

OWNING AND BELONGING:
SOUTHERN LITERATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT, 1903 – 1979

A Dissertation

by

MICHAEL J. BEILFUSS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2012

Major Subject: English

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	M. Jimmie Killingsworth
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ABSTRACT

Owning and Belonging:

Southern Literature and the Environment, 1903 – 1979. (August 2012)

Michael J. Beilfuss, B.A., SUNY New Paltz; M.A., SUNY New Paltz

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. M. Jimmie Killingsworth

This dissertation engages a number of currents of environmental criticism and rhetoric in an analysis of the poetry, fiction, and non-fiction of the southeastern United States. I examine conceptions of genitive relationships with the environment as portrayed in the work of diverse writers, primarily William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neal Hurston, and Elizabeth Madox Roberts. Southern literature is rarely addressed in ecocritical studies, and to date no work offers an intensive and focused examination of the rhetoric employed in conceptions of environmental ownership. However, southern literature and culture provides fertile ground to trace the creation, development, and communication of environmental values because of its history of agrarianism, slavery, and a literary tradition committed to a sense of place.

I argue that the concerns of the two main distinctive threads of environmental literary scholarship—ecopoetics and environmentalism of the poor—neatly overlap in the literature of the South. I employ rhetorical theory and phenomenology to argue that southern authors call into question traditional forms of writing about nature—such as

pastoral, the sublime, and wilderness narratives—to reinvent and revitalize those forms in order to develop and communicate modes of reciprocal ownership of natural and cultural environments. These writers not only imagine models of personal and communal coexistence with the environment, but also provide new ways of thinking about environmental justice. The intersection of individual and social relationships with history and nature in Southern literature provides new models for thinking about environmental relationships and how they are communicated. I argue that expressions of environmental ownership and belonging suggest how individuals and groups can better understand their distance and proximity to their environments, which may result in new valuations of personal and social environmental relationships.

DEDICATION

For Kimberly, with whom I belong

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

“The current ecological crisis must be understood, I think, not just as an array of technical problems but as a genuine crisis of spirit and imagination” (Gatta vii).

“To me the land I have is always there, waiting for me, and it’s a part of me, way inside me; it’s as much me as my own arms and legs” (a “yeoman farmer” in the “deep South,” qtd. in Tuan 97).

At the end of “Delta Autumn,” the penultimate story in William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*, the old and feeble Isaac McCaslin, the last and only (white) heir to the McCaslin patriarchy, ruminates on his relationship with the wilderness as he lies on a cot in his party’s hunting camp. Compared to the wilderness, he sees the hunting camp as a “puny evanescent clutter of human sojourn” and concludes that within a week of their departure the wilderness would be “completely healed, traceless in the unmarked solitude.” He feels gifted with this insight “Because it was his land, although he never owned a foot of it. He had never wanted to, not even after he saw plain its ultimate doom, [...] because it belonged to no man. It belonged to all; they had only to use it well, humbly and with pride” (337). The passage is fraught with paradox. Isaac envisions the wilderness quickly healed and yet ultimately doomed; it is *his* land, although he does not own “a foot of it;” it belongs to no one, yet to everyone; it demands to be used with humility *and* pride.

This dissertation follows the style of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*.

In another story earlier in the same book, Faulkner informs the reader of Lucas Beauchamp's relationship with the land. Lucas, the son of a former slave, shares a parallel branch and position with Isaac on the convoluted McCaslin family tree—they both claim the *pater familias* Carothers McCaslin as their grandfather. Similar to Isaac's relationship with the wilderness, the land that Lucas inhabits is "his own [...] though he neither owned it nor wanted to nor needed to. He had been cultivating it for forty-five years [...] plowing and planting and working it when and how he saw fit" (35). Faulkner explains and reiterates Lucas's "ownership" of the land near the end of the story: he was "allotted [...] a specific acreage to be farmed as he saw fit as long as he lived or remained on" the McCaslin plantation (106). Cleanth Brooks was perhaps the first to note that Isaac and Lucas "are by far the most important figures in *Go Down, Moses*" (253). Their importance lies in part in how Faulkner treats their respective relationships with the land. Their interactions with the southern landscape are strikingly divergent, and yet they both provide examples of environmental ethics that are well worth considering, particularly since their ethics are expressed through the rhetoric of ownership and belonging. The wilderness becomes a place for mystical encounters with nature while the farm acts as a location for sustaining and sustainable practice. In both portrayals of human-nature relationships, Faulkner employs a mode of ecopoetics within a bioregional framework while also anticipating an environmental justice outlook.

Throughout *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner reiterates the idea that neither Isaac nor Lucas owns the land in the sense of holding legal title; nevertheless, he reaffirms that they each own the land in some other way. In a confused attempt at justice, Isaac

relinquishes his legal claim to the McCaslin plantation to repudiate his heritage, atone for the sins of his slave-holding forebears, and live by a code of wilderness ethics. Lucas, on the other hand, demands his “birthright,” a cash settlement along with his allotted acreage deeded to him by the McCaslin patriarch to atone for his sins, and attempts to live by a code of agrarian ethics. Isaac repudiates his heritage in his twenty-first year, and he is the McCaslin representative from whom Lucas demands his legacy on his twenty-first birthday. Unlike Isaac, Lucas asserts a claim-right to the land as well as the power to use it and benefit from it. But both Isaac and Lucas, according to Faulkner, *own* the land.

Owning an environment is not the same as possessing property. Jonathan Bate argues in *The Song of the Earth* that “To inhabit is not to possess. Dwelling is not owning; you may own a house without it being a home; you may find a dwelling place that you do not legally own” (279-280). Bate aligns himself with Thoreau, who, as Bate remarks, thought that “property ownership was not a right but an encumbrance” (279). Lucas Beauchamp expresses the encumbrance of land ownership in much the same way Thoreau thought of it. He does not want to actually own the land because, “it was not Lucas who paid taxes insurance and interest or owned anything which had to be kept ditched drained fenced and fertilized” (58). He enjoys the privilege and liberty the property provides him, but he avoids the liability and the duty that property ownership entails. For Isaac McCaslin part of the encumbrance of ownership includes the weight of guilt he feels for an historical exploitation of both land and people from which his family profited. However, if Thoreau’s conception is viewed from the perspective of a poor

sharecropper or migrant worker, land ownership is anything but an encumbrance, or rather, the encumbrance is that the people who own the land enjoy the privilege and benefits of ownership while the sharecropper is encumbered with the duties and liabilities. And contrary to these views, there are those such as the “yeoman farmer” quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, who feel a special attachment to their land.

The writers examined in this dissertation employ a rhetoric of ownership while engaging these different conceptions of owning and belonging and provide new ways of imagining and communicating the various benefits and drawbacks of varying degrees of proximity and distance from the land and environment. The primary texts I work with are William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*, Robert Penn Warren’s *Brother to Dragons*, W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Elizabeth Madox Roberts’s *Time of Man*. With the exception of Du Bois, each of the writers are considered Southern and they write about the South. Although Du Bois cannot be considered “Southern” by any stretch of the imagination, I include *The Souls of Black Folk* in my analysis for a number of reasons. Much of the book is explicitly concerned with Southern culture and the Southern landscape. I focus on two chapters in the work that feature narratives set in Tennessee and Georgia and detail the plight of the local population as well as local relationships with the natural world as it is expressed in the particular bioregions under discussion. Du Bois offers the perspective of an outsider traveling through the South and exploring its history of land use—and thereby offers a perspective not available in most Southern works. Despite his position as an outsider, Du Bois identifies with the local black population, and engages

the social history in such a way as to provide new ways of interpreting environmental relationships as experienced by black Southerners.

Other than Faulkner and Hurston, the authors addressed in this dissertation are not typically thought of as nature writing, and even less so as environmental texts. While Faulkner and Hurston have received some attention from ecocritics, the ecocriticism on the other authors is scant or non-existent. Yet, they all express a desire to understand the land and human relationships with it, with the goal of developing closer bonds with the environment, not just for the privileged, but for all people, particularly those who are often marginalized by the dominant culture. In their own ways, they each fulfill the four criteria of an “environmentally oriented work” that Lawrence Buell proposes in his influential book *The Environmental Imagination*, namely: “1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history [...]. 2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest [...]. 3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation [...]. 4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text” (7-8). Each of the authors addressed in this dissertation exhibits a keen awareness and concern for such environmental attitudes through explorations of individuals that are enmeshed in a reciprocal relationship with their environment. While Wendell Berry’s ideas have informed some of my own, I do not examine his work at length in this dissertation because, unlike the other authors, his work has been examined extensively by ecocritics.

I draw on Faulkner's novel *Go Down, Moses* in this introduction as a case study for a number of reasons: it more or less fulfills Buell's criteria of an "environmentally oriented work" while remaining a distinctly southern work—a region often ignored by ecocritics. While Hurston's novel has had some attention from ecocritics, it cannot compare to the widespread attention devoted to Faulkner's work from a wide array of ecocritics. Most importantly, Faulkner's novel provides an opportunity to examine the intersections of modes of ecocriticism that have been largely divergent and fragmented in their developments over the past decade or so. An eco-poetic response to the natural world, a bioregional framework, and a sense of social and environmental justice pervade Faulkner's novel. His treatment of environmental ownership and belonging, of proximity to and distance from nature, coupled with his concern for racial and social questions suggest that eco-poetics, bioregionalism, and environmental justice criticism can operate simultaneously. Each of these approaches to environmental relationships are promoted and challenged to their mutual benefit with the aim of finding common ground in their distinct rhetorical appeals.

I use the term "environment" rather inclusively in its etymological sense of "surroundings." The manner in which proximity and distance to the surroundings is understood not only influences the way a subject values and views his or her responsibility for those surroundings, it can also indicate how a subject interprets his or her relationships with others in the same culture as well as in neighboring and distant (both geographical and social) cultures. But as Wendell Berry points out, the very use of the term "environment" can imply an assumed separation and distance between a subject

and what surrounds him or her. Early in *The Unsettling of America* Berry argues that the concept of a dwelling-place can be

simplified as “the environment”—that is, what surrounds us. Once we see our place, our part of the world, as *surrounding* us, we have already made a profound division between it and ourselves. We have given up the understanding—dropped it out of our language and so out of our thought—that we and our country create one another, depend on one another, are literally part of one another; that our land passes in and out of our bodies just as our bodies pass in and out of our land; that as we and our land are part of one another, so all who are living as neighbors here, human and plant and animal, are part of one another, and so cannot possibly flourish alone; that, therefore, our culture must be our response to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other, and so neither can be better than the other.

(22)

In Faulkner, as in the other writers examined in this dissertation, the environment can only be understood in the inclusive manner that Berry lays out—the land, country, home, and dwelling-place. As Berry suggests, reciprocity is not just an imaginative creation, but also a fact of biology. As much as a culture imagines it can distance itself from natural world by managing, controlling, conquering, or even destroying the environment, it is reminded of a ceaseless proximity to nature—often through some kind of tragedy or disaster such as food-borne illnesses, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, drought, etc. The

environment does not only include the natural world or biological processes of nature in which all people are enmeshed, it also includes crafted nature (gardens, parks, and agricultural) and built environments (houses, cabins, roads, businesses, Main Street), as well as more elusive “surroundings” such as time and history, community and culture, race and class, and so on. An understanding of reciprocity between subjects and their entire environment pervades the texts studied here. I argue that in order to understand human relationships with nature and how they are communicated, and to alleviate humanity’s impact on the natural world, it is imperative to closely examine the rhetoric of environmental ownership.

Regionalism and Bioregionalism in the Southern Environment

Bioregionalism began as a subset of the developing environmental movement in the 1970s, primarily in western North America, and it has been an important aspect of ecocriticism since its inception. In their 2012 book *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology and Place*, the editors Tom Lynch, Cheryl Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster explain that “there is no official bioregional program or ideology” but rather a continuing dialogue that foregrounds “natural factors as a way to envision place” and proposes “that human identity may be constituted by our residence in a larger community of natural beings” (3-4). As Buell, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber make clear, “First-wave ecocriticism attached special value to the aesthetics and ethics of place-attachment at a local or regional scale as modeled in the bioregional thinking of such environmental writer-critics as Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder” (420). A similar

sense of place has likewise long been a special concern of southern writers and literary critics, and although the “concept of place has always been of central interest to literature-environment studies” (Buell et al. 420), and despite Wendell Berry’s position at the genesis of ecocriticism, southern literary studies and environmental literary criticism have seldom intersected.

While a regional perspective has been an important aspect of ecocriticism, and the South is often first in line to be labeled “regionalist,” until recently ecocritical works have been largely confined to examining the literature of the Northeast and Western United States, mostly ignoring the literature of the South. The recent turn in ecocriticism away from the regional and national literatures of the global North to more cosmopolitan literatures often centered in the global South (influenced in part by postcolonial studies) has faulted first-wave ecocriticism for its often exclusive focus on nature writing as traditionally conceived in Great Britain and the United States. A who’s who of traditional American environmental literature reads like a chronicle of Transcendental thought and the literature of the West: Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, John Muir, Wallace Stegner, Edward Abbey, Terry Tempest Williams, Gary Snyder, Leslie Marmon Silko, etc. There are of course some notable exceptions where ecocritics examine southern writers beside Wendell Berry. Cormac McCarthy has been examined by ecocritics as well, although it is telling that much of the ecocriticism that addresses McCarthy focuses on his later Western novels rather than the earlier southern works. Faulkner’s story “The Bear,” which features Isaac McCaslin’s apprenticeship into a wilderness ethic, is often addressed by ecocritics, but they rarely examine the rest of the novel in which the story

appears, let alone the other works in Faulkner's oeuvre. Buell's influential work *The Environmental Imagination* provides a good case in point of early ecocriticism's proclivity for the Northeast and its neglect of the South. Fewer than a dozen passing references to Faulkner are scattered throughout the nearly 600-page study, and in Buell's estimation, the story is reduced to a "'patriarchal' wilderness romance" (16).

