency to move the people. The landscape controls the destiny of the people of the region because they live on top of it and because it is by God's handiwork that the earth has been made—its rivers of mountains and waters included.

Brother Mobberly's recognition of the landscape's primal agency to move people along their shared path to their shared destiny could be understood as a purely religious question, as something that would attempt to get the congregation to consider their ultimate salvation. However, within the context of the novel, it becomes far more clear that Still's intent in having

³⁸⁸ Still, p. 76.

Brother Mobberly ask this question is to connect the religious with the ecological and the moral constraints of living in a blasted region. “Where air we going on this mighty river of earth...?” gives readers the sense of commitments to an ecological ethics of living in place made all the more complicated by the fact of the coal industry’s extractive ethics ravaging the very land these people have called home for generations, reaching as far back as the eighteenth-century.

They are “a-borning, begetting, and a-dying” here and to have done so for such a long time carries with it an embeddedness that connects the Appalachian people tightly to the land. Because the mountains rise and fall (whether by the will of God or the misdirected and therefore immoral will of man), because they change over time through natural or artificial processes, the people are carried along with those changes, and they have no choice whether to be carried along or not. The change of seasons is and has always been apparent to the dwellers in the land—especially considering that they are and have been primarily an agricultural people (as have most humans in the unfathomably long history of our existence on the planet). However, what Brother Mobberly brings into conscious awareness (both to the congregation and more so to the readers) is that the changes to the landscape have just as much of an effect on the health of the people and the health of the landscape.

As the hills erode naturally or are made to decay through extractive processes, so too does the ability of the land to support both agriculture and industry decline.³⁸⁹ As Still has made clear (and as I have said earlier), the land is exhausted and becoming more so. The hills are bald

³⁸⁹ I include here, in addition to mining and other means of polluting the land, bad agricultural practices. Wendell Berry, to take a clear and related example (though he is *not* an Appalachian writer though he has been egregiously mischaracterized as such), presents the farmer Troy Chatham as someone who gives up on the healthy practices of crop rotation and farming for local sustenance and instead practices farming for profit, getting the most he can out of the land, sending himself into crippling debt (due to his fetish for farming machines and industrial, non-seasonal agricultural practices).

and balding, the people are hungry, and the crops are poor—though the latter two have more to do with the unwillingness of the menfolk to work the land for their own sustenance and instead latch themselves onto the extractive, dependence-inducing teat. Indeed, this decline in health, this rapaciousness has altered the ethical commitments and character traits (virtues into vices) of the dwellers in the land such that they are at odds with it instead of being in a harmonious relationship with the hills they claim to love so dearly. And they have no choice but to be affected by the shift in relationship.

In fact, when the narrator's grandmother recounts Boone's lecture to Uncle Jolly on the notion of hunting, we can see the extent of this ethical shift: "They won't be a bird on the face of the earth the way folks fire lead around...Hain't right to take a creature's life just to pleasure yourself. Mighty nigh like killing folks."³⁹⁰ What we see here is the shift from killing to eat and killing for sport and for pleasure, and one way to interpret this shift within the context of the grandmother's retelling late in *River of Earth* is as a demonstration of the great evil wreaked on the bioregion by the extractive ethics of those industries that provide only benefit for those outside of the region.

Though the practice of extracting coal is erroneously seen as the means to survive in the region (despite it being a representation of the evil of how a renter's market functions) and is not done for pleasure, we can easily connect the practice of hunting without purpose and mining for the benefit of the outsiders. If the miners internalize the ethic of extraction, of learning to be unable to see how this choice disastrously alters their relationship to the bioregion that they *actually* depend on, it would be a small leap to see that the way they view hunting would change. As they are treated as disposable entities within the extractive industry (like the canaries sent into

³⁹⁰ Still, p. 150.

the mines to die), the men's sense of the dignity and sacredness of life may also decline into passive apathy or mere nonexistence. Choosing to engage in the practice of hunting for sport, to take a life for pure pleasure reveals a lack of respect for other beings within the I-Thou³⁹¹ relationship—for humans *and* animals, both of which serve as essential beings working towards the sustainment of the local bioregion.

This choice is one route that the river of earth in Mobberly's question could carry the people along. It is a route embodied in the literal river of earth that exists in the form of the mine run-off known as acid mine drainage and the semi-liquid substance known as slurry.³⁹² If the people allow themselves to be carried this way along the river of earth, they will be led towards an ontological and ecological ending from which there can be no recovery. These are the stakes involved in Brother Mobberly's sermon, in his question about the course of mankind within the bioregion: the ecosystem will die from the cascade effect, from the submission of the people to an extractive ethic that may seem easier or promise more economic gain than the agricultural practices that would serve them better.

Fortunately, within Brother Mobberly's question and tentatively demonstrated throughout the novel—in the narrator's reveries within the natural world through which he moves and the farms on which he lives—we find a second choice, an option that could result in a bioregional ethics that is not impositional or extractive. Though Still himself does not articulate a positive ecological ethics within *River of Earth*, he does show readers through negative example that

³⁹¹ See Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (Scribner's, 2000).

³⁹² Acid mine drainage (AMD) significantly alters the PH levels of streams and soils near the mines and has disastrous ecological effects. It consists of highly acidic water full of heavy metals and other rocks that have been discharged from the mine. Slurry is a mixture of water and coal; it is semi-liquid and often used to transport coal as an alternative to the railroad. The Martin County coal slurry spill in Kentucky is an example what happens when this river of earth is let loose on the region: in 2020, people are still finding slurry in surface water and drinking water.

there needs must be a better way. Considering that the most objectively beautiful passages—the passages with the most aesthetic value—are representations of farming, of walking through the woods and falling into silence, we can see where Still places emphasis on what ought to be done to live harmoniously and sustainably in place. In the novel, we see that Still, like Cather and Rølvaag, forwards hyper-local family agricultural as the basis for any kind of successful community formation, which in turn is the foundation for any kind of successful community-wide bioregional ethics. And as has been clearly demonstrated throughout this whole project, these ethical commitments must necessarily derive from a consideration of what the landscape will allow us to do.