There has been some fruitful interaction between ecocritics and Faulkner scholars, generated in part by two Faulkner conferences and their subsequent publications: *Faulkner and the Natural World* (Kartiganer and Abadie 1999) and *Faulkner and the Ecology of the South* (Urgo and Abadie 2005). By and large the essays in both books are written by Faulkner and/or southern literature scholars, not by writers primarily identified as ecocritics, with a few notable exceptions: Scott Slovic, Ann Fisher-Wirth, Louise Westling, and Buell. In the earlier work, which followed his *Environmental Imagination*, Buell contributes an essay where he expands his reading of *Go Down, Moses* and offers a more nuanced examination of the novel. He takes the entire work into consideration (rather than just the popular story "The Bear") and argues that a knowledge of "environmental history can illuminate Faulkner's fiction in unexpected ways" (3) and that although Faulkner "never fully formulated an environmental ethic" (6) the stories in *Go Down, Moses* represent "exceptionally rich meditations in environmental ethics" (16). Buell maintains, however, "for Faulkner, environmental issues were usually a secondary concern" and that *Go Down, Moses* began and ended "more as a race book than as an environmental book" (14). This claim, which seems to rest strictly on Buell's criteria of an "environmentally oriented work,"

divorces the natural environment from the broader environment—one that includes the social and cultural history of a place as well as its particular natural attributes. While it may be true that for Faulkner race was the main concern of the book, it is also true that for Faulkner race and the environment in the South are concomitant concerns, an issue I will return to below when I discuss the environmental justice movement and the ecocritical approach called “environmentalism of the poor.”

One reason for the paucity of ecocritical attention to southern literature may be due to the ways regionalism departs from bioregionalism, as well as some of the particular attributes assigned to specifically southern regionalism. The South cannot be described as a unified bioregion, which, as Robert L. Thayer explains, is typically defined by “watersheds, similar plant and animal ecosystems, and related identifiable landforms” (qtd. in Lynch et al. 3). The Atlantic coastal piedmont, the Appalachian Mountains, the Mississippi drainage and Delta, and the Gulf Coast, each represent starkly different bioregions, yet it is taken for granted that when critics speak of “the South” they are lumping together Virginia, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Florida among other states. What defines the region as the South, beside the fictive (and yet not insignificant) boundary of the Mason Dixon line, has been debated at least since the Southern Renaissance. To arrive at a satisfying answer to the question, “what is the South?,” lies beyond the purview of this dissertation. But to begin to conceptualize the South, I refer to Scott Romine, who provides some examples of the criteria that have been used to define and differentiate what is “southern:”

(1) geographically, as a region defined by political or other boundaries; (2) economically, as a region having a distinctive system of labor; as a material ‘base’ in the classic Marxist sense; (3) ideologically, as a region differentiated by collective (or at least public) norms, laws, practices, and codes that determine or influence both behavior and subjectivity; as a hegemony; (4) culturally, as a region with distinctive patterns of speech, leisure, folkways, ritual, food preferences, and the like; (5) historically, as a region defined by its past or by the presence of ‘the past in the present’; as a character in a historical plot; (6) orientationally, as an identification with or positive orientation toward one or more of the preceding ‘Souths.’ (28).

While some of these attributes align with a sense of bioregionalism, one distinctive aspect of bioregionalism is conspicuously absent, namely the natural environment, while one of the defining characteristics of “southern” includes the “arbitrary political boundaries” that bioregionalism attempts to move away from (Lynch et al. 2). One critique of bioregionalism is that while many political boundaries may technically be “arbitrary”—that is they are arbitrated in the sense of being legally and authoritatively determined—they are not necessarily arbitrary in the sense of being insignificant, “capricious,” “uncertain,” or “varying” (*OED*). Greg Garrard argues that bioregions “based on, say, the River Jordan watershed or the Congo, would have to incorporate hostile ethnic groups who are deeply rooted in their geographical locations as presently defined” (119). One need only think of the “arbitrary” state boundary

superimposed on the Ohio River, and what that boundary meant for an escaped slave on the run, to see that political boundaries can be anything but insignificant. Some of these distinctive qualities of southern regionalism and literature can complicate and develop what it means to be enmeshed in a bioregion, and what needs to be included in discussions of the “environment.”

The southern writers examined in this dissertation include time itself as an aspect of the experience of a region and environment. A sense of place is incomplete without a sense of the past. For example, one of the ways Faulkner indicates that Lucas “owns” the land even though he doesn’t actually own it, is by demonstrating how his identity is inextricably bound, through his own volition, to the past of the place. When Lucas is about to tell the current landowner, Roth Edmonds, about an illegal whiskey still on the plantation, Faulkner interrupts the narrative present with a long flashback told from a third-person limited perspective. The flashback details the night of Roth’s birth when Lucas went to get a doctor, and the subsequent power struggle between Lucas and Roth’s father. Faulkner explains that it is not actually a memory, but a more subtle aspect of Lucas’s identity: “Lucas did not need to remember that. He would never forget it” (45). Faulkner even situates the non-memory within Lucas’s natural environment—the sequence begins with a detailed description of the weather and its effect on the landscape: “that night of early spring following ten days of such rain that even the old people remembered nothing to compare it with, and the white man’s wife’s time upon her and the creek out of banks until the whole valley rose, bled a river choked with down timber and drowned livestock until not even a horse could have crossed it” (45).

Faulkner ties significant events in personal history with significant events in nature. The flood even becomes a marker and part of the cultural memory. By the end of story, Roth admits that Lucas owns all aspects of his environment in a way that he never will: “He is both heir and prototype simultaneously of all the geography and climate and biology which sired old Carothers and all the rest of us and our kind, myriad, countless, faceless, even nameless now” (114). In Lucas’s story the connections of landscape and heritage, place and time, and race and class, indicate how southern regionalism can incorporate and contribute to a conception of bioregionalism.

The landscapes of the South addressed in this dissertation are permeated with the history of that landscape, particularly with the culture’s relationship and impact on the environment and the historical impact of the environment on the culture. All the writers discussed in this dissertation enter into a southern landscape that is not only spatial, but temporal as well. Faulkner explains it as “the mystical belief that there is no such thing as was. That time is” (qtd. in Gwynn and Blotner 139). Historical perspective and the ever-present presence of the past allow competing narratives to enter the conversation of southern writing; the moonlight and magnolias are overshadowed by the burden of the past and the juggernaut of chemical and mechanical progress. One cannot speak of agriculture in the South without the history of plantations and slavery looming over the conversation; images of the “Big House” and the slave quarters are present, even if only on a distant horizon.

Yet this horizon closes in when one thinks of the peculiar institution of slavery, the untenable economic system that was based on the commodification of land, people,

and resources, a system that prefigured such things as sharecropping, tenant farming, mountain-top removal mining, and the modern corporate-industrial farm with its ubiquitous monocultures. In a discussion of the growth of “commercial forests” in the South during the 1970s and 1980s, Cowdrey explains that “here were new-model plantations with national corporate boardrooms for Big Houses and the sheepskin-bearing products of forestry schools for overseers” (177-78). The parallels extend well beyond forest management. The modern contract farmer, burdened by debt, “growing” chickens or hogs for the corporate-industrial-agri-giant, moves in an environment that is connected in many ways to the cotton rows of the past.

Due to the many competing narratives present in the South and southern literature it is clear that to speak of the South as a unified whole is inaccurate at best, and destructive of its diversity at worst. It is perhaps more instructive to think of the South and its culture and history as a kind of ecosystem where the interconnections between discreet yet interdependent entities work in harmony, and often in discord, to create a vibrant and lively environment. This is true for the literature of the South as much as it is for the broader ecology, culture, and history. Beside the specific bioregions, the whole tapestry of southern culture, its myths, legends, heroes, villains, the stereotypes and realities, are all also part of the southern region and environment. It includes yeoman farmers, sharecroppers, mountain folk, tidewater communities and ecosystems, virgin forests, clear-cutting, migration, immigration, rootedness, mobility, stasis, urbanization, and struggles with modernity. The writers of the South contend with this richly layered and interwoven fabric. Historical figures such as John Smith, William Bartram, Thomas

Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Nat Turner, Robert E. Lee, Frederick Douglass, Jefferson Davis, Nathan Bedford Forrest, and Stonewall Jackson are a part of the southern environment, as are the literary figures active before the twentieth century, such as John Pendleton Kennedy, William Gilmore Simms, Mark Twain, and George Washington Cable.

The southern writers of the twentieth century operate in an environment that includes the ghosts of its legends, its mythmakers, and the other writers who have staked their claim to the southern soil. As Flannery O'Connor famously remarked, alluding to the predicament southern, "regional" writers face after the global success of Faulkner, "Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down" (45). The southern writer must reckon with the force of the South's long cultural history—from the pre-Columbian era to landfall to slavery and the plantation system to sharecropping to the writers, such as Faulkner, who helped create and introduce the southern soul to the world. The Native American mounds that dot the southern landscape are also present in *Go Down, Moses*. They are a distinctive part of the bioregion and cultural heritage, and may serve as physical and symbolic reminders of the dispossessed peoples who populated the southeastern regions of North America before it became the South and who were displaced by a culture that dispossessed another population and exploited their own land. Faulkner, Warren, Du Bois, Hurston, and Roberts each struggle with this long heritage in order to construct and embrace a place of dwelling and seek atonement (at-one-ment) with that place of dwelling.

O'Connor's remark suggests something of the anxiety of influence described by Harold Bloom, but as Richard Gray argues in *A Web of Words: The Great Dialogue of Southern Literature*, the image of a web may better portray the ongoing dialogue of southern writers. He categorizes Bloom's theory as evocative of a wrestling match, and in its place, he proposes a convergence of Faulkner and Bakhtin and their views on language and communication. He argues that they "preferred the figure of the web to that of the wrestling match" (3). He finds a web of communication present within individual southern texts that often foreground dialogue and exhibit a commitment to oral tradition. The spoken word, and the folklore transmitted through it, is of course an important aspect of a sense of place, of the knowledge of a region and bioregion. Furthermore, Gray explains that, "along with conversations in southern texts, there are also the conversations of and between southern texts" (10). To understand how southern writers approach the problem of expressing multivalent relationships with the natural world, as experienced within a shared culture, although not necessarily a unified hegemonic culture, it is important to consider how this communication web overlies the landscape—the real and imagined landscape, the natural and built environment. As the writers discussed in this dissertation imagine and communicate genitive relationships with the land, they also participate in creating and expressing their own sense of owning and belonging to the South and its environment—including the literary tradition within which they operate. In Heidegger's terms, through the act of *poiesis*, the writers gather the environment in order to build their own South, and by doing so establish a place of dwelling. As inhabitants actively enmeshed in the entire environment, their creations

might also be called a type of *pyhsis*, “the arising of something from out of itself” (Heidegger 317). The South creates the writers and the writers create the South.

A bioregional perspective in literature and/or criticism can help “people reimagine the places where they live and their relations to those places, as well as reflecting the unique bioregional character of specific communities” (Lynch et al. 4). Mikko Saikku credits Faulkner as “an accurate student of the region’s natural and environmental history,” and he offers a careful examination of Faulkner’s portrayal of the Yazoo-Mississippi delta (529). It is an informative and worthy study, as well as a valuable asset to ecocritics. However, the accuracy with which Faulkner portrays the bioregion is not as important as the whole picture he paints of environmental relationships. Ecomimesis is not the only goal here, but rather an imaginative experience of the world that seeks to promote an understanding and appreciation of encountering environments as numinous localities with manifold possibilities of hierophany. The ecological accuracy helps ground a deep, sometimes spiritual, connection to the land by adding concrete details that are more easily communicated than feelings of mystical union, suggesting the role of ecopoetics in literary study. Faulkner succeeds as much as he is able to convince the reader, through his use of storytelling, that the woods, or the small cabin, or any other aspect of our material environment, has value in itself and conceals within it something worth preserving, something of the sacred. As Bate argues, with a reference to Heidegger, to be attuned to a place is to live in a way that does not approach the environment through instrumentality, but rather respects “the difference, the ‘self-concealing’, of entities even as they are unconcealed in poetry” (262). Lynch et

al. argue that “imagination [...] transforms mere space into place” and that “literature and stories can play a crucial role in renewing a sense of place among residents” (13). Regional and bioregional literature need not be limited to a handful of local residents; the methods of imagining and communicating a sense of place can help residents of other places claim ownership and recognize how they belong to their own places.

Appealing Stories

In the milieu of southern literature, we see, as William Cronon affirms in his essay “A Place for Stories,” that “narrative remains essential to our understanding of history and the human place in nature” (1350). A scientific study of an ecosystem, on the other hand, is not an effective tool at converting the masses to appreciate and protect the natural world. In his study of American attitudes toward nature, Stephen R. Kellert has found that “fundamental variations in basic perspectives of nature often have no connection to factual understanding” (57). His study finds that scientific and ecological values of nature are far less appealing to the average person, as compared to humanistic and moral values: “the scientific emphasis on biological functioning, taxonomy, and physiological process appears to be of marginal interest to all but a few Americans” (44). Humanistic and moral values can be more easily communicated through storytelling. In *Go Down, Moses* Faulkner connects the wilderness with plantation, the plantation with the past, the past with racial injustice, racial injustice with an instrumental relationship between a dominant culture and nature that links back to the exploitation of both nature and an oppressed culture. He uses storytelling to express these connections in an effort to

communicate a humanistic and moral imperative to treat nature and each other with respect, dignity, and even reverence. When Faulkner details Isaac's mystical experience of being in a world where the wilderness is itself a sentient being that contains its own value, he is attempting to "appeal to readers to open their minds and expand their own communities to develop new identifications and perhaps new identities" (Killingsworth, *Appeals* 142). Although a scientific study may provide indispensable information for our understanding of the functions of the natural world, and humans' impact on that world, it does not necessarily have the power to reorient an audience's perspective. As Eugene Gatta argues, the environmental crisis we face today is not a result of too little information, but rather too little imagination (viii). He is not only arguing for more imaginative solutions to environmental problems, but for the power of imagination and creativity in the world of literature to move its audience toward a more sensitive understanding of the environment and humanity's place in it.

As Kellert's findings suggest, unless the knowledge of environmental degradation is immediate, such as discovering that your tap water has been polluted by the factory upstream, instead of the distant knowledge of the loss of habitat and species in a rain forest, new knowledge does not necessarily alter an individual's relationships with the environment. What is needed is a method to bring the realities of seemingly distant environmental problems to the immediate attention of individuals and communities. I use "distant" here in a broad sense—it does not just mean geographical distance, but also psychological, intellectual, and even spiritual distance. Rob Nixon indicates that in the dominant modern culture, attention often jumps from one dramatic

incidence of violence to another, and thus tends to overlook the more distant “slow violence [...] a violence that occurs gradually and out of site, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is not viewed as violence at all” which is, in fact, more damaging to the human species and the planet (*Slow Violence* 2-3). Many of the intricacies of ecology, and the reverberating ramifications of our multiplying environmental problems, may seem abstract, distant, overwhelming, and beyond the ken of the average person. Storytelling and other artistic endeavors can provide a format through which immediacy may be recognized. Narrative can help create proximity; it can help establish a connection between individuals, bioregions, and global problems.

Ecomimesis, or an attempt at realism in nature writing, may provide some enjoyment, but it may also lack the power to move the audience to think deeply about its relationship with the natural world and how day-to-day actions reverberate and affect the environment. As Dana Phillips argues, mimesis in literature will often fall short, and if it alone is used to judge the quality of texts, it would leave the ecocritic in the marginal position of “an umpire [...] squinting to see if a given description of a painted trillium or a live oak tree is itself well painted and lively” (“Ecocriticism” 586). Phillips’s arguments suggest some of the problems that confront the ecocritic when examining representations of nature, although I would argue that he tends to be unfairly reductive in his analysis of texts and ecocritics. He faults Lawrence Buell for promoting a “sort of realism [that] strives to put verbal representations on an equal footing with visual representations” and quotes from Foucault to support his argument that audible and

visual representation are “fundamentally dissimilar” (*Truth of Ecology* 170). It seems to me that what Buell is trying to get at is not that environmental literature attempts to create, as Phillips interprets Buell, a “one-to-one relationship” between stimuli and representation, or attempts to equate “what we say” with “what we see.” Rather, he seems to be arguing that the ecocritic needs to look for, among other things, those moments when a writer effectively renders, grasps and gives, an experience of the environment that communicates the distinct particularity of the objects in that environment in an effort to imbue them with a non-instrumental value.

Phillips takes Buell to task for the latter’s interpretation of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem “Pied Beauty.” To Buell’s rhetorical question of who would ever think to see a trout the way Hopkins describes it, Phillips provides a “perfectly obvious” answer: “anyone with normal vision who has ever caught a brown trout and held it in his hands would have thought to see” the “rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim” (169). Phillips’s misreading of the line from Hopkins’s poem—the poet is looking at a trout swimming in its habitat, not in his hand at the end of fishing line—indicates how his fixation on demolishing Buell’s arguments leads him to his own spurious claims. The average person with normal vision may not even see the trout in the stream, let alone notice the unique configuration of color on its back that functions to camouflage it from predators such as Phillips with his fishing rod and biting wit. It is even less likely that a person with normal vision would have such facility with language and creative attunement with the world that they would automatically verbalize an observation with such poetry. Phillips is right to question an ecocritical approach that merely marvels at

representations of the natural world, but there is a larger rhetorical argument to be made. Buell's point in celebrating this passage is that the average person does not typically "see" the world so creatively, and that when it is presented in such a defamiliarized, yet accurate, way, it can add something to the experience of the environment. A passage as brief as the "rose-moles all in stipple" or as long as a multi-page paragraph describing the movement of a phantom buck through a dense wilderness, may have the power to linger in the audience's conscious, or even unconscious, mind. It is not so much an equation of "what we see" and "what we say" as it is an attempt to bridge the gap between what we experience and what we think. As Bate argues in broader terms, "Ecopoetry is not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it" (42).

Ernest Hemingway explained that he attempted to convey "experience to the reader so that after he or she has read something it will become a part of his or her experience and seem actually to have happened" ("Paris Review Interview"). Not all writers strive for such *communication*, and whether or not they so strive for it, is somewhat beside the point. The matter for the ecocritic is to discover when, where, and how such communication might be accomplished and how this experience of literature may translate into experience and sensitivity to the environment. In Hemingway's brand of communication, the rendered experience of the environment moves beyond what is said or what is seen. When it becomes a part of the reader's experience, it can be said that they own and belong to that moment of environmental communion.

It's all well and good to marvel at representations of nature, or to even feel like one has experienced what an author has attempted to communicate, but can that make a reader care for the environment or act on its behalf? As an old Zen saying goes, "paintings of rice cakes do not satisfy hunger." Mere representation, even the enjoyment or experience of that representation, is not enough. And yet, looked at from another perspective, the perspective of Zen master Eihei Dogen, paintings of rice cakes "alone satisfy hunger." The American Zen teacher John Daido Looi explains "that the image of the truth and the truth itself are completely interpenetrated, interdependent, mutually arising and non-hindering [...] unless we eat pictured cakes, we can never satisfy our hunger" (56). Hopkins's image of the "rose-moles all in stipple" is not simply a description of the spotted flank of a brown trout—it is an attempt to communicate a particular moment of wonder at the natural world. Of course, as Phillips points out, Hopkins is employing the fish somewhat instrumentally, to praise God. But that need not take away from the ecopoetics of Hopkins's description. To equate Hopkin's trout with the fish in the angler's hand confuses the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself and forgets that meaning arises when the significance of the sign is recognized by the audience. Some may contend that adding a Zen koan to a serious ecocritical debate can only result in unproductive mystification. It is my contention that one of the duties of ecocriticism is to offer, through rhetorical and aesthetic discourse and analysis, a counterweight to technological-industrial discourse, which objectifies the world in the name of establishing its instrumentality and relies on a rhetoric that assumes the ability and desire for unlimited and perpetual progress. What can be more mystifying than an

unexamined faith in unlimited and unrestrained knowledge and power over nature and the environment?

Appeals to science and technology can of course be marshaled to the defense of nearly any position regarding environmental problems, even to the position that there is no problem except for how to extract resources from the earth. As Jacques Lyotard has pointed out though, in *The Postmodern Condition*, expert scientific discourse does not really allow for closure—which can allow a confused public to put off action indefinitely at the behest of the experts marshaled by industry to show that the results of the research are inconclusive. In their book *Ecospeak* Killingsworth and Palmer suggest that the “reading public is usually thought of as desiring a clear answer, a definite end to the story. But science is not designed to provide such melodramatic closures. As a consequence, public interest in science is very difficult to sustain” (145). This line of thought anticipates Nixon’s critique of the public’s fascination with stories of dramatic violence, and the short attention spans to more attritional, slow violence. Appealing narratives, however, do not always provide closure either. When a story, or a poem, functions more than passive entertainment, it can provide openings to engage the reader once the covers of the book are closed. Scott Slovic explains that “literature might function as a prod, a springboard, a guide—a stimulus designed to accentuate reader’s engagement with the world, to make us conscious of our individual presence in the world. We begin to understand the world and our place in it through specific sensory experiences, not through factum upon factum of abstract information” (119). The lack of closure in scientific discourse, with its “factum upon factum of abstract information,”

can function to distance the audience from the “sensory experience” of the world, and the particularity of the objects that share their environment. The lack of closure in a story can create a sense of mystery while also functioning to promote attunement and proximity to the environment.

An example from Faulkner, who often employs stories within stories, can be instructive here. After the young Isaac kills his first deer while he was still under the tutelage of Sam Fathers, Sam introduces Isaac to one of the spirits of the forest, a phantom buck, which only the initiated have the privilege of witnessing and greeting. Later that evening Isaac relates his story to his older cousin McCaslin and is convinced that his cousin doesn't believe him. McCaslin responds with his own story that explains his conception of the wilderness and how the life and blood exhausted and spilled there is not wasted but rather might be transubstantiated into a spirit of the forest. Isaac misconstrues McCaslin's story as betokening a type of naturalism and doubt about Isaac's encounter with the phantom buck. Isaac excitedly reaffirms his vision and says “But I saw it! [...] I saw him!” McCaslin calms Isaac and tells him “Steady. I know you did. So did I. Sam took me in there once after I killed my first deer” (178-80). The chapter ends here and leaves the reader with a sense of the deep connection between the two cousins, Sam Fathers, and the wilderness, with McCaslin confirming and encouraging Isaac in his relationship with the land and creatures, both natural and supernatural, that dwell on the earth. But the reader is left with questions as well.

Faulkner makes it clear in the narrative that Sam and Isaac saw a tremendous buck moving through the forest. He describes it quite accurately, providing ample

sensory details of the movement of its muscles, its posture, etc. He also provides a dose of mythological imagining; the deer moves with a “winged and effortless ease” (177). The question is not whether Isaac saw the deer, but whether the deer is meant to be an “actual” phantom buck, or if McCaslin (and indeed Faulkner) is employing a “real” deer as a symbol of the continuity of the forest, its creatures, and the men who are initiated into the wilderness ethic. The only means for closure would be if one of the hunters actually killed the deer. But Faulkner suggests that even if the deer is a “real” deer, an uninitiated hunter would never have the opportunity to see, let alone shoot at, this spirit of the forest. By employing the technique of a story within a story, Faulkner manages to take both author positions outlined by Killingsworth in his book *Appeals in Modern Rhetoric*. Isaac and his cousin McCaslin function in the position of “bearing witness” while Faulkner himself functions from the position of “making ironic and mythic connections” through metaphor and identity (140-42). The audience is invited to participate in the story and feel empowered by it by recognizing that for Isaac hunting is more than just chasing after trophies; it is about communing with the natural world and the spirit of the wilderness. The reader is invited to engage and share Isaac’s initiation and proximity to his environment—to be attuned to the defamiliarization of the beings of the forest, to keep an eye out for the phantom buck.

A keener attunement to the sensory experience of the world may lead to a greater appreciation of the mystery of the natural world and human connections with that world. Annie Dillard attests to this in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* where she attempts to see the world for all its “unwrapped gifts and free surprises” and often finds herself stunned

“into stillness and concentration” (17-18) by the mysteries of nature that multiply before her eyes. Mystery is an important aspect of human existence, and it can produce a sense of humility. That, however, does not mean everyone needs to strike out for the wilderness in search of the phantom buck or take up a Zen koan. It does mean that the ecocritic should employ every tool available to help examine relationships with nature and the environment—from the scientific study to the Zen koan.

Cronon, an environmental historian, celebrates storytelling for its ability to impart value. Geneticists and neurologists might be able to tell us how our aptitude for certain human values evolved and function on a cellular and molecular level, and this information is important in helping us fully understand the creation and endurance of certain values, but this information is not enough to explain how to communicate and employ these values. Likewise, ecologists might be able to explain the development and evolution of a forest ecosystem, and again this information is useful and necessary for the survival of our species, but also again, it cannot explain how to effectively communicate the value of this information. Nature alone cannot and does not tell stories, only humans can interpret the signs presented by their environment. Cronon notes that the framing and the timelines that are inherent in all narratives are important to us because they suggest “consequences” (“A Place for Stories” 1370). Through storytelling an author may untangle the knotted chain of causality and imaginatively recreate and depict the links of concatenation and complicity, overcoming distance and demonstrating proximity between nature and author, author and audience, and audience and nature. The imaginative moment can extend well beyond the confines of the text. Elizabeth Royte

suggests that “How we imagine a place determines, among other things, how far we may go to ‘save’ it” (13).

Imparting values through narrative, and within specific contexts and among varying perspectives, implies the rhetorical function of southern literature, that is, its ability to appeal to an audience (both senses of appeal—to plead a case and to please—see Killingsworth *Appeals* 2). If the audience assents to (and participates in) the form—be it through an account of wildlife, a complex pastoral, a wilderness epic, or a story of dwelling—then the reader is more likely to move toward a position of identification with the values being examined and/or promoted. Discussion of rhetorical appeals and environmental issues may suggest an overtly political stance. But as Killingsworth points out, this is not necessarily the case. Rhetoric can be viewed simply as “a concern for audience manifested in the situation and form of communication” (137). With all but perhaps one exception (Du Bois), the writers studied in this dissertation do not attempt to persuade their audience to take direct political action, but rather they attempt to bestow value on the environment through their stories and attempt to move the audience to align its values with a greater sensitivity to human entanglement with the natural world. They attempt to bring about, through the art of storytelling, what Kenneth Burke calls the “conditions of identification or consubstantiality” (*A Rhetoric* 55).

Faulkner does not ask his readers to surrender their modern ways and take up hunting or to relinquish their inheritance as Isaac McCaslin does in *Go Down, Moses*. He invites us to examine the conflicting values and the modes of ownership and belonging he portrays in the novel through, among other things, its polyvocality. His representation

of the human interactions with their environment attempts to accomplish what “Longinus refers to [as] that kind of elation wherein the audience feels as though it were not merely receiving, but were itself creatively participating in the poet’s [...] assertion” (Burke, *A Rhetoric* 57-58). The feeling of creative participation facilitates proximity to the representation and the represented, providing a sense of ownership and a “longing for belonging that is the essence of ecopoetics” (Bate 212). Faulkner presents different ways of interpreting an individual’s relationship with the environment, and this, coupled with his style, demands the reader’s active participation in creating meaning. Burke argues that authors’ attempts to size up various situations and attitudes provides literature with the function of “equipment for living” (“Literature” 262). In *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner creates a place where the represented and the representation can be viewed from multiple perspectives, engaging the reader to find his or her place within a matrix of the varying perspectives.

Ownership and Environmental Justice

Southern literature provides particularly fertile ground to interpret the conceptions and rhetoric of environmental ownership because of its storied tradition of agrarianism and its fraught history of human bondage. Kimberly K. Smith’s book *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* does not include a stated focus in southern literature, but its investigation of the roots of the environmental movement in African American thought necessarily addresses the many complexities involved with environmental ownership in the South. Smith opens up the field of environmental

thought in order to critique the “scientific racism and pragmatism,” which she argues, “were important parts of the wide ranging conversations about nature taking place at the turn of the nineteenth century” (7), when many of the dominant culture’s understandings of nature began to take root. African American theorists at the time developed their own understandings of an appropriate relationship with the land that paralleled civil rights issues, anticipating the growth of social ecology and issues of environmental justice. Smith provides a particularly insightful examination of the “rich concept” of “possession,” which, she argues, was approached at the turn of the century through “at least three understandings.” The first approach includes a sense of “civic membership, political autonomy and personality, and community integrity.” The second approach built upon nineteenth-century Romanticism and its preoccupation with “coming in contact with the creative energy animating nature,” only later to be translated into a third understanding which conceived of possession “in its social aspects as common ground” (9). The movement from civics and autonomy to “the creative energy of animating nature” to common ground suggests a development of reciprocal ownership and the rhetoric employed to express and communicate it. Smith’s book is particularly poignant in that it shows how a people who started with nothing could arrive at a powerful sense of place in the environment and world.