A Christian mind would say that we are merely sojourners here on earth, travelers who have no choice but to settle here until our inevitable deaths. Leaving aside speculations about what happens to the soul, after death, if we were to allow it, our bodies would begin to return to the earth, giving back to it what we have been given from it. Since we have no choice but to live on this mighty river of earth, we must understand that our choices are few if we are to sustain life: we must choose to subordinate our desires to the needs of the landscape's health—it is from the land that we derive our sustenance and health and from the land that we must derive how we treat both it and each other. As Pancake will show in her stories, there must be love and gratitude at the core of this treatment, of this bioregional ethic, which is itself a human ethic. And, if I am allowed a slight modulation, we must necessarily answer Brother Mobberly's question: Where will we choose to go, to be carried along, on this mighty river of earth?

Ann Pancake's Bioregional Ethic of Love and Gratitude

An Appalachian native and a Marine West Coast Forest transplant, Ann Pancake's work chronicles the people and the sense of place that derives from the particular Appalachian bioregion. Her work often takes on the voices of fictional locals from the region, giving these fictional personas the means to speak about their lives within the Appalachia. All of her characters are given the status of the outsider by their creator; they are often placed in contrast with twentieth-century American society, and much of Pancake's writing represents the various intrusions and interpenetrations of that society with the rural, Appalachian communities where her stories are set.

In her encounters with landscape, in her representations of place and the various ethical models at stake for people attempting to live and thrive in the blasted lands of Appalachia, Pancake takes up a similar project to that of James Still in *River of Earth*. Indeed, her attempt to have characters seek out the meaning of being-together in place, to factor themselves back into the communities from which they have been separated, brings to the foreground the quest and draw for a homeplace, a place to settle and grow roots in. As *River of Earth* demonstrates, the people of Appalachia have a choice to make: the choice between further degradation and attempted renewal. So too does *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley* take up Brother Sim Mobberly's question, asking readers to decide where the river of earth will lead them.

Published in 2015, *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley* is a collection of eleven stories (two of which are novellas), each connected with each through common behaviors that begin and end each story—behaviors like the scratching of a pant leg. Each story in the collection deals with the powerful draw of community and of specifically the Appalachian community. Isolation and the blending of city and rural cultures—of flattened, homogenous

culture blended with idiosyncratic and diverse local cultures—mark the stories of this collection, as well as characters’ attempts to resist the draw back in, a draw that primarily arises from the particularities of the landscape that the stories represent.

To date, no published literary analysis has been done on *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley*, but Pancake is not entirely ignored in the communities of the literati. Primarily, scholars have written about her novel *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, a novel chronicling a family of coal miners dealing with family issues as well as mountaintop removal and other related issues. Though this novel is highly regarded and spoken about as a powerful investigation into the lives of poor Appalachian people dependent on coal mines’ extractive ethics, I have instead chosen to write about *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley*, which more closely pertains to this particular project because of the way it represents landscape, bioregional ethics, and that draw back into a community one has chosen to leave or that one has been isolated from by external factors. By attending to how Pancake’s book demonstrates the being and doing of love in relationship with the land, we can see how, as Wendell Berry attests, bioregional virtue ethics does indeed all turn on affection.³⁹³ Love, as Berry argues, is essential to the growth and regrowth of a local culture composed of individuals and families that “will preserve our part of the world while we use it,” a process and a knowledge that is unavailable to the unaffectionate.³⁹⁴ Pancake’s stories in *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley* demonstrate this kind of love-in-action that helps us envision a way back into community that begins with the love of the land.

³⁹³ “It All Turns On Affection” argues that the land *and* the people have suffered together, and that the only way to repair this damage is to rescale our communities to the human (i.e., the local) level. And the only way to accomplish that is to begin our work motivated by love—for a place, for the life we want to build and preserve there, for the people there no matter who they are.

³⁹⁴ Berry, Wendell. “Out of Your Car, Off Your Horse.” *Sex, Economy, Freedom, & Community*. Pantheon Books, 1993, 24.

Further, *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley* provides an incredibly contemporary means of approaching the bioregional ethics I have been discussing throughout this project. It also gives readers ways of thinking about place and being-in-place that come primarily from individual perspectives, whereas most of this project has dealt with families or communities at a distance. Each community in Pancake's collection begins with the individual; the focus is a singular person attempting to make sense of life in a place devastated diachronically. Specifically, in "The Following" Pancake shows us the separation of people from place, the intrusions of outside ethical systems (and cultures by extension), and the complex interactions the homogenizing has with the diverse and local.³⁹⁵ It is important to note that, in contradistinction to those who might argue that independence and individualism are problems because they are isolating, Pancake instead shows that individualism is necessary in order to form and preserve a diverse, sustainable community.

By way of beginning, I want to discuss an article that attempts to place Cormac McCarthy and Ann Pancake in conversation with each other; the argument has some direct bearing on the claims that I will make regarding Pancake's stories in *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley*.³⁹⁶ Published in the *American Studies Journal* last year (2019), "An Ecocritical Reading of *Blood Meridian* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been*" forwards an argument founded in the work of Edward Said on "postcolonial cultures and literatures from an ecological

³⁹⁵ One might also effectively find this focus in "Sab" and "Arsonists," as well as the novella "Sugar's Up."