One of the growing trends in ecocriticism parallels the environmental justice movement and is often called the environmentalism of the poor. It includes a more globalized perspective, particularly one that focuses on the global South. Rob Nixon, one of the leaders of this recent turn in ecocriticism, focuses on post-colonial literatures in an

attempt to bring the ravages of neoliberal globalization closer to home for the dominant culture in the global North. Interestingly enough, the way Nixon positions the conflicts between the global North and South mirror the conflicts between the American North and South through much of the twentieth century. As I suggested above, ecocriticism and southern literary studies have rarely intersected. This is particularly ironic because, as Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein explain, the “southeastern United States, an area notorious for toxic waste dumping and exposure within communities of color, gave rise to some of the earliest environmental justice movements in the 1980s” (8). But the exploitation of the land at the expense of an exploitation of people of color began and was recognized in the South long before the 1980s.

In his article “Faulkner’s Ecological Disturbances,” Matthew Wynn Sivils responds directly to Buell’s claim that “for Faulkner, environmental issues were usually a secondary concern” and that *Go Down, Moses* began and ended “more as a race book than as an environmental book” (Buell, “Faulkner and the Claims” 14). Sivils argues that Faulkner often “merged these [racial and environmental] concerns. For Faulkner, race, poverty, class, and other social factors *are* environmental issues” (489). Faulkner clearly demonstrates that he is cognizant of the fact that the exploitation of the African American population was directly tied to the exploitation of the land; in the establishment of the Cotton Kingdom you could not have one without the other. With the end of slavery, the continual exploitation of land and people (both poor black and white) was assured by Jim Crow laws and a system of tenant farming, sharecropping, and burdensome debt. Sivils focuses his examination of exploitation and the intermingling of

social and environmental factors with examples from a number of Faulkner's novels, including *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Wild Palms*, *Light in August*, and *The Sound and the Fury*, but he does not address the novel that is Buell's primary concern in his essay—that is *Go Down, Moses*. Nevertheless, *Go Down, Moses* is replete with instances where social issues are tied to environmental issues, especially when we consider the long links of causality, the distant reverberations of the impact of society on the environment, and the interpenetrations of culture and environment.

Faulkner exhibits the interpenetrations of race, culture, and the environment in the character of Lucas Beauchamp and suggests that the only way for the South to rectify the environmental injustices on which it was founded and developed is through access to land ownership. Faulkner's novel makes it clear that without a sense of ownership any sense of belonging to a landscape is more likely to be enacted as a more damaging sense of possession, a proximity that takes little account for the inherent value of the particular subjects and objects in an environment. Leaving aside for the moment Lucas's affliction with gold fever, when he succumbs to the dominant culture's attitude of possession, and considering rather his agrarian methods and his free use of his allotted acreage, it is clear that Lucas is empowered by his relationship with the land. He is not empowered solely by the gift of land, delivered to him to atone for the sins of slavery, miscegenation¹, and incest committed by the McCaslin patriarch Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin—Lucas's white grandfather. He is empowered by his relationship with his heritage and

¹ I don't mean to imply here that interracial sexual relations is a sin in itself, but rather that it was viewed as such at the time, and more importantly, that Faulkner suggests that sexual relations between owner and slave are necessarily problematic.

how he treats the land allotted to him. He demonstrates an intimate knowledge of his environment, rejects the aid of machines in working his land, and looks with disdain upon the modern ways of the latest generation of Edmonds (descended from patriarch through a female line) who run the plantation. Faulkner explains that Lucas “approved of his fields and liked to work them, taking a solid pride in having good tools to use and using them well, scorning both inferior equipment and shoddy work” (42). Thadious M. Davis argues that Lucas distances himself from racism and oppression and empowers himself by “claiming the model of his white grandfather’s power and authority wrought from ownership” and operating “within an ethics of business” (140).

Lucas’s gold fever, and the divorce it nearly leads to, comprises the main plot of “The Fire and the Hearth,” but the mostly comic episode is replete with suggestions that this behavior is somewhat uncharacteristic for Lucas. Davis’s reduction of Lucas’s empowerment to an embrace of the dominant culture’s view of the land and how it should be treated is somewhat problematic, but it does suggest something about the only opportunity that a black man living in the south at the time might have at gaining some self-possession and justice. However, Faulkner suggests that Lucas does not merely assimilate into the dominant culture and adopt an attitude of simple possession of the land. Lucas’s empowerment is registered through a bioregional framework that intertwines with his identity that he has chosen to mix with the place where he dwells. He is so familiar with his environment that it seems to comprise his identity. Faulkner reminds the reader several times that Lucas was born on the plantation. Significant moments in his life are not accounted by his age in years, but by his actions in relation to

the land: he began to work it when he was old enough “to hold a plow straight,” and he quit hunting on it when “it was no longer commensurate with his status [...] as the oldest McCaslin descendant” (36). We are never told his precise age at these moments, but only of the moments themselves and how his relationship with the land changed. Faulkner hardly portrays Lucas’ relationship with the land solely as a business transaction, as Davis suggests, although he does employ a vocabulary and rhetoric of property ownership.

The verb “to own” shares a common root with the German reflexive verb *eigenen* which means “to be suited for.” The *OED* explains that the “principle current sense” means, “To have or hold as one’s own; to have belonging to one, be the proprietor of.” In its adjective form the word can express “tenderness, affection, or (formerly) respect” as in the old folk song lyric “my own true love.” Lucas’s intimate relationship with his environment—the use of horse or mule power, good tools, “and using them well,” his long history on the land, etc.—suggests that he views it with tenderness and affection. Christopher Rieger argues that “Lucas has an intimate knowledge of nature through labor, and Faulkner suggests that this gives him a truer ownership than a legal deed” (147). When Faulkner explains that it is Lucas’s land even though he does not own it, he is distinguishing Lucas’s personal relationship with the land with the legal documentation of who actually possesses the title. Even though Lucas is empowered by his relationship with the land, and he views it and uses it as his own, Faulkner suggests that as a black man and the illegitimate offspring of a white grandfather in the Deep

South, Lucas's desire and ability to claim all the legal rights and responsibilities are limited through his own motivations and the social context.

Legal scholars commonly discuss ownership as a "bundle of rights" or "incidents" (Honoré 113). Stephen R. Munzer explains that the "legal conception" of ownership "understands property as *relations*" (16). He prefers the metaphor of a "bundle of 'sticks'" when referring to the rights and liabilities attached to ownership, particularly because of the metaphor's ability to distinguish among the various "relations [...] among persons or other entities with respect to things" (16). Munzer summarizes A.M. Honoré's conceptions of these relations as including: "the claim-rights to possess, use, manage, and receive income; the powers to transfer, waive, exclude, and abandon; the liberties to consume or destroy; immunity from expropriation; the duty not to use harmfully; and liability for execution to satisfy a court judgment" (22). Since the dominant culture of the Jim Crow South would be reluctant to grant Lucas full legal ownership of the land, his relationship with his "allotted acreage" does not entail him all of these rights, powers, and liberties. In a legal sense, he would have difficulty maintaining his control over the land if the Edmonds heirs² decided to renege on what amounts to a gentleman's agreement.

Faulkner demonstrates that Lucas more or less has the claim-rights to use and receive income from his land, and the power to waive his ownership (as one of his older brothers did), as well as the duty to do no harm with his land (like keep an illegal

² The Edmonds branch of the McCaslin family is descendent of LCQ McCaslin's unnamed daughter. McCaslin Edmonds, the patriarch's great-grandson, comes into ownership of the land when Isaac McCaslin surrenders his rights to the plantation and is the first Edmonds with whom Lucas has an agreement to "own" his land. McCaslin Edmond's son Zack, is born the same year as Lucas and they are raised as brothers. Zack's son Roth is Lucas's antagonist in the story "The Fire and the Hearth."

whiskey still on it—which he does anyway). His rights to possess and manage, and the powers to exclude and abandon, are much more tenuous though, especially as each successive generation of Edmonds feels less bound to continue Lucas's legacy. Roth Edmonds in particular attempts to assert his claim-rights and powers over Lucas's allotted acreage, and Lucas's labor, at first tentatively, but by the end of the story more aggressively. Faulkner first describes Roth as somewhat of a passive overseer—depicting him “riding up on his mare maybe three times a week to look at the field, and maybe once during the season stopping long enough to give him advice about it” (36). Toward the end of Lucas's gold fever escapade Roth takes a more threatening stance, informing Lucas that he will have to give his wife Molly half his crop “every year as long as you *stay on my place*.” Lucas corrects Roth: “You mean every year I keep *farming my land*” to which Roth replies: “I mean every damned year you *stay on my place*.” Lucas attempts to assert his rights and powers with an appeal to the legacy and authority of Roth's grandfather, now long dead: “Cass Edmonds give me that land to be mine long as I—,” but Roth cuts him off with a curt “You heard me” (122 emphasis added). Faulkner forestalls the impending final confrontation over who possesses what rights and powers over the land when Lucas has a change of heart and surrenders his treasure hunt and the gold finding machine. The tone of story, with its comedic elements, calls for a happy ending—and in regards to Lucas's relationship with his wife, his personal relationship with his environment, and his own health, it seems like a just and appropriate ending. But Faulkner does build enough tension in the story to call attention

to Lucas's ambiguous position in a dominant culture that would rather not see an African American empowered through property ownership.

Faulkner implies that the confrontation itself stems in part from Roth's reluctance to accept the knowledge that one of his perceived racial and social inferiors in fact owns and belongs to the McCaslin plantation and heritage in a way that Roth never will.

Roth's repudiation of his black mistress and their unborn son at the end of the novel, parallels the McCaslin patriarch's actions toward his own illegitimate black son, Lucas's father. They both attempt to bribe their way out of recognizing their illegitimate children, offering money rather than love or affection, and thus refuse to acknowledge, or *own*, their actions. Faulkner employs a financial metaphor to express the same idea through the character of Reverend Hightower in *Light in August*—Hightower expresses his freedom from the past and responsibility to his community by repeatedly stating that he has “bought immunity.” Faulkner's use of literal and metaphoric currency to express characters' attempts to shirk their responsibilities to the past, is connected to the literal and metaphoric use of ownership in *Go Down, Moses* as well as the other southern texts discussed in this dissertation. The common occurrence of these themes and motifs suggest their significance, and are emblematic of the importance of accounting—accounting in all its senses: to justify, explain, answer for, and reckon.

In Faulkner's vision of environmental justice, he juxtaposes Lucas to Roth Edmonds, and provides a strict accounting of Lucas's participation and ownership of his environment. As I already suggested, Faulkner links Lucas's identity with the plantation like no other character in the book. A basic conception of property rights, as explained

by Munzer, includes “projection theory,” where the rights and powers of ownership are derived from “*embodying* the person into external things” (67). The projection theory recalls Berry’s conception of human interpenetration with place, where the land and the people who dwell upon it are intimately connected to one another. Faulkner embodies and enmeshes Lucas in his environment by detailing Lucas’s methods of farming and by accounting for his maturation through his changing relationship with the land. Munzer explains that embodying can be achieved through “occupancy, which covers both taking possession of a thing and using it” (69). This mode of possession, or “to have physical control of a thing, [...] is the foundation on which the whole superstructure of ownership rests” (Honoré 113). Munzer adds that “physical grasping may appear to be the paradigmatic mode of taking possession, but it is temporary and restricted in scope” (69). It suggests the immediacy of the object possessed, and it only extends as far as the possessor can exclude others from taking control over the object. Lucas might not have explicit legal ownership of his allotted acreage, but he does demonstrate his ability, or at least his will and intent, to exclude. For example, he ignores Roth’s advice about farming his land, he attempts to prevent a competitor from operating an illegal whiskey still on the land, and refuses to allow crop-dusters to fly over his acreage. However, by injecting the tension Lucas has with Roth, Faulkner implies that Lucas can have his rights and powers quickly revoked. A conception of property rights based on an attitude of possession implies a relationship based solely on power, a tenuous position for any disadvantaged individual or group. As the history of exploitation of land, people, and resources shows, and continues to demonstrate, this conception of ownership often boils

down to whoever can build the highest walls, or bribe the most officials, or hire the most guns, will ultimately control the land.

In Faulkner's multivalent novel, however, he also shows how this mode of possession is a necessary aspect of a just and sensitive understanding of owning and belonging. Occupancy relates to the "incorporation" theory of ownership as the obverse of embodying. In the incorporation theory, property rights are viewed as "extensions of the body that result from incorporating external things into the body" (64). It operates in *Go Down, Moses* on a metaphorical level. Faulkner explains that Lucas possesses his black and white heritage by ignoring any conflict which might arise from this mixed heritage: "He resisted it simply by being the composite of the two races which made him, simply by possessing it" (101). Lucas possesses both white and black blood, and the possession is manifested through an act of willful extension—he incorporates the social (external) ramifications, the social environment, into his own body by accepting it and refusing to struggle with it. He does not suffer the division Wendell Berry speaks of where the environment is separated from the individual. But he also declines to extend his possession of the environment to take advantage of the incorporation. Again employing an economic metaphor, Faulkner writes that Lucas does not "make *capital* of his white or even his McCaslin blood" (101 emphasis added), he simply possesses it. By refusing to struggle or capitalize with it, and yet accepting it as part of himself, he maintains exclusive control over this aspect of his identity and environment.

Faulkner's use of the word "possessing" here, rather than "owning" has further implications, and helps distinguish distinct modes of ownership. The verb "possess" has

a long history with roots in classical Latin where it meant, among other things, “to engross, to overwhelm, [...] to dominate, to take control of, to seize, to exercise power over” (*OED*). These connotations are more appropriate to Lucas’s attitude toward his mixed racial heritage, or his attempts to wrest gold from the earth, than his attitude toward the land he “owns”; the land for which he feels he is suited, the land he treats with “tenderness, affection, or respect,” before he becomes *possessed*, as if by a demon, with gold fever. In its noun form as a legal term the *OED* traces “possess” back to 1394 where it specifically denoted “exclusive control of the land.” This category of ownership is the most limited in scope, as it entails complete domination and results in a qualitative distance between the subject and the object, whereas “owning” suggests more reciprocity and a qualitative proximity where subject and object are on more equal footing. An attitude of opposition and strict duality is inherent in possession, and in that sense, it does not entail any communication between the possessor and the thing possessed.

Given his cultural environment, it makes perfect sense that Lucas would want to *possess* his mixed heritage while adapting a more supple bond of ownership with the land he works and “owns.” His affliction with gold fever, his desire to seize a treasure from the earth demonstrates the blind greed and self-centeredness present when an individual is motivated solely by a desire to possess, to seize and control. Possession, then, is somewhat ambiguous; it can be damaging and take over an individual’s identity if it is the only motivation for ownership, but it is also necessary in certain instances as a building block for more nuanced, and reciprocal, modes of ownership. Lucas’s older

brother and sister refuse to take possession of their land and heritage and suffer consequences. The brother “ran away before he came of age [...] shaking from his feet forever the very dust of the land where his white ancestor could acknowledge or repudiate him from one day to the next” (102). By refusing to dominate, to take control of, his mixed heritage, the brother loses an opportunity, however difficult, to exert power over that heritage. After leaving the plantation he is “never heard from [...] again” (102) resulting, in the novel at least, in a loss of identity.

In the case of Lucas’s older sister, Fonsiba, disowning the environment of her youth does not end in success either. When Isaac tracks her down to deliver her share of the McCaslin inheritance, he finds her in a “roadless and even pathless waste of unfenced fallow and wilderness jungle” (265) with her husband sitting in the only chair “reading a book in the midst of that desolation” wearing a pair of “gold-rimmed spectacles” (266) without lenses. The scene is reminiscent of a passage in Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery*, when he describes “a young man [...] sitting down in a one-room cabin, with grease on his clothing, filth all around him, and weeds in the yard and garden, engaged in studying a French grammar” (59). For Washington, as with Faulkner, the quality and condition of one’s garden and yard says more than the quality and condition of one’s reading habits or eyewear. Both of the male figures in these episodes effuse an air of erudition; meanwhile they live in squalor, disconnected—separated—from the situation and environment around them. Instead of attempting to improve their lot with what is at hand and developing pride in their place of dwelling, they exist in an idealistic realm disengaged from the people and land around them.

The episode somewhat problematically suggests an accommodationist attitude, or a doctrine of gradualism, in Faulkner's portrayal of the possibilities for African Americans in the South. They can either remain committed to their place of origin, or disappear, or live in squalor. Faulkner indicates that if an African American in the South attempts to rebel more actively against injustice, as Ryder does in the story "Pantaloon in Black," he is most likely to be lynched. Sivils suggests that Faulkner "risks falling prey to problematic racial complications that reside in linking African Americans with the environment" (492). But Faulkner values the idea that healing the land and healing the culture is the same thing. Cleanth Brooks explains that for Faulkner "man's attitude toward nature is a function of the health of his own nature" (270). Christopher Rieger echoes these sentiments: "Faulkner suggests that the way we treat nature matters profoundly, for the environment we create determines to no small degree who we are" (137). There is no healing for those like Fonsiba, or even Isaac McCaslin, who flee the land and place where they might find reconciliation only to neglect the land and place where they finally settle.

The fate of Samuel Beauchamp, Lucas and Molly's grandson, attests to this as well. Before his execution for killing a police officer in Chicago, he is blithely dismissive of the census takers' concerns about what will happen to his body after his execution: "What will that matter to me?" (352). He could not be more removed from the life on the plantation where his grandparents had tried to raise him. He fled the place and community of his birth, and has no regard for that place, even in death. In this way he is emblematic of modern man—those who, as Robert Pogue Harrison argues "for the

first time in cultural memory [...] are not sure where they will be buried, or where they should be buried, or even where they desire to be buried” (198). Molly intuits that Samuel is in trouble and calls on the county attorney, Gavin Stevens, who enlists the help of the local newspaper editor and the whole town by collecting donations, and finances the transportation of the body. The community gathers at the train station to watch as the body is loaded into the hearse and driven through town and around “the Confederate monument and the courthouse” on the way back to the old McCaslin plantation.³ Not only is the town watching over the funeral procession, so too is the legal system and long shadow of the confederacy. The story suggests how much the community and place, history and the environment, are intermingled.

This final episode in the novel brings together the rituals of homecoming and burial, the juxtaposition of public greeting, and private grief, the life of the town and that of the country. As the hearse passes the sign that reads: “Jefferson. Corporate Limit” where “the pavement vanished” (364), Stevens, who belongs to the life of the growing, “Corporate” town, stops following it. He does not journey beyond the paved road onto the gravel lane that marks the border between the old agrarian South and the new South of “progress,” the world of confederate statues and county courthouses that can be fraught with danger for a black man or woman trying to survive in the Jim Crow South. The rural South can be fraught as well (see chapter III), but for Faulkner, as Samuel’s history of run-ins with the law demonstrate, the towns are far more dangerous places. In

³ In a moment of intertextuality that attests to Gray’s conception of a dialogue within and between southern texts, and demonstrates the depth of Faulkner’s attunement to the cultural and literary environment he represented and created, Faulkner has Molly refer to Samuel as “Benjamin” throughout the story. Benjamin’s corpse circles the same Confederate monument whose position is so important to another Benjamin—that is Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*.

honoring Samuel's homecoming, the town claims some ownership and responsibility for Samuel. But as Stevens recognizes, that sense of ownership can go only so far, it cannot cross the boundary between the "Corporate" town and the countryside beyond. The community of the town may participate in the homecoming, but it has no business at the location of the burial ritual.

Harrison explains that in ancient civilizations, "Burial guaranteed the full appropriation of ground and its ultimate sacralization. Through burial of the dead the family defined the boundary of its place of belonging, rooting itself quite literally in the soil, or *humus*" (7). Molly's insistence on Samuel's return to the plantation reflects the desire to claim and sacralize her, and her family's, place of belonging, a place symbolically defined by the boundary of the gravel road of the country and the pavement of the town. The plantation is particularly significant for Molly because, similarly to Lucas, she has chosen the McCaslin plantation as her place of dwelling. Unlike Lucas though, who feels he owns the land, and to some extent possesses it, because of how much he has mixed his identity with the life of the plantation, "Molly believes that the land belongs to God who has the power of authority over it and that it cannot belong to any man" (Davis 144). Molly reminds "Lucas that the land is defiled by human exploitation, and she draws him away from the egocentric and destructive ways of his grandfather" (144). Lucas's attempts to unearth gold buried on the plantation are juxtaposed with Molly's attempts to bury her grandson in that same land. For Molly, the land does not belong to Lucas, Edmonds, or Isaac, it belongs to God, and if they recognize that reality, they too may belong to God through extension by belonging to the

land. Bringing Samuel home for burial amounts to a recognition that the land belongs to God while simultaneously, and paradoxically, establishing a claim of ownership and belonging to that land itself.

Belonging to the Southern Landscape

Buell argues that in *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner sets “up an ironic distinction between the spiritual teleology [...] and the propertarian teleology” (“Faulkner and the Claims” 16). He suggests that Faulkner’s refusal to resolve this distinction, even though he evokes both worldviews “at distinct moments in the text” and also shows them to be “interdependent,” is what makes the novel such an “exceptionally rich meditation in environmental ethics” (16). The split between the two teleologies is represented by a bifurcation of land once inhabited by the Chickasaws, whose chief Ikkemotubbe sold it. Isaac argues that “on the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered, realized, that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased ever to have been his forever” (246). The McCaslin plantation (the land Isaac repudiates) and Major DeSpain’s tract of wilderness (the land of Isaac’s initiation into the spiritual-wilderness ethic) were both carved out of the same property, which suggests something of Cartesian duality and idealism. The bifurcation of the land also indicates the overlapping and interdependent concerns of the two teleologies, especially when one considers that Isaac repudiates the plantation in the name of his conception and relationship with nature he developed in the wilderness under Sam Father’s tutelage and in an effort to atone for his grandfather’s sins against the land and people. It is precisely Isaac’s refusal to acknowledge the interdependence of

the spiritual and propertarian teleologies that comprises his tragic flaw, and provides another way into the knotty issue of ownership in the South as it is presented in *Go Down, Moses*.

Isaac does not just repudiate his inheritance of the plantation, he repudiates a whole system of property rights and a traditional western conception of man's relationship with the land and the natural world. Isaac attempts to articulate his reasoning for repudiating his heritage in the famously long and complex section 4 of "The Bear," where he debates the merits and faults of his ideals with McCaslin Edmonds. Faulkner stages the meeting between the cousins in the plantation commissary, "not the heart perhaps but certainly the solar-plexus of the repudiated and relinquished" (244). The debate is bookended with references to Isaac's conception of ownership. The "projection theory" of property, as detailed by Munzer, relies on an individual's embodiment in external things, specifically through "occupancy." Physically possessing something is a basic form of occupancy, but the "Use of things, especially their persistent use, is the more developed mode of occupancy" (69). Isaac categorically denies this foundation of property rights, arguing that although the preceding generations had persistently used the land and believed they "had tamed and ordered" it, they really knew that "not even a fragment of it had been [theirs] to relinquish or sell" (243-44). Isaac explains that he cannot even repudiate his inheritance because "it was never Father's and Uncle Buddy's to bequeath me to repudiate [...] because on the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered, realized, that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased ever to have been his forever" (246).

The juxtaposition of Isaac and McCaslin Edmonds helps focus the energy of the novel on contrasting views of land and property. McCaslin Edmonds eagerly embraces the role of plantation owner and businessman, and views the land as an object to be possessed by men. For Isaac the commissary represents the sins of the Old and New South and the adaptation of credit and debt peonage to replace the old system of slavery. In contrast to Edmonds, he views land as more of a distinct subject to which men belong. General Compson, an elder at the hunting camp, condemns Edmonds for having “one foot straddled into a farm and the other foot straddled into a bank” while praising the young Isaac for his adeptness and dedication to the wilderness (240). Faulkner explains that Isaac dedicated his life “to the wilderness with patience and humility” (191), and thinks of it primarily as “bigger and older than any recorded document” (193). During a number of episodes in the novel the wilderness is described as a sentient being looking over and watching Isaac as he matures. Isaac finally sees himself as “coeval” with the wilderness, and does not mourn its disappearance because he feels he has merged with its essence.

Edmonds attempts to apply the logic of legal ownership and progressive legacy, his “propertarian teleology,” to Isaac’s conception of mystical owning and belonging, his “spiritual teleology.” As the debate is laid out, Faulkner demonstrates that Isaac will never believe that the land belongs to him “because it belonged to no man. It belonged to all; they had only to use it well, humbly and with pride” (337). Isaac repudiates his inheritance not only because of the sins of his grandfather and his belief that the land belongs to all, but also because he believes humility and pride are incommensurate with

running a profitable plantation and his commitment to what amounts to deep ecology expressed through Faulkner's use of ecopoetics. A noble but deeply flawed sentiment, as the example of Lucas's relationship with the land attests—he succeeds in operating his acreage and maintaining a degree of humility and pride. In keeping with Isaac's commitment to a mystic vision, and his repudiation of his inheritance (both its substance and its sentiment), Faulkner depersonalizes Isaac by referring to him solely in the third person singular. He erases his individual subjectivity to demonstrate his elision of responsibility. Isaac sheds his identity and refuses to acknowledge that he owns and belongs to his heritage on the plantation.

Isaac's tragedy may finally be expressed in his inability to understand the entire lesson given to him in the wilderness. The significance of his first encounter with the bear Old Ben is lost on Isaac. As a ten-year-old boy, Isaac traverses the country around the hunting camp in the hopes of seeing the legendary bear, but keeps coming up short. Sam Fathers finally tells Isaac that the bear had been watching him and that he has to leave behind his gun in order to catch a glimpse of Old Ben. Isaac follows Sam's instructions and journeys further away from camp. He finally realizes that he must also surrender his watch, compass, and walking stick to truly enter into the wilderness. After setting aside these last ties to civilization, he quickly becomes lost. As he sits down and surrenders to his predicament, he sees the bear's print in the swamp before him. He follows the prints until he enters a "little glade and the wilderness coalesced. It rushed, soundless, and solidified—the tree, the bush, the compass and the watch glinting where a ray of sunlight touched them. *Then* he saw the bear" (200, emphasis added). Isaac has to

surrender to the wilderness before the unseen bear leads him back to the symbols of civilization, only then will Old Ben reveal himself to Isaac. The significance of the sequence suggests that Isaac does not in fact belong to the wilderness—but that his proper place is in civilization, serving as an emissary of the wild places. Like the ascetic in the Zen Ox Herding pictures, after attaining enlightenment, he must come down off the mountain and live his life in the village, or in Isaac's case, come out of the woods and live on the plantation (Kakuan). The wilderness may provide the opportunity to confront the deepest meanings of existence, but it does not fashion a home for humanity.

Bart Welling argues that Isaac's "wilderness depends for its aura of inviolable sublimity on his sole imaginative possession of it, a kind of ownership based on its insulation from what he imagines to be the tainting blackness of his family/plantation" (488). Faulkner demonstrates that this is an impossibility; the wilderness cannot insulate Isaac from the realities of his society and culture. He cannot truly possess, or own, the wilderness because he does not belong to it. In the end he loses the wilderness, the plantation, his wife, and any hope for a son to inherit his legacy, and winds up a feeble and deluded old man. I return to the questions from the beginning of this introduction: what does Faulkner suggest about humanity's relationship with the environment when he asserts that both Isaac and Lucas own the land even though they don't actually own it? Likewise, what does it mean to belong to a place? As Buell argues, Faulkner provides no unifying vision of environmental ethics, nor an exemplary character who might evince what a sustainable balance of possessing, owning, and belonging might look like.

While Faulkner served as a writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia, a questioner asked him about the “conflict between man and the wilderness” in *Go Down, Moses* and if he intended “the reader to sympathize more with Old Ben in his conflict with the hunters or towards the hunters in their conflict with Old Ben” (Gwynn & Blotner 276). Faulkner responds by saying:

What the writer’s asking is compassion, understanding, that change must alter, must happen, and change is going to alter what was. [...] It’s to have compassion for the anguish that the wilderness itself may have felt by being ruthlessly destroyed by axes, by men who simply wanted to make that earth grow something they could sell for profit, which brought into it a condition based on an evil like human bondage. (277)

He acknowledges the inevitability of change, that the wilderness landscape of “The Old People” cannot endure, that it is lost in the name of “progress,” and he asks his readers to feel compassion for “the splendid fine things which are a part of man’s heritage too, but were obsolete and had to go.” Sadly, he seems to anticipate Bill McKibbin’s *End of Nature* thesis, and concludes that the wilderness is lost forever, sacrificed for “the good things of life” or just “to give more people more automobiles,” but sacrificed nonetheless. Perhaps the wilderness is lost, the last few remaining acres relegated to charted and prescribed borders, forever attenuating to the instrumental demands of developers, hunters, and tourists; roads, deer bait, and GPS devices. But Faulkner retains hope that the loss of the wilderness may provide for the greater good: “to give man leisure to use what’s up here instead of just leisure to ride around in automobiles” (277).