³⁹⁶ Both texts, of course, appear in this project. I have selected them for their commitment to the depiction of ecological concerns, and in this chapter, the corollaries between the imperial-industrial ethic in *Blood Meridian* and *Me and My Daddy* are quite interesting, though I have explored this link differently throughout each chapter in the project.

point of view.”³⁹⁷ Zakarriya takes this point of view and claims that ecological violence and economic (i.e., human) violence in both novels “articulate a particular awareness of the interconnections between economic and political hierarchies” within the context of each novel’s setting and ecologies.³⁹⁸

Though I won’t discuss *Blood Meridian* at length here (see Chapter Two of this project for an extended discussion of how I approach McCarthy’s novel bioregionally), it is interesting to note how both Pancake and McCarthy demonstrate in similar ways that, as Zakarriya has it, “humans are not separate from their ecological surroundings.”³⁹⁹ Rather, he argues that they are subject to “spatial violence” that “disturbs the familial and social relationships” of the local peoples, especially in Pancake’s representation of Appalachia.⁴⁰⁰ As should be clear at this point in this project—and as should be clear from a consideration of how our local ecosystems impact, change, and demand particular behaviors in order to remain healthy and sustainable—humans are most certainly not separate or even separable from their ecological surroundings. The question we have to ask is where the disturbances and fissures between the person and her family and social relationships derive, instead of asking whether or not bioregional ecologies have any bearing on human behavior.

Zakarriya rightly links this disturbance to “the violent, industrial transformation and destruction of the landscape,” especially in Pancake’s novel, but we could easily extend this link to most if not all other ruptures between person and family and social relationships. The wildfires in Gatlinburg, Tennessee and across Australia in recent years, as well as the more recent

³⁹⁷ Zakarriya, Jihan. “An Ecocritical Reading of *Blood Meridian* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been*.” *American Studies Journal*, vol. 66, 2019, 2.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 1.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

tornadoes in and around Nashville, Tennessee present some examples of how landscape impacts familial and social relationships—though it should be stressed that these are not at all the same kind of transformation that Zakarriya and myself identify in Pancake’s writing. There are, as Zakarriya claims, a set of “planned tools of ongoing processes of cultural, political, and economic militarism and secularization” within the Appalachian bioregion that contribute to the dissolution of bonds that are essential to the health of any sustainable ecosystem.⁴⁰¹

And yet, despite these intentional, oppressive practices imposed upon Appalachians from without, Pancake recognizes and represents the incontrovertible fact that indissoluble bonds exist between people and the places that are their homelands. These bonds have been and can be antithetical; people have expressed hatred of or dissatisfaction with their place in creation and have attempted to sever those bonds by leaving. However, the bonds exist, are permanent, and must be encountered on their own terms—much how like James Joyce found he could write only about Catholic Ireland despite his supposed rejection of his homeland throughout his life. One of the most famous articulations of this Gordian-knot-like bonds in Pancake comes from Bant, one of the primary characters in *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, and this articulation will be the impetus for the majority of my discussion of *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley*; Bant considers whether or not it is “worse to lose the mountains or the feelings that you had for it” and realizes “that to not care wasn’t to save yourself at all. It was only another loss.”⁴⁰² Bant’s perception of things becomes more forgiving, her attitude towards the Appalachian bioregion more loving and grateful, as she begins to understand that to check out—to leave and disconnect

⁴⁰¹ Zakarriya, p. 16. It is interesting to note that he does not appear to see the connection between these processes and a set of ethics founded on a total misreading of landscape: that landscape is meant for humans to exploit because it contains within it the resources we need to “sustain” our homogenizing cosmopolitan and urban society. Or if he does see the connection, it is not made apparent to this reader.

⁴⁰² Pancake, Ann. *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007, p. 25.

without engaging and encountering the requirements of the land on its own terms—would only serve to give the land over to its destruction by the imperial, extractive ethics of the outsiders. What Bant begins to feel is the inalienable, inevitable call of the land that tries to draw her back to itself.

This same pull of person back towards relationship with his homeland marks all of the stories and novellas in *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley*. It is the direct and deep connection with the land that makes stories like “The Following,” “Arsonists,” and “Sab” so important to understanding how an ethical and sustainable relationship to place works and how it is derived from the land itself. Though I will focus exclusively on “The Following” to conduct my analysis, Pancake shows the collection that this pull is a connection that cannot be avoided and cannot be severed—except in the case of extreme, violent, imperial action by those from the outside, as she shows in “Arsonists.”

However, before digging into the ways that Pancake’s characters resist the horrific and the violent (i.e., the imperial, centralized, and cosmopolitan) in favor of the generous and the loving, I will discuss the nature of this pull towards place, which Pancake details clearly in “The Following.” The story itself concerns the movements of the narrator back to Northern Appalachia (near Pittsburgh and West Virginia) from where she has lived in and around Seattle for much of her adulthood. Pancake sets the story after a period of extreme loss for the narrator—her dog has died, her long-term relationship has ended, and she has lost her employment in the area. Even though her voyage back to her familial home in the West Virginian Appalachian mountains is no less traumatic, it contains within it the possibility of healing, of working through the loss that has so affected her prior to the beginning of the story.

What Pancake attempts to grapple with in this story “The Following” is the intense and irresistible draw that landscape exerts on the human person. Though Pancake does not clearly identify the source of the draw, we can certainly conclude that whatever it is, it is spiritual and divine and invests the landscape with its ability to draw a person back to itself as a magnet attracts other objects. The following—which is what the narrator calls the deep down thing that pulls her back home—is incredibly embodied and passes beyond the realm of cognitive knowledge; it is graspable only through the biological and the spatial. Indeed, the narrator tells readers right at the outset of the Pancake’s story, “Once I got under those limbs, got my feel off asphalt and on dirt, I knew now I was not just knowing, but following. I knew it was carrying me, the sweet eerie draw.”⁴⁰³

The narrator’s knowledge is of a grounded, biological draw that emerges when she removes herself from the artificial, made things of her local bioregion.⁴⁰⁴ Immediately as the narrator enters the shelter of the tree limbs, she feels and knows that she is being carried by this visceral thing which she calls “the following.” Importantly, it is the following that is the actor in this relationship: she is carried by it, and she knows “what lay at its end” and at least at this point in the story does not attempt to resist the following’s pull.⁴⁰⁵ Part of the reason she does not immediately resist this deep, tugging thing is that she feels its sweetness; she knows that there is nothing at stake while she is in the middle of the following, and she learns that the only way she can describe the following to the reader is as a “[s]ilent thrumming,” an “[u]nthered balance.”⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰³ Pancake, Ann. “The Following.” *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley*, Counterpoint Press, 2015, p. 155.