If we no longer have to contend with the wilderness for our day-to-day survival we may be able to improve the lifestyle and relations of all humankind. But how would such a future look? Faulkner believed that we would soon deplete our natural resources to the point that we would have to rely on human capital. He imagined then the poet would have a more significant standing in our culture. He did not imagine that the human capital would find more and better ways to extract resources from our lands and oceans. He did not foresee that as the wilderness was spent our investments in hyperreality would grow exponentially. But that does not negate the potential of the imaginative experience of the environment presented in *Go Down, Moses*.

Each story in the novel offers a thesis and an antithesis, not only within the story itself, but across stories as well. Faulkner provides multiple visions of humility and pride, dependence and independence, courtship and marriage, stewardship and neglect, care and destruction, the past and the future, the wilderness and the plantation, nature and civilization, self and other. Each juxtaposition complicates the previous one. Each juxtaposition suggest that there may be some balance between them, or some synergistic sum of the parts. The reader must decide what to do with the materials of the story. Does the story stoke our desire for nostalgia of a lost world, or does it provide glimpses of sensitivity for our environment through *poiesis*. Can that sense of *poiesis* translate to our contemporary dwellings? The answer may be found in a sense of reciprocal ownership.

In every way, Lucas and Isaac are presented as opposite. Black and white, proud and humble, happily and unhappily married, demanding and relinquishing, plantation and wilderness, owning and belonging. They each have their faults, and neither one can

serve alone as an exemplar. But when synthesized they provide a vision of reciprocal ownership worthy of any steward. A mixed racial heritage blends with a sensitivity to the sins of the past. Humility of belonging tempers pride of ownership, and vice versa. An acknowledgement of the past enriches a commitment to the future. If one claims ownership of his environment and acknowledges that he belongs to that environment, he cannot help but use it well.

In the next chapter, I discuss Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons*, in order to show how Warren employs *poiesis* in his engagement with the frontier narrative and the brutal murder of a slave to provide his readers with a sense of the necessity of accepting ownership and belonging to all aspects of the environment. Warren conceptualizes the frontier during the first decades of the nation as a place where some of the fundamental thoughts on the nation's relationship with the environment emerged and developed. The concept of the frontier lends itself to ideas of possession, when "Grab was watchword" (13). Warren plays out this theme while also providing alternative models of environmental relationships, namely by introducing the poet's voice as a character in a dialogue with historical persons—a character who struggles with his own sense of owning and belonging to the environment and the story he creates. The frontier narrative provides the author with the form to critique philosophical idealism and a sense of possession, while also coming to recognize his own complicity and discovering the materials for his own redemption. Conceptions of owning and belonging come into play when Warren addresses a particular philosophical world view—Thomas Jefferson's Enlightenment ideals—in order to call it into question. He

indicts Jefferson's idealism for its manifestation in the destruction of the land and his nephew's senseless killing of a slave. With the help of the fictionalized historical characters, Warren guides Jefferson to a redemption which consequently results in the poet's own redemption. Warren advances the challenge of communicating environmental values and conceptions of environmental ownership by situating himself, and the reader, in the midst of an environment that is more comfortable to ignore.

Chapter III focuses on Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. I situate both of their works within traditional forms of nature writing, particularly the pastoral. They each complicate ideas of owning and belonging through their reimaginings of the pastoral form, and develop differing views on the possibility of environmental justice. These texts provide snapshots of the early development of African American writers' attempts to reconcile their relationship with the land, and particularly the South, after centuries of forced labor on that land. The works complement each other in that they each exhibit distinct methods of exploring and representing African Americans' encounter with nature. The differing formal approaches suggest different motivations for their writings. Du Bois's work is unique in the dissertation as the only piece of non-fiction and it provides the most direct appeal for a genitive relationship with the environment, while Hurston provides a more subtle appeal for personal dignity and sensitivity to genitive relationships in her novel.

The fourth chapter takes up the concept of dwelling as it relates to poor whites in the south, and argues for an assimilation of environmental justice and ecopoetics in Elizabeth Madox Roberts' *The Time of Man*. Greg Garrard distinguishes the concept of

dwelling from pastoral, wilderness, and ecological apocalypse as one which presents “the possibility of coming to dwell on the earth in a relation of duty and responsibility. ‘Dwelling’ is not a transient state; rather it implies the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life, and work” (Garrard 108). While Garrard classifies agrarianism under dwelling, I distinguish the concept from agrarianism by focusing on what Roberts calls growing “*into* the land” (Warren, "Elizabeth Madox Roberts: Life Is from Within" 21, emphasis added).

Rural life in the South, as depicted in these works, presents a unique perspective of how the development of environmental relationships are concomitant with, and an expansion of, an individual’s sense of self. The rhetoric of ownership provides a method for examining the intersections of ecopoetics and environmental justice within a bioregionalism framework. All the works attempt to communicate the value of establishing one’s identity through a rooting in place, “a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life, and work” (Garrard 108). In the conclusion I carry the conversation away from the rural south to offer some possibilities of how the rhetoric of reciprocal environmental ownership can be extended to urban environments. The South as depicted and experienced by W.E.B. Du Bois is not the same South Robert Penn Warren writes about in *Brother to Dragons*. Race, time, class, population density, and geographic region are just some of the aspects that separate these authors. Yet the publications of these two works serve as the historical bookends in this study, even though this dissertation is not organized to follow the chronology of the published works. Rather it takes a thematic approach that parallels the chronological development

of the South—beginning with an examination of the frontier, moving to the lingering effects of slavery, then investigating the predominance of rural life in the South, and ending with an interpretation of the New South and urbanization. All the writers recognize the necessity of a reciprocal ownership with the land, and attempt to provide a literary experience of how one might develop such a relationship.

Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* was published during the post-reconstruction transitional era, appearing during a period when the South, still smarting and nursing a grudge over the “War of Northern Aggression,” had just begun to tentatively rejoin the union after its participation in Spanish American War. The revised publication of Warren's poem in 1979, on the other hand, marks the end of an era and a year when social ecology and the environmental movement began to be established in the South with the protests surrounding the TVA's construction of the Tellico Dam (Matthiessen) and the proposed dumping of PCBs in a landfill in Warren County, North Carolina (Bullard). *Brother to Dragons* was also published at the end of a decade where the South “experienced a net in-migration” and the population “grew at a faster rate than the nation as a whole” (Bullard 22). The diversity of authors considered in this dissertation, from Du Bois to Warren, along with the diversity of issues they confront, provide multiple perspectives of how southern writers have approached the problem of attempting to establish, cultivate, and communicate a bond with a changing land and environment that is united perhaps only by its long and bloody history.

CHAPTER II

OWNING THE LANDSCAPE AND ITS PAST: KENTUCKY, THE SOUTHERN FRONTIER, IN ROBERT PENN WARREN'S *BROTHER TO DRAGONS*

Although Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed the closing of the frontier in the late nineteenth century, and with it an end of an era for America, the frontier ethos never dissipated from the American way of life. Turner married his frontier thesis to the availability of “free land” between the oceans, but when the free land ran out, the attitudes governing the frontier ethos did not disappear as Turner predicted. In fact, it is still quite active today—employed as trope and a means of directing energy toward the future while establishing distance from the present environment. In one of many reexaminations of Turner’s frontier thesis, William Cronon suggests that it “expresses some of the deepest myths and longings many Americans still feel about their national experience” (“Revisiting” 160). Over the past century, the dominant culture has appropriated the frontier thesis and applied it to technological and scientific advancement—advancement manifested in explorations of the North and South poles, outer space, deep-water oil wells, hydraulic fracturing, and inner space in the form of molecular nanotechnology. The popular media, advertising agencies, and public relations firms continuously announce the crossing of new frontiers, each new advance promising to alter our culture and our relationship with the environment, and the line of the frontier continues to advance.

Turner noted that “the American intellect owes its striking characteristics” to the frontier (37-8), but Turner’s claim may be inverted, that is to say that the perpetuation of

the frontier, as a reality and a trope, owes its striking characteristics to the American intellect—an intellect that, after all, may not be all that unique—an intellect that traces back to the Old World and the Enlightenment; an intellectual tradition that thrives and justifies itself with a grand narrative of perpetual progress. Unexamined commitments to progress lend themselves to a possessive and distancing attitude concerning humanity's relationship with the environment, which in turn rely on Enlightenment grand narratives, particularly the narrative of human perfectibility. The subject, and object, of progress is the future, necessarily abstract because the predictions and promises of the future are just that, predictions and promises. Once fulfilled, if indeed they are, they become antiquated, just so many rungs that have been surmounted on an ever-expanding ladder to a future that is receding as fast as the culture climbs. There is little if any reciprocity and the only possible end is an unachievable utopia.

The frontier in early North America exhibited such an ethos. Although each new frontier settlement demanded a reversal of sorts, in that the “civilized” settler necessarily faced a “return to primitive conditions” (Turner 14), a continued sense of possession and progress ruled the day. Turner argues that a primary characteristic of the frontier was “perennial rebirth” (14). Such rebirth is aligned with a sense of progress—the past is dispensed with and the movement is again toward the future. Even when the settlement promises a utopia based on a return to a pastoral golden age, the rhetoric of a “rebirth” or a “return” implies the possession of a new future. Moreover, the rhetoric of progress possesses the society; each new advancement must be greeted with enthusiasm in order

to sustain the order of the society. To dispense with the rhetoric would necessitate a radical and likely devastating reexamination of the very essence of the society.

The location of the settlement becomes the property of the future—the settled society possesses the location as a means to actualize the future; it superimposes its ideals on the landscape, assuming it can control and dictate the development of the environment. The location and landscape are thus abstracted from a previous reality to serve as a means to future progress. Unfortunately, nature often does not cooperate with the ideals imposed upon it, and it certainly does not cooperate with the Enlightenment ideal of linear progress. Ecology has taught us that environments do not move comfortably toward stasis, the equilibrium necessary for the future-oriented society to carry out its goals. Eruptions and dearth, acceleration and deceleration, reversals and recursive movements, expansion and contraction, these are the characteristics of an environment and ecosystem—hardly conducive to a reasonable forward advance. The conflicting characteristics of the Enlightenment and nature's essence results in what Jonathan Bate argues, employing Adorno and Horkheimer, “is the ‘dialectic’ of Enlightenment: its programme is liberation, its effect is enslavement. Technology is the instrument which enslaves nature and exploits the masses” (77). In the “ambition [...] to free human beings from superstition and fear” and its “disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths,” the Enlightenment substituted the myth of perpetual progress and renewal, and the god of science and technology. It is hubris on the grand scale to imagine that humanity can ever approach a complete understanding and control of the interconnected intricacies of human-nature relationships. Nevertheless, nothing short of

such understanding and control could ever lead to the Enlightenment's ideal of human perfectibility.

As the foundational document of the United States, Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence* exhibits America's commitment to the grand narrative of human progress. While the ideals articulated in the *Declaration* are nothing but praiseworthy, the actualization of those ideals have been messy and difficult to say the least. It is well known that Jefferson's commitment to the narrative he set forth in the *Declaration* often resulted in his tolerance or acceptance of events that were less than liberating. His support of the French revolution, and his unbending belief that it was an extension of the American Revolution, was so complete that he viewed the subsequent massacres as an unfortunate by-product of the march to a future of liberty. He wrote that he would rather see "half the earth desolated" than see the revolution fail (qtd. in Ellis 142-3). Rhetorical flourishes such as this exhibit Jefferson's tendency to abstract the mess of lived experience in service to the ideals of the future. Present atrocities are provided as promissory notes for future advancement. With the distancing mechanism of the grand narrative, the light of Reason, Jefferson is able to reconcile and justify the ends and the means. There is, however, one little discussed event that occurred during Jefferson's life that he did not seem capable of reconciling with his belief in the perfectibility of humanity and the liberation of nature. In December 1811, on the eve of the New Madrid earthquake, Jefferson's nephew Lilburne Lewis, with the help of his brother Isham, brutally murdered one of Lilburne's slaves with an ax before dismembering the body and feeding it to a fire in their meat house on the Kentucky

frontier. Jefferson never spoke or wrote of the event publically, or as far as is known, privately. Perhaps the best-known account of the murder and its ramifications for a Jeffersonian democracy is Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons*.

Contextualizing Warren's "Tale in Verse and Voices" is a difficult task. He began thinking about the poem and composing it while serving as the Chair of Poetry in the Library of Congress toward the end of World War II. It was not completed and published until nearly ten years later in 1953, the same year the Korean War ended. The final, revised edition was published well after the end of the Viet Nam war in 1979. Warren had left the South in 1942 and never lived there again; he returned only for visits with family and friends, and for research. Nevertheless, as C. Vann Woodward remarks, "the South furnished the setting for virtually all of Warren's fiction and much of his poetry as well as the subject of his nonfictional prose" (283), and *Brother to Dragons* is no exception. While the poem is rooted in the South, it also stretches across time and place to encompass national and international concerns, including, among others, the composition of the *Declaration*, the Louisiana Purchase and the journeys of Lewis and Clark, the war of 1812, Warren's father's boyhood in the late 19th century, the Korean War, and contemporary visits to the site of the Lewis cabin by the poet. The poem resembles an historical narrative drama, although Warren designates the setting as "No place [and] Any time" in his attempt to universalize the themes he plays out. The characters include apparitions of Jefferson, Meriwether Lewis, Lucy Jefferson Lewis (Jefferson's sister and Lilburne's mother), the murderer Lilburne, the young slave and

victim John, an invented mammy (Aunt Cat), and R.P.W—the voice of the poet who interacts with the other characters.