⁴⁰⁴ Though a discussion could be had about what counts as a made thing, I am simply referring to those things which insulate the human person from the natural world, which refers to trees and grasses and animals and even parks, but not buildings or roads or cities.

⁴⁰⁵ Pancake, p. 155.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

As well, she is aware of a stranger eerie side to this following, a side that resists comprehension, a side that creates that paradox. She is untethered from where she is and her usual contexts for knowing the world, and yet she is brought into balance with the bioregion she is in and with herself. She hears the pulse of its thrumming, and yet the music is silent.

As the narrator attempts to come to terms with what this draw is, the narrator poetically tells readers that “[t]he knowing was not mind-knowing, that had been the single knowing I could remember before this other knowing had arrived six months before. The new knowing came through my chest and I could describe it only in paradox: weightless presence.”⁴⁰⁷ Relocating this new knowledge she receives from the following—which is itself derived from the pull of the landscape itself—the narrator renegotiates her typical ways of arriving at an understanding of the world. She instead places the locus of knowing in her chest, in the heart-place, in the intuitive, gut-knowledge place. She knows the following has welled up in her, and she knows that it is leading her because she knows these things, feels them in her chest.

Too, readers should clearly understand that the following Pancake focuses her story on derives from the agency of the landscape, from its moral force, from its attempts to remind human persons about proper relationships with itself. The following does not just lead the narrator along the path; in fact, it leads her deeper into an unmediated encounter with the landscape, beginning near Seattle:

But I did leave the trail. Plunged into drenched salal, English ivy, Oregon grape. It led me around a nurse log high as my waist, pushing up seedlings, sloughing off rot. And, finally,

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

with one hand in the chill of the log's soaked moss, I spotted what I'd known all along.

The tiny bones of a bird. Its skeleton intact as a cage.⁴⁰⁸

Though her footsteps are the bodily agent of her movement, the narrator is not the primary agent in the finding of this bird skeleton. It is the following which leads her through thick vegetation and past a decaying log that serves as the groundbed for the growth and generation of new life. It is important to note that salal, English ivy, and Oregon grape are all evergreen species, and salal and Oregon grape have traditionally been part of the diets of the native peoples of the region. English ivy on the otherhand has been spread to the Northwest by human action, and though it has its own positive ecological uses, it is seen throughout the region as an invasive species and noxious weed. Though Pancake does not here pass symbolic judgement on the bringing of the ivy to the region by non-natives, she does suggest a kind of harmony (or at least equilibrium) between the various vegetation in the Northwest—something that does not seem to be found within the heavily exploited Appalachian bioregion. Even with the “noxious weed” (which is a human category), there is still new growth emerging from the rotting log. Through the rot come new seedlings inherent, the promise of new (and more) trees inherent with their brilliant greenness. Yet, finding the skeleton amongst the new growth adds an eerie element to the first conclusion of the following that readers experience, an element that the narrator has always felt about this “chest-knowing.”⁴⁰⁹ For the narrator, this following always leads to bones, and this arrival at the remnants of the once-living affects the narrator in several ways.

Firstly, the narrator begins to see the intimately local arrival at bones as mirroring the larger-scale ecosystemic degradation occurring earth-wide. She tells readers, “I couldn't help see my own disintegration as a microcosm of the Earth's. The world unraveling in sympathetic

⁴⁰⁸ Pancake, p. 156.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

backdrop to my own misery—then I’d hate myself for such analogy even occurring to me.”⁴¹⁰ The backdrop to which she refers here is the notorious BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico as well as how an unnamed coal company “slaughtered twenty-nine miners” near the West Virginia hills among which the narrator grew up. Seeing her own dissolution as a microcosm of the Earth’s broader dismantling reflects the interconnectedness of all life in both local and global ecosystems.⁴¹¹ In spite of how the narrator feels about the analogy, she is not wrong about that piece of it. The guilt she feels in prioritizing her personal life over the “global” life could be read as an internalized ethical system that denigrates the local and the diverse and the small from which the narrator suffers at this point in the story. However, this is a reading that I do not advance because there is no evidence for such a reading without resorting to malformed analytical methodologies.

Rather, taking the narrator at her word, we can still see that there is at least an intuitive connection between the far-flung ecological issues that the Earth suffers and the local ecological issues that the narrator is suffering. This connection is something that does cause her consternation and causes the narrator to wrestle with this shift in ethical commitments—and leads readers to the ethical heart of the story: the narrator expressed that she should be “battling head-on” the global ecological crises instead of “sneaking around diddling with bones.”⁴¹² This disconnect and guilt that the narrator feels about ecological behavior demonstrates how Pancake dramatizes the difficult shifting of moral commitments that inform more widely all the stories in *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley*.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., p. 157.

⁴¹¹ Indeed, as this project has hopefully shown, the term “global ecosystem” should have lost all meaning and should be removed from use in ecological criticism’s discourse since everything is at once a local ecosystem that work together in a distributed, decentralized way to form a healthy whole. In other words, the whole is only as healthy as its parts.

⁴¹² Pancake, p. 159.

It is a shift of attention from the global to the local bioregions in which real people actually live and move (and not the abstract conceptions of the distant places that we are told ought to dominate our conscious lives). Too, it can be read as an acknowledgement that the local and the global are linked; however, the narrator must come to terms with the fact that the local must come first.⁴¹³ And this shift in attention is a recognition (difficult for the narrator to accept except for the following's influence on her) that the private encounters with the landscape are the necessary grounds of doing, the necessary first steps in a bottom-up and thereby morally consistent model of bioregional ethics. And even though the narrator initially feels guilt about this shift in commitments, she eventually understands the compulsion and the draw of the following the more it tugs at her: "the actual following shifted me into an alignment with a force so grounded that I knew it was the essence of sanity. From beginning to end and then beyond...the following was suffused with a simple matter-of-factness."⁴¹⁴

Further, the narrator is emotionally affected in confusing and powerful ways by this grounded, essential force. Though she knows that the following will end in bones, she is never certain until confronted with clear, incontrovertible evidence. And, as soon as she receives confirmation from the external ecosystem that the following has indeed led her to its conclusion, she is moved to tears that she has difficulty understanding, though she is comforted by them:

After the tears, as always, the spontaneous upgush of gratitude, not exactly for the bone, but for the reassurance that the following had once again been right. And on the heels of the gratitude—the hardest of all for me to accept, to understand, yet also less ambiguous

⁴¹³ Though we would do well to mind Wendell Berry's correct analysis that "global thinking is not possible....Unless one is willing to be destructive on a very large scale, one cannot do something except locally, in a small place" (*Sex, Economy, Freedom, & Community*, Pantheon Books, 1993, p. 20). Berry also reminds us that "abstraction is what is wrong" with thinking globally because it has an inherent "inability to distinguish one place...from another" (22).

⁴¹⁴ Pancake, p. 160

than anything else—love....As though my heart were speaking directly with what moves the world, and me registering the profundity of that communication in my eyes, but the communication was so far beyond my ken that my self could touch only its rim.⁴¹⁵

These tears are the reassurance that the ethical shift from the global to the local not only is the right course for both healing and ecologically sustainable behavior but also that the guiding force for this behavior comes up from the ground, from “what moves the world.” It is the landscape itself, the Genius of Place that underwrites and guarantees and generates the moral compunction to live sustainably in place and in communion with oneself, with one’s family, and with one’s community.

Just as it is essential to acknowledge the ground of being for the bioregional ethics that Pancake forwards through the stories in *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley*, it is further essential to acknowledge that it is with her heart that the narrator speaks with what moves the world, that it localizes her after bringing her into alignment with itself, that it causes her to express gratitude and love not just for the bones but for her own self: “Love your mute chest,” she says.⁴¹⁶ Still further, this love and localization cause her to consider “[h]ow might the following play out in mountains so much more ancient than the Olympics, the Cascades?”⁴¹⁷ After being brought into alignment, after feeling love and gratitude for the exterior beings (plant and animal) the following leads her to, the narrator understands the necessity of localist consideration of moral commitments to the bioregion, and this understanding is not a mind-knowing but a chest-knowing. This is something she must first feel in her ancestral home in the Appalachian mountains, the place where the following pulls the strongest (because the power has

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., p. 156, 161.

⁴¹⁶ Pancake, p. 162.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., p. 163.

rooted itself in the oldness of the hills for a much longer geological time than elsewhere), for the story suggests that only then will she be able to renegotiate moral commitments to a different bioregion should she choose to return to the Pacific Northwest in the afterlife of the story.

Indeed, she understands this so deeply that the narrator acknowledges the physical (and spiritual) distinctions between human behavior towards the Cascadian bioregion and the Appalachian bioregion. How might the following play out, she asks “on land that had suffered greater hurt, land being destroyed faster and more spectacularly than almost anywhere else in the besieged United States, land that was itself a Great Loss of These Times?”⁴¹⁸ Too, how might the following play out in a land the narrator has had a deep, personal connection to? The ecological degradation and the violence done to the Appalachian region serves to help the narrator and readers to understand the intense locality of how choices made about living in place affect the bioregion in which chosen practices are carried out. Specifically, the narrator is lead to acknowledge that “the bone following would speak a little louder in Appalachia than it had so far.”⁴¹⁹

And as should come as no surprise to readers, the following does indeed speak louder to the narrator in Appalachia than it did in the west. Pancake creates the narrator as a character who is quiet about why the following speaks louder in her home bioregion other than the ecological factors. However, we can conclude at least tentatively (based on the evidence that has been presented throughout) that part of the louder communication between what moves the world and the narrator’s heart is the fact that Appalachia is her local bioregion—it is the land that has shaped her with its own ethical commitments and biological and cultural speciation. Yet, it takes time and distance for the narrator is even able to understand and feel that the following will

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., p. 163-164.

⁴¹⁹ Pancake, p. 164.

speak louder elsewhere; in its first instances, the following is not as powerful as it becomes throughout the story. Through this process, Pancake appears to suggest that alignment with the values and morals deriving from the landscape takes time—that it takes an intimate, private, and individual communion with a particular local place for that knowledge to emerge and take root and grow. Like her dog Shea, the narrator “had no shape in her brain to receive” what the following would show her.⁴²⁰

Too, the shapes that have built up over time in the narrator’s mind are shifted when she actually confronts the landscape in the West Virginia portion of the Appalachian bioregion in which she grew up. Understandably (though no less devastatingly) the landscape has changed in the time since she left for the Pacific Northwest, and it is clear that the hegemony of the extractive, impositional ethical system has been firmly established. In fifty miles, the narrator passes several billboards “exalting natural gas, including one where solemn steelworkers photographed in 1950s black-and-white passed a metal baton to fully colorized, grinning hydrofrackers.”⁴²¹ She passes “these chain restaurants and gas stations, the strip malls hacked into hillsides,” “the edge of [her] first mountaintop-removal mine,” her first “drilling rig, spearing through trees in the near distance,” and paeans to the extractive processes that have led to the disintegration of the Appalachian bioregion.⁴²²

That the masters of the extractive ethics advertise to the people they have imposed their systems upon suggests a religious element to the morals attendant with the coal/gas industries—there is a need to proselytize the “goodness” of gas and coal to those who work in the mines in

⁴²⁰ Ibid., p. 165. The dog could not make sense of the horses she sees for the first time. I have removed only the word “horse” from the quotation to make the connection here clear.