There are any number of historical “facts” that Warren admits he ignores or invents for the poem. After making a reference to Boynton Merrill’s book, *Jefferson’s Nephews*, which offers a “conscientious and scholarly account of the general subject” of Warren’s poem, Warren goes on to defend his tinkering with the facts (xii). He explains that his primary concern is to “write a poem, not a history” but he explains that he tried to make “historical sense along with whatever kind of sense it may otherwise be happy to make” (xiii). Specifically, in *Brother to Dragons*, he posits in opposition to a Jeffersonian idealism and the frontier ethos a sort of phenomenological approach in that he considers the lived experience of the participants in the poem in their interactions with their environment. Through his use of “Verse and Voices” Warren presents a method of dwelling in an environment that invites the reader to participate in the poem and its creation of knowledge in order to actualize its lessons beyond the text. Warren’s phenomenology is similar to and postulates a Heideggerian sense of *being* in the world and an act of “bringing-forth in the sense of *poiēsis*” (Heidegger 320).

This study of Warren’s narrative poem relies in part on an ecopoetic approach. Bate explains that “Ecopoetics asks in what respects a poem may be a making (Greek *poiesis*) of the dwelling-place – the prefix eco- is derived from Greek *oikos*, ‘the home or place of dwelling’” (75). Warren is not attempting to make a personal “home place” in any specific bioregion in the sense of home-place as one’s physical residence, but rather he attempts to explore the very method of creating a home place, while also

acknowledging the site of the murder as a sort of intellectual and spiritual symbol of a home place for the nation. He examines the relationships between differing conceptions of human nature—a sense of human perfectibility in contrast to a sense of humanity as fallen—particularly when the relationships confront and interact with a natural world and environment that can be viewed variously as hostile, beneficial, or indifferent. He questions the degrees of distance and proximity between humans and nature from a number of angles and, in a reversal of traditional mimesis, discovers that nature presents a mute mirror to culture’s examinations and superimpositions. Nature is there; it exists outside of our cultural constructions, but any lesson we may draw from nature is that of our own making. Warren employs a number of narrative and poetic techniques to suggest that while our relationship with nature is always unfolding and forever developing, the act of poetic engagement and creation can work as cement to bind and solidify knowledge and experience just enough to serve as a foundation for further relationships with the places where we live. Using Bates’s terms, we may say that the materials of the poem—the themes, characters, tropes, and natural phenomena—add up to make a dwelling place for the values and knowledge gained through the very act engaging the materials and creating a poem.

Pig-nuts

At the end of *Brother to Dragons*,⁴ the poet’s voice and character, R.P.W., visits the ruins of the homestead built by Lilburne Lewis in Western Kentucky, the same

⁴ All references to poem are from the 1979 version (reprinted 1996), unless otherwise noted.

homestead where Lilburne and his brother murdered a young slave named John.⁵ The slave's "crime" was simply breaking a pitcher beloved by the brothers' deceased mother, Lucy (Jefferson's sister). It is R.P.W.'s second visit to the site in his attempt to make sense of the events that transpired there, and their relationship to American history, after having spent the duration of the poem in dialogue with the ghosts of the major figures connected to the murderers. During his first visit, R.P.W. comes across as rather distanced from the landscape and the events that transpired there. He approaches the land in a possessive manner as he attempts to wrest meaning from the place. By the end of the poem, and the second visit to the site, the character has gone through a significant transformation, and he enters into the environment with a greater sensitivity to its significance and a willingness for it to act on him. After meditating on the knowledge he gained through his explorations of the land and his interactions with the ghosts that participate in the poem, R.P.W. performs a minor, but significant, action:

I leaned above the ruin and in my hand picked up
 Some two or three pig-nuts, with the husks yet on.
 I put them in my pocket. I went down. (Warren 131)

The significance of pig-nuts, as well as the hickory tree that bears its name, reaches into a number of directions, from its history as a natural resource for settlers such as the Lewises, to its extensive folk history, to its function as a practical symbol tied to various images and elements of the poem, including a significant dendrological motif. By taking the pig-nuts with him, R.P.W. claims a sort of ownership of the place, the knowledge he

⁵ Although Warren uses the slave's real name, George, in the 1953 version of the poem, he changes the name to John in the 1979 version.

gained, and the events that transpired there, which we will see, relates to the South's and America's present and historical connection and relationship with the environment. For Warren, the pig-nuts serve as a concrete symbol of "that landscape" which he holds "in [his] heart" (132), a landscape which not only includes the ghosts who people the poem, but also includes a specific part of Western Kentucky that is emblematic of America's relationship with the land. When R.P.W. picks up the hickory nuts, he carries with him the whole tree from root to trunk to crown and all its associations. His action of gathering the pig-nuts represents an overcoming of his distance from the environment and functions to acknowledge his proximity to the land and the people who are connected to it.

The inclusion of the pig-nuts in the narrative suggests the bioregional aspects of *Brother to Dragons*, a specificity of place that is woven throughout the narrative and helps enmesh R.P.W. into his environment. The pignut hickory is not only distinctly native to North America, but more specifically to an area including western Kentucky. According to the National Audubon Society's *Field Guide to Trees*, its range extends from southern New England to central Florida and "west to extreme E. Texas, and north to Illinois," and it is "one of the most common hickories in the southern Appalachians." The site of the Lewis property, where R.P.W. claims the pig-nuts, is of course located in a bioregion distinct from that of the Appalachians. However, the poem is largely concerned with the settlers who crossed over that mountain range and into the first frontier west of the geological obstacle, along with the ideals that helped govern the settler mentality. Early settlers like the Lewises were intimately acquainted with the

pignut hickory from the piedmont, through the mountains, and on into western Kentucky. A hardy tree, whose dendrology is as important as its symbolic significance in *Brother to Dragons*, it can be found at elevations up to 4800 feet. It provided a vital and indispensable natural resource for early settlers. The *Field Guide* explains that the tree's lumber was used to make "wagon wheels and textile loom picker sticks because it could sustain tremendous vibration." The tree itself was named in colonial days after the nuts that provided forage for hogs at a time when free-range livestock was the rule. It was also called "Broom Hickory" by early settlers, who "made brooms from narrow splits of the wood" (Little 348). The nuts can be sweet and are sometimes eaten by humans. Furthermore, the wood was, and still is, often employed to make tool handles, including famously, axe handles.

The pignuts are not the only evidence in Warren's poem of what the title of a recently published collection of essays calls *The Bioregional Imagination*. The editors of the volume explain that bioregionalism, a movement that began in the late 70s, attempts to move "away from existing political boundaries" in favor of "a biotically determined framework, primarily based on natural communities or watersheds" (Lynch et al. 2-3). The natural community of Smithland, Kentucky, the location of the Lewis homestead and the geographical nexus of *Brother to Dragons*, is a consistent presence in the poem. From the "canebreak and gray clay, / And hoot owls" that made Smithland a less desirable settlement than Louisville, to the catfish wintering at the bottom of the adjacent river, to the Joree, or Eastern Towhee, that haunts Isham after the murder, the natural community of western Kentucky is a distinct entity in the poem—often functioning as a

rebuke or contrast to human efforts to overcome the natural world and processes.

Smithland lies at the confluence of the Ohio and Cumberland rivers, a fact that Warren draws attention to on a number of occasions. The Ohio River is, of course, particularly significant in that it served as an important political boundary as well a geographical one, separating free states from slave states. Warren also highlights the Ohio's function as a conduit for Eastern settlers making their way into the frontier, carrying with them Jefferson's dream of a Republic that would tame and order the West. Warren's continual reference to the natural entities in and around Smithland, along with the ever-present significance of the watershed, evokes a specificity of place in juxtaposition to Jefferson's abstract ideals that would provide the ontology that enabled the settlers to dispossess the indigenous inhabitants, the human, animal, and plant life, and superimpose their own culture on the land and thereby fully possess the environment.

Although bioregionalism as a concept developed after the publication of *Brother to Dragons*, Warren anticipates a bioregional mentality. As Joseph Millichap explains, "Warren's literary canon is primarily concerned with the South in general and, in particular, the Black Patch or dark-fired tobacco country of West Kentucky and Tennessee" (29-30). Warren's commitment to understanding the natural and cultural history of his native place anticipates a bioregional perspective. He often employs that perspective to critique what Greg Garrard calls "giantism." Garrard explains that bioregionalism arose to promote "decentralisation of the economy, in the form of regional diversification and self-sufficiency as well as the anarchistic dismantling of the centralised nation-state in favour of confederated self-governing communities" (118), all

of which are ideas similarly promoted by Warren and his fellow Agrarians in *I'll Take My Stand*. While the Agrarians can easily be called regionalists, calling them bioregionalists may seem a bit of a stretch, but the term does fit Warren's work quite well. Lawrence Buell, who seems more sympathetic toward bioregionalism than Garrard, differentiates bioregionalism from traditional regionalism through "the sense of vulnerability and flux" that exists in the former (*Future* 88). This sense arises from an awareness that "regions remain permeable to shock waves potentially extending worldwide." Buell argues that this is why "the bioregional horizon must extend beyond a merely local horizon: the locale cannot shut itself off from translocal forces even if it wanted to" (88). Warren was deeply concerned with reverberating shock waves and interconnectivity on a micro and macro scale. An interlocking web of human action and complicity permeates most of his work, both fiction and poetry, and *Brother to Dragons* is no different. In the poem, the disconnect between the ideals set forth by Jefferson, and the subsequent actions committed by the settlers and the nation as a whole, are implicated not only in the murder of a young slave, but also in the dispossession of an entire people, and the despoliation of an entire continent, beginning with a small patch of ground on a bluff overlooking the confluence of the Ohio and Cumberland rivers.

The parallels between more traditional regionalism and bioregionalism, especially considered in regard to the overlap of ideas between bioregionalists and the Nashville Agrarians, suggest some of the criticisms leveled at bioregionalism—that it can easily be rendered as exclusionary, it is backward looking, limited in scope, and overly concerned with rural ways of life. Lynch, Glotfelty, and Arbruster, draw on the

work of Ursula K. Heise to explain that while Heise does not “advocate abandoning a sense of place” she does warn that “the cultivation of such a sense is no panacea and that we must add a much greater degree of global awareness to local and bioregional understanding than has typically been done in the United States” (9). They go on to argue that they “wholly concur that a localized sense of place is incomplete unless augmented by a sense of how that place is integrated into the wider biosphere and the global network of cultures and economies” (9). Again, Warren’s poem fits the bill quite nicely. Jefferson’s plantation at Monticello and the slaves he owned there, the land surveyed by Lewis and Clark and the indigenous cultures they met during their exploration after Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase, the avenues of Washington D.C., European architecture (both ancient and medieval), the Korean War, the wonder expressed by inhabitants of a small town on the border of Kentucky and Tennessee when they see a Canadian Goose, the battle of New Orleans, and a middle-aged poet’s attempt to make sense of it all, among other connections in a wider biosphere and the global network of the growing American empire, are all integrated and implicated in a net of complicity whose epicenter is a tulipwood butcher’s block where a young slave was murdered.

The bioregional framework attests to Warren’s commitment to enmeshing himself in the landscape, not just viewing it from an abstracted distance. The bioregional markers and specificity allow Warren to acknowledge his own connection and integration into the environment—the geographical as well as historical, political, and ontological environment of the Ohio and Cumberland watersheds, the southeastern

United States, the nation as a whole, and its node in the network of a global web. The poem traces the development of R.P.W.'s claims of ownership and his recognition of belonging, resulting in a sense of dwelling in the land. While referencing Kirkpatrick Sale's 1985 book *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision*, Lynch, Glotfelty, and Arbruster argue that "to *dwell* means to live mindfully and deeply in place, to be fully engaged to the sensory richness of our immediate environment" (5). The editors note the associations of the term "dwell" with Heidegger, but in an effort not only to distance Sale from Heidegger, but themselves and the bioregional movement as well, they remark that "Heidegger, however, is never mentioned in Sale's book, so his influence, if present, is once- or twice-removed" (5). The rest of *The Bioregional Imagination* makes no reference to Heidegger at all. Linking Heideggerian philosophy with bioregionalism is of course problematic considering Heidegger's participation in the Nazi party and the regime's rhetoric of Blut and Boden. Although some ecocritics, particularly Greg Garrard, would do away with Heidegger entirely, I would argue that some of his ideas are quite beneficial to an environmental and bioregional imagination. Furthermore, retaining Heidegger in ecocritical discussions can serve as a precaution for ecocritics and environmentalists of the potentially damaging effects of idealism of any kind.

As I already indicated, the main thrust of *Brother to Dragons* features a rebuttal of idealism, largely at the hands of a poetic reimagining of a violent crime committed by Thomas Jefferson's nephews. As Lynch et al. explain, bioregional literature helps "people reimagine the places where they live and their relations to those places, as well as reflecting the unique bioregional character of specific communities" (4). For Warren,

the piece of land (and its human history) on the bluff overlooking the confluence of the Ohio and Cumberland rivers functions as a microcosm of the Jeffersonian ideals as they were sometimes enacted in the frontier and in the development of the national character. Warren argues that for Jefferson and the growing nation, the West was simply an available space awaiting its manifest destiny. Lynch et al. suggest that it “is the imagination that transforms mere space into place” (13) and this is exactly what Warren attempts in his poem in order to better learn how to live-in-place. “The idea is not simply to minimize harm to the environment, not simply to be able to sustain the current circumstances, but to find ways of living that repair the environmental harm caused by previous behavior” (Lynch et al. 6). The environmental harm central to *Brother to Dragons* is not so much any particular material pollution, but rather a more pernicious pollution of the psyche at the hands of a possessive frontier ethos that distances itself from the particularities of any place with which it comes in contact. For Warren, a way of living-in-place that repairs the environmental harm of previous behavior is incomplete without a sense of ecopoetics.

Similarly to Bate and Heidegger, Warren draws on the etymology of “poetry” in *Democracy and Poetry*, and argues that “The ‘made thing,’ the ‘formed thing,’ stands as a perennial possibility of experience, available whenever we turn to it” (72). The interlocking thematic, philosophical, political, and environmental concerns of *Brother to Dragons* are effectively communicated only in so much as they make the experience of the poet transferable to the experience of the reader. Warren’s understanding of poetry intersects with Bate’s sense of ecopoetry when Bate writes that ecopoetry “is not a

description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it” (42). It is through an engaged sense of dwelling that the poet, and the reader, may gain proximity to their environment and acknowledge a sense of reciprocal ownership—where individuals may recognize that they own and belong to their environment and develop a sense of dwelling.