⁴²¹ Pancake, p. 165.

⁴²² Ibid. The entire list takes up almost a full half-page in this story. I have picked out some of the clearest examples of impositional ethical systems in order to make my point clearer to readers.

order to convince them that their labor is valuable. Of course, as shown with the discussion of *River of Earth*, the hidden truth is that the resources do not provide local benefit to those within the bioregion but to those on the outside. For those that would see, the landscape attempts to communicate that hurt, to communicate its colonization by the outside and non-local ethical systems that it presents to those dwellers in the land.

As the narrator begins to explore the wooded areas of this hacked apart place, she sees that “almost all the vegetation was still black and brown, white and gray, a sobering contrast to the Pacific Northwest’s winter-long green...and for the first time, I saw the green as deceptive.”⁴²³ That there are seasons in Appalachia as opposed to the Northwest is an obvious fact that can be easily overlooked once one has adjusted to the local place one is in (just like the narrator has). That these seasons are governed by landscape features, ocean currents, winds, and so forth (i.e., objective, biological, ecological, and meteorological determinants) is also an obvious fact that can easily be overlooked, and indeed the narrator has overlooked the absolute authority landscape has over the cycle of the seasons in Appalachia. The green becomes deceptive in Appalachia because lushness and fullness of growth is not the normal existence for vegetable or animal or human life. Too, the deceptive green becomes a mirror for what is happening to the Appalachian bioregion. This deception is revealed to the narrator by the landscape itself: “This place told you. Look. Understand. Half the time, I am dead.”⁴²⁴ Within the context of the story, there is also a sense of foreboding—the following always leads the narrator to bones, the Appalachian bioregion is being systematically destroyed by imperialist, extractive ethics, its half deadness likely will at some point become a whole deadness.

⁴²³ Ibid., p. 167.

⁴²⁴ Pancake, p. 167.

Importantly, the following directs the narrator's gaze outward as much as it does inward. The narrator is clearly affected by the following—feeling love and gratitude and expressing her chest-knowing through tears—but the following that comes from the land and leads her back to Appalachia impels her to look out and understand. It is the same imperative force that Jorie Graham would later express in her collection *Fast*: “look up, look out—there is always the world.”⁴²⁵ And when the narrator looks out and understands, what she finds, what she is led to by the following, are bones. Her understanding of what the bones mean, of why the following always ends in bones comes slowly.

Pancake only reveals to readers why once the narrator has returned to the Appalachian bioregion. Bones are the remnants of the once-living; “[w]hat's left last.” the narrator tells readers, “Things supposed to be buried. Pushing up through graveyard grass.”⁴²⁶ The bones are the physical reminders of death; they are seen literally and figuratively as emblems of the dead, and yet they have pushed up through the ground and have remained there for anyone to find should they come across the bones. Too, until the narrator arrives in Appalachia, she has only encountered partial reminders of death uncovered—pieces of bone or skeleton, the leg of an elk. Yet here, where the following speaks louder, the bones become more complete; the first time the following takes her in Appalachia she finds a total skeleton, that of a dog. Though this finding brings her own loss back to her conscious life and fills her with grief, still she is taken by the “transcendent gratitude” of previous followings and feels the love “embracing, containing, the entire welter” of the experience.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁵ Graham, Jorie. “From The Enmeshments.” *Fast*, Ecco, 2018, p. 12.

⁴²⁶ Pancake, p. 168.

⁴²⁷ Pancake, p. 170.

And then the narrator finds the fully fleshed body of a hawk. Just dead (she sees the first beetle approach the corpse), the hawk represents the naked immediacy of death within the Appalachian bioregion. This body is the culmination of the following for the narrator; it is where she has been being led the entire time she has been subject to the following's will. It is her final coming to terms with loss in the story. And yet it is not just personal loss that she faces up to here, even though she initially feels the desire to flee from the hawk's body. It is bioregional loss that she begins to understand and come to terms with. It is the final alignment of herself with the landscape's moral system, the set of behaviors that will change her and change her relationship to the homeplace of her past.

What the narrator begins to understand in the presence of the hawk's body is the objective necessity of confronting death's ubiquitous and abject presence in every ecosystem. Though we are not told what has killed the hawk (and indeed it matters not one bit to Pancake's controlling theme in the story), we are meant to understand the freshness of this corpse within the context of the devastated Appalachian bioregion. The tension Pancake creates here rests between the human-caused degradation of the local landscape, the natural cycle of death and growth, and the narrator's orientation towards each. Certainly she is caught up in both, imbricated in between the extractive and the biological. The narrator does have cause for anger and for grief—the invading cosmopolitanism and industry have ravaged and hacked and flattened into convenient homogeneity. Yet she does not express anger at the destruction; rather she feels what she has always felt when the following grounds her and leads her to bones:

And wrapping me, the odd objective love. I stood over the hawk, my palms open at my sides, my cheeks sticky with tears. This time, I held. The revulsion and the tenderness, the grotesque and the gift. The numinous and the dismemberment, the terror, the bliss.

My heart dilating to accommodate the paradox, the contraries interpenetrating, I felt them, until what they made together burst free of me, and I hovered inside of that. The hawk blurred below me, the ground around me, the trees, the sky. I didn't end at my skin.⁴²⁸

The narrator understands the inherent dignity in all organisms, and by the end of the paragraph she understands the inherent dignity in place, especially the places in which we dwell. It is a whole life ethic that the narrator comes to terms with, an ethic that affirms the love and gratitude we inherently owe to everything and everyone else around us—even those that cause harm. Both tenderness and revulsion, the gift and the grotesque are caught up together in the following, and they blend forming something greater than they would separate from each other. What the narrator begins to feel is her own embeddedness, that she is an inextricable part of this ecosystem and is thereby obligated to act in certain ways towards it. Pancake suggests that this way is the way of love and gratitude, not of hate or envy—the desire to destroy or to take from another what you yourself do not have or think you are owed.

Rather, it is the way of love that the following leads the narrator through, ending with the contemplation of a freshly dead hawk. What we see in the above quotation, which appears on the final page of the story, is the inability of the human person to contain the way of love: it must burst forth, and it must connect the person to all things outside of itself. The body, the chest-knowing cannot contain or control the way of love either; rather it must engage in the process of “dilating to accommodate the paradox” of the way of love and gratitude.⁴²⁹ With the narrator's recognition that she does not end at her skin, readers are made aware (along with the narrator) that love must be outwardly focused if it is to have any bearing on the ecosystems of which it is

⁴²⁸ Pancake, p. 172.

⁴²⁹ Pancake, p. 172.

objectively a part. Love is always *for* another. It is directed away from the self, even through the self, towards the other to whom love is given as a gift.

And it should be made clear from “The Following” that love does not originate within the human person; instead, it enters into the human person from without, shaping her personhood, her character, and her virtues, giving her the capacity and desire to live in the world as a human person—that is, as a being who loves another and does not hate. It is only love, the kind of love that shows us how embedded we are in the ecosystems around us (in the lives of the plants and the animals and the other persons in it), that can show us the way forward, the way to live sustainably and ethically. It is only this kind of love that can teach us to sit still, be led, and listen to the land help us answer the questions “How now shall we live?” and “What kind of persons shall we be?” The narrator, at the end, knows what kind of person she will choose to be; she will be one who follows the leading of the following. When it leaves her, she records a final meditation: “In the grounded peace the following left behind, I trusted I’d take the right way....I understood I would not lose anything that had already come to me. But I also knew I’d found no final word.”⁴³⁰ The following has led the narrator to the right way, and it was only by learning to love another and by facing up to the reality of death and loss, accepting the leading of the land and its aged wisdom, that she was able to understand that objective love will heal and be the grounding for sustainable being and doing.

⁴³⁰ Pancake, p. 172.

Coda: “Look Up, Look Out, There is Always the World”

Humans of the twenty-first century have difficulties with limitations being placed upon them. This difficulty of accepting limits in an increasingly globalized world is fairly self-evident. We have seen the tension of a place-based ecological ethic within a degrading and degraded global climate and the difficulty of advancing a localist ethic of sustainability in that climate. Daily we see discourse within the public (and academic) spheres representing the human person’s attempt to supersede the ecologically- and biologically-determined limits set in place *a priori*. Defenders of industrial farming and food production, of “technologically superior” supply chain models, and of more and more uprooted trade all dominate the popular consciousness seemingly without regard for the long-term consequences of such behavior. This is of course more polemical than may perhaps be useful, but the point remains: humans have difficulty with limitations imposed upon them.

This dissertation has argued for a reconsideration of the necessity of limits. It has attempted to combine the domains of virtue ethics in literature and ecological literary criticism with more recent discussions within literary-cultural studies about virtue ethics and “more-than-human” studies within the social sciences. Doing so has led this dissertation to maintain that a bioregional virtue ethics can help us understand the pedagogical implications of literature and the necessary limits that our localized ecosystems place upon us. Understanding how humans are actually positioned in particular places and cognizing how we can best live most sustainably and ethically within those places helps us to see how the human person is always and forever subject to ecological and biological limits that we ought never to try to exceed (nor could we if we were able to try). Rather, places make demands upon the human person. We are required to hydrate in the desert, seek treatment for allergies in high-pollen areas, deal with salt corrosion by the sea,

respond to inevitable flooding when we build below sea level or in “reclaimed” swampland. We are always forced to contend with that which is beyond our control, and we cannot ignore that conflict for long without disastrous consequences, especially if we deny our localization as human persons within particular places.

And yet as Wendell Berry reminds us (whose humble work and unflinchingly blunt castigation of industrial agriculture has been enormously influential on this project), we are always already localized; we are always already in place, and that place comes with its own processes and systems and laws (natural or otherwise) that preexist us. Cognizing this empirical fact results in, generally, two possible teleologies for the human person, which I have discussed throughout this project: *oikophilia* and *oikophobia*. It is the love or hatred of the place in which one is rooted; this is one of the central factors that motivate both our behavior towards and perceptions of the place in which we live and move and have our being—inevitably so. Either relation to the *oikos* can result in idealizations of the place (positive and negative) such that hatred or love of place can be directed towards a version that never existed outside of the thinking mind. And yet, it is more often indifference (or perhaps aversion or even hatred) that leaves us unrooted and predisposed to working for the destruction of those places we are inevitably tied to—predisposes us to seeing a place as merely resources rather than an imbricated system of inter-dependencies.

This is where literature can serve and has served as a corrective to human behavior throughout the ages. Specifically in the context of this project, literature, I argue, serves as an ethical and bioregional corrective for destructive behavior. By holding up for readers’ contemplation characters who are forced to contend with that which is both empirically outside of them and completely beyond their control (despite whatever fiction of control motivates their

cognition), the authors discussed in this project present the multiplicity of knowing and being in place. They demonstrate that situatedness (and the moral obligations required of being situated in particular bioregions and places) is always couched within social, ecological, cultural, and political context. They show that this knowledge comes to our understanding within a nexus formed by all of the contexts we have been brought up in, and that knowledge (and being) is always in the process of becoming—it is never finished.