Brother to Dragons incorporates a developed investigation of phenomenological relationships between subjects across time and the environments they inhabit. In his roles as the director of the action, participant in the dialogue, and, as the list of “Speakers” in the beginning of the work identifies him, “The writer of this poem,” R.P.W. provides the reader with the center of consciousness that strives for knowledge and understanding of what he calls “innocence,” “freedom,” and “selfhood.” He discovers these are unattainable without, as he explains in the 1953 version, the respective prerequisites of “complicity,” “necessity,” and “the death of the self” (214-215). The passage evokes St. John of the Cross’s depiction of “The ascent of Mt. Carmel” that demands the complete surrender of the individual yearning toward mystical knowledge. But part of the knowledge R.P.W. attains through the course of the book includes the dangers of idealism and abstraction, and how they can have devastating ramifications for individuals attempting to survive in a turbulent world and environment. After the abstract rumination about the path to selfhood, and the necessity of the death of the self along that path (a passage cut from the 1979 version), R.P.W. comes down to earth, literally—“And so I stood on the headland and stared at the river” (131). Moments later the poet makes his return to this world complete, and concretizes the knowledge he

gained, by picking up the pig-nuts—a symbol and a memento of the place and the things he learned there. He has claimed that knowledge as his own and tied it to a specific place to acknowledge that he belongs to this material environment as much as he does to the mystical realm. As if the mystical path to knowledge were not enough, there is much more packed into those pig-nuts: between forage for wild hogs to the fulfillment of the self lies a whole world of meaning.

A Tale with Many Narratives

Brother to Dragons includes the tone of a folk tradition in conversation with a grand narrative of the Enlightenment ideals of progress, the emancipation of humanity, and the emancipation of nature from the unruly state of wilderness. In his work *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard argues that postmodern man no longer has recourse to the grand narratives and that new forms of knowledge emphasize dissensus over consensus. For Lyotard the postmodern condition is governed by divergent discourses. Warren's work exhibits many of the characteristics of Lyotard's postmodern condition, but in the end, Warren employs little narratives as a succession of musical counterpoints rather than dissensus, similar to Eliot's technique in *Four Quartets*, to offer what amounts to a statement of environmental interconnectivity and proximity. He does not supplant one grand narrative for another, nor profess a hegemonic consensus, but rather creates, and submits to the reader, a harmony—a harmony that asks the narratee to test Warren's proofs through their own lived experience. As Lynch, Glotfelty, and Arbruster suggest in a bioregional context, there is

no official “program or ideology; rather, 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” (3).

In opposition to Jefferson’s grand narrative, which assumes the settlers carry with them the light of reason to the wilderness of the frontier, Warren foregrounds a number of techniques that Lyotard later discussed in his famous work, most predominately the use of multiple “little narratives” which challenge and upset the logic and practice of Jefferson’s dream of progress and liberation. Martin Halbert explains that one of the problems with grand narratives is that when they “are concretely formulated and implemented, they seem to go disastrously awry” (Halbert n.p.). Warren exhibits this problem with Jefferson’s abstract hope with an imaginative retelling of “that fellow Smith,” who founded the town where the Lewises later settled. Smith and his fellow settlers do not bring light into the wilderness, but rather take possession of the environment and despoil the land for quick profit and “vainglory” (13). Warren portrays the settler’s mindset through a rhetoric of lust, “When *grab* was watchword and earth spread her legs” (13, italics in original), anticipating Annette Kolodny’s critique of narratives that portray the land as feminine. The narrative of Smith moving west undermines Jefferson’s grand narrative of progress and the “liberation” of nature from a state of wilderness to a continent-wide patchwork of small farms with subsisting yeoman. Instead of liberation, Warren presents the march westward as penury of spirit and lasciviousness for land. Jefferson’s ideals serve the settlers as a distancing mechanism through which they can claim full possession of the environment.

The little narrative is present in a variety of other ways as well—throughout the text little narratives disrupt any attempt to establish or appeal to grand narratives of human progress and perfectibility. Multiple interlocutors play a variety of language games in order to investigate a web of connections between the brutal frontier murder, Jefferson’s philosophy, slavery in general, westward expansion, relationships between black mammies and the white children they raise, familial relationships, and human relationships with the environment. Through the use of little narratives, complete with specific and local ecological knowledge, Warren attempts to overcome the distance of idealism and claim ownership of the natural and social environment, an ownership that respects the land as a distinct entity, ungovernable by human ideals and worthy of admiration in its own right, not as an instrument of progress. Warren demonstrates that each of the participants in the conversation has a claim of ownership on the events and ideas under discussion.

Lyotard advocates for a pursuit of knowledge through an ongoing conversation, replete with agonistics. He suggests that any time the conversation seems about to stabilize, “someone always comes along to disturb the order of ‘reason’” (Lyotard 61). Although Lyotard addresses the pursuit of knowledge primarily in the context of scientific discourse, Warren assigns similar techniques to the characters within the poem in their attempts to arrive at a broader humanistic and ecological knowledge. Drawing on Heidegger, Bate argues that scientific discourse itself can be problematic “because it is representational rather than presencing, because it presupposes a Cartesian subject challenging forth the world of objects” (230-31). Although Bate may place too much

faith in the power of poetry to be “the savior of ecosystems” (231), his arguments indicate the necessity of multiple perspectives—where aesthetic approaches to the environment can temper a scientific, or rather I’d say technological, approach that is representational and instrumental. *Brother to Dragons* does include an instrumental perspective—for example when Jefferson praises the architecture of the Maison Quarrée and early in R.P.W.’s development while he still employs a naturalistic ontology, both of which I’ll return to below—but it is, after all, a poem, and the primary standpoint is aesthetic. The entire poem resembles a meandering conversation or debate bounded by the characters’ changing relationships with each other and their environments, as well as their ultimate motivations (60). Interruptions and shifts in direction abound in *Brother to Dragons*. For example, Meriwether Lewis often interrupts Jefferson’s idealizing with his own actual experience of the western frontier—complete with beauty and brutality. While Jefferson would possess the western frontier from afar, Meriwether presents his own tested and confirmed sense of owning and belonging to the land he explored.

The questions, doubts, verbal parryings, demands, evaluations, and many more of what Lyotard calls “language games” that are present in *Brother to Dragons* serve to disrupt and unbalance the control of the narrative and its implicative knowledge, particularly the grand narrative of progress and liberation of man and nature. Although Warren does not privilege a Lyotardian anti-foundationalism, he does seek, as Stuart Sim explains, “constantly to disorient and displace entrenched authority in whatever guise it may manifest itself” (Sim 47). It may sound strange in the age of postmodernism to suggest that Warren seeks “constantly to disorient and displace entrenched authority,”

considering his name became synonymous to some as *the* entrenched authority, vis à vis New Criticism. It is crucial to recall, however, that New Criticism itself began as a rebellious movement, before it came to be seen as the authoritative doctrine in English departments that was in need of overthrow. Much of Warren's career, particularly as a novelist, was explicitly concerned with calling into question "entrenched authority"—*All the King's Men* and the story of Willie Stark's downfall, offers the best-known example. As a literary critic, in his essay "Pure and Impure Poetry," Warren argues that "Poetry arises from a recalcitrant and contradictory context; and finally involves that context" (7). He concludes that poetic structure itself, "must, in some way, involve resistances; it must carry something of the context of its own creation" (27). For Warren a poem that strives for "purity" in its composition and presentation is similar to the grand narrative that chokes the vitality of developing knowledge.

Recalcitrance and the involvement of the creative context are present throughout *Brother to Dragons*, and further demonstrate Warren's employment of little narratives. The little narratives often assert local and particular knowledge of distinct bioregions, and help, in Heidegger's terms, "bring forth" the "presence" of particular places. For example, the first section of the poem cuts off at the moment when Jefferson first attempts to convey his knowledge of the murder and assert his authority on the matter. The section ends with Jefferson speaking: "There was the house, and I will tell you—" (30). The next section begins with R.P.W.'s interruption of Jefferson (paralleling the interruption imposed by the author by breaking the conversation in two separate sections): "Yes, I have read the records, even intended / To make a ballad of them, long

ago.” Warren includes some lines from the ballad which imaginatively attempt to situate Lilburne and Isham in the midst of their environment during a winter in western Kentucky where “the wind is raw and it’s coming snow / And the woods lean close and Virginia’s far” (31). The “records” R.P.W. alludes to include newspaper accounts Warren discovered in the Library of Congress during his tenure as the Chair in Poetry in 1944, records which recalled the folk tales and songs about the murder he had heard in youth, and motivated him to eventually write the poem.

The appeal to the authority of contemporaneous newspapers over Jefferson’s unsupported assertions, suggests Warren’s insistence on, and commitment to, some form of legitimation, while also explicitly including some context of the poem’s creation. In the first section of the poem when Jefferson initially mentions “the house”—that is the cabin built by the Lewis family—R.P.W. interrupts and offers his own experience to support his claim to authority on the subject: “Yes, I have seen it. Or saw, / Rather all that remained.” In his early role as a naturalistic and ironic modern man R.P.W. explains that nature has reclaimed the ruins enough so that the “crime / Could nestle, smug and snug, in any / Comfortable conscience, such as mine” (9). Shortly thereafter Jefferson again attempts to establish his authority, returning to his earlier phrase: “The House—,” but his power to control and shape the discourse is again checked, this time by Charles Lewis who appeals more directly to personal experience and ownership: “I built it, and I know” (10). He states that he went west full of Jefferson’s dream to “redeem the wild land, set blossom by the stone,” but then admits that Jefferson’s dream only served as motivation to flee Albemarle County, Virginia, to hide in the wilderness while also

retaining his material “marks of rank and occupation” (11-12). Instead of taking possession of the wilderness, while maintaining an idealized distance with “all the trinkets of [his] emptiness,” he becomes trapped in a suffocating proximity where the wilderness possesses him.

R.P.W.’s interruptions of Jefferson and his claims of personal knowledge and the authority it provides, suggest one of the many ironies of the poem—although Jefferson was closer to the people and events than Warren, his knowledge is presented as more distanced than R.P.W.’s. Jefferson surely had less contact with his nephews after the death of his sister, which would already distance him somewhat from the events surrounding the murder. Unlike R.P.W. (and Warren for that matter), he never visited Smithland, Kentucky so his knowledge of the place would necessarily be remote and abstract. In fact, the reader is informed (in the poem and in endnotes) that Warren/R.P.W. may have known more about the murder and the subsequent events than Jefferson, since Warren also examined the court documents—a privilege Jefferson surely did not assume since there is no record of Jefferson ever mentioning the murder in public or private. All this suggests Jefferson’s lack of authority in speaking about and interpreting the events and their significance. By interrupting Jefferson at the moment when he attempts to present his authority on the matter, and then appealing to his own authority based on his experience and his sources, R.P.W. refuses to allow Jefferson to take control of the narrative. The interruptions present juxtaposing little narratives based on specific and concrete particulars of experiential knowledge, supplanting Jefferson’s recourse to an abstract grand narrative.

Warren employs little narratives to reexamine, reinvigorate, and reinvent a narrative of significance. Although this undermines the force of the grand narrative, Warren is aware that the grand narrative can never be fully dispensed—as some critics of Lyotard have pointed out, his report of the death of the grand narrative is grossly exaggerated—it remains, in Warren’s time, and in our own time, fully functional in a number of aspects of America life. The grand narratives of progress and human liberation (be they social, scientific, technological, economic, etc) are interwoven in the fabric of American culture; they are even an integral aspect of Jefferson’s dream of an agrarian republic, which influenced the South’s conception of itself and was transmogrified first into the plantation system and then into mechanical factory farming. The Jeffersonian narratives still exist as the premier rhetorical position at a variety of points across the American political spectrum. To ignore the still-active recourse to grand narratives is just as dangerous as Jefferson’s ignore-ance of the disastrous ramifications of his grand narrative. Warren attempts to reactualize the premise of man’s potential for good (the foundation of the Jeffersonian narrative) while acknowledging the conflicting motivations and diverse little narratives that swirl around the grand narrative and provide knowledge and legitimation through tested experience.

On the heels of R.P.W.’s appeal to the authority of personal experience and historical record, he switches tenor and provides ten lines from the original ballad he attempted to compose before he wrote the poem. The abrupt shift in narrative register is somewhat disconcerting, but R.P.W. immediately reverts to his loose iambic pentameter and explains:

It began about like that, but the form
 Was not adequate: the facile imitation
 Of folk simplicity would scarcely serve.
 First, any pleasure we take in folksiness
 Is a pleasure of snobbish superiority or neurotic yearning.
 Second, the ballad-like action is not explained,
 If explainable at all, by anything in the action.
 If at all, it must be by more complex form, by our
 Complicities and our sad virtue, too. (31)

Despite Warren's avowal to dispense with "folksiness," which in the way he describes it above he does, the poem still relies heavily on folk wisdom and forms. As James Justus explains, "in its liberal use of homely idioms the work still carries overtones of the ballad" (62). R.P.W. rejects the ballad form, that treasury of folklore, yet Warren still attempts to operate within a folk tradition, and acknowledge its relevance in transmitting knowledge, while providing an appeal to a "sort of bioregional imagination that inspires and grows out of practice" (Lynch et al. 10). In "Pure and Impure Poetry" Warren explains that poets "not only have tried to say what they mean, they have tried to prove what they mean." He attempts to convey to the reader a "burning conviction" that has been "tested and earned" (29). R.P.W.'s explicit rejection of the ballad form is not a rejection of folk knowledge and the methods of its transmission; he only rejects a simplistic and condescending employment of the form. A number of lines that appeared

in the 1953 version, between the third and fourth lines quoted above, provide even more insight into Warren's reluctance to use the ballad form:

For the beauty of such simplicity is only,
That the action is always and perfectly self-contained
And is an image that comes as its own perfect explanation. (43)

Warren rejects the contrived and simplistic “folksiness” on the grounds that it represents modern man's sense of superiority to the “folk simplicity” and that it does not acknowledge interconnectivity. In its refusal of the Jeffersonian grand narrative, *Brother to Dragons* provides narratives that aim for specific knowledge of particular places and events, and transmit a sense of interconnectivity and interpenetration. The type of knowledge Warren yearns for demands much more of all parties in the discourse. As he explains in “Pure and Impure Poetry,” “A good poem involves the participation of the reader; it must, as Coleridge puts it, make the reader into ‘an active creative being’” (27). Ecopoesis may arise only if and when the audience can find some proximity to the narrative and claim some ownership and belonging to the poem. In this guise, Warren's narrative poem can be interpreted as a combination of what Lyotard defines as traditional narratives (folk tales, ballads