To live sustainably in place, in other words, requires a hard look at the bioregions we live in, a look that at the same time seeks to understand the constraints of the place and aims to subject the human will to the *a priori* ecological concepts that govern whatever place we are in; in other words, submitting to the ecological and biological limitations that we, as twenty-first-century human persons, have a hard time accepting. If we are in the desert, we must live a certain way, or we die. We must care for the land a certain way, or it dies. Though perhaps we feel this deeply in our bones, it is easy to shut out but impossible to eradicate. At some point, we will be called into account for the actions we have taken towards the land we have lived in, have loved, have hated, and so forth. This is why we must look hard at the place, to correct our behavior while still there is time.

And this is part of the function of the literature discussed within this dissertation—to aid us in the discovery of the concepts that will enable us to enact the several virtues in place (including humility, temperance, prudence, justice, courage, and so forth). By providing us with an imaginative example, an illustration we can inhabit and test out, the authors discussed here provide us with the means to access the knowledge for living ethically within human community and for living sustainably within places. The ability of literature to allow readers to test out different ways of being and thinking, different ways of approaching and cognizing the world is

one of its important functions—if not its most important function. This is one of the central things that literature is good for (in addition to being good in itself). What testing out allows us to do is evaluate behavior, make distinctions and judgements about them, and change our own behavior in response. Literature cannot make us more empathetic, but it can teach us to be better persons through illustration.

The lessons taught through these illustrations is, in one sense, quite simple and the same no matter where we go: practice the sustainable virtues, do not exhaust the land, take responsibility for your actions, accept and submit to the ecological and biological limitations of existence. Yet the particular applications in the ways of living in a place—of farming or of irrigation or of building communities—look different. Though the general principles remain the same, how we live sustainably in Appalachia will look different in action than how we live sustainably in the desert. Though this project has not attempted (and indeed this is outside of its scope) to outline the particular applications of a bioregional ethics in different places, it has suggested how each landscape demands *something* of each individual character who has resisted (or become subject to) the landscape's bioregional necessities. Indeed, this agency in the material world is that which enables dwelling in the land and that which enables the human person to position itself within the confines of a determined landscape. Though this agency, in this project, is merely an imaginative representation within the confines of a novel, we can clearly see *a posteriori* that what these novels represent have a ring of truth to them.

As such, the ideas and methods presented throughout this dissertation have applications beyond the domain of the humanities. I have always thought of this project as interdisciplinary in nature, dancing the lines between moral philosophy, literary studies, religious studies, and various social sciences. Indeed, as I acknowledged in my introduction, for the social sciences and

philosophy, the questions asked here are not necessarily new in any respect. What is new, however, is the focus on literature and what literature (as well as its methodological apparatuses) have to offer social theorists, geographers, philosophers, religious scholars (and religious adherents), and other groups who have vested interests in healthy communities and sustainable practices.

I have also always considered this project as the opening gestures in something much larger than a dissertation or a single book would be able to accomplish. Still to discuss is the inevitable pushback against a rigorous, demanding emphasis on the local and bottom-up solutions to global problems. Of course, as I have argued throughout, “global problems” is the wrong focus. We can only change minds and practices at the local level; we must, indeed fix local problems, which will in turn enable us to fix global problems (which is to say, the “global problems” will have been addressed because no problem is at root global). However, within questions of proper scale of action and community, we can indeed consider ways in which larger scales can work in concert with smaller scales; in other words we ought to consider how, for example, a novel presents a moral mode of being within a larger, more “global” context. How might a novel like *Gravity’s Rainbow* or *Infinite Jest* demonstrate ethics when the setting of these novels represents a systematically centralized political-ideological discourse? How would the characters and their encounters with new and particular places change their relationship to those places, especially if we consider how those characters work in concert with or even against the larger system within the novel?

Furthermore, one of the other possibilities this project suggests is how density would impact the communities and behaviors necessary for healthy communities. To that end, it would be worthwhile to consider how bioregional virtue ethics would be represented in and derived

from literature set in major cities. How might the methods I have forwarded here need to be adapted to a novel that has little-to-know description of the natural world (trees, grasses, plants, animals, etc.) but it full of descriptions of the built environment (buildings, transportation, concrete, glass, steel, etc.)? We might consider novels like Ann Petry's *The Street*, Toni Morrison's *Song Of Solomon*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, or others that serve to represent contrasts to the more rural examples I have selected for this project (though Still, Pancake, Silko, and McCarthy do consider somewhat the movement of the industrial-cosmopolitan outwards). Following after the work of William Gleason on built environments, how might these novels represent bioregional ethics differently? How might we conceive of places like Chicago or New Orleans or London or New York City as bioregions that require human submission to ecological and biological limitations in order for human and sustainably community to flourish and not perish?

And furthermore, what do we stand to gain from such a shift away from the thick descriptions of natural landscape that this project has considered? What changes when we analyze a sense of characters forced to contend with that which is outside their control when that thing is completely and utterly an imposed human construct? What ethical issues would be forced to consider and what moral action would we have to take to make those ethical issues practicably actionable?

While another project would be equipped to tackle such things, I have chosen instead to focus her on more natural, rural, and clearly bioregional descriptions of the world within American literature—a choice I have made because they do indeed represent characters who cognize their insignificance in the world they live in. I have also chosen these texts because of my love for them; even beyond their appropriateness for the project, my affection for these

novels has given me the will and desire to write about them, to make something of them that (hopefully) has enhanced what their authors have already made of them. Affection, it could be said, was the motivating force of this dissertation, and if I am demanding of my readers when it comes to the necessity of living morally and sustainably in place with a view to oikophilia, this is why. And we would do well to remember that Wendell Berry has taught us that it all turns on affection, motivated “by such love for a place and its life that [we] want to preserve it and remain in it.”⁴³¹

⁴³¹ Berry, Wendell. “It All Turns on Affection.” *It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays*. Counterpoint Press, 3rd ed., 2012, p. 11.

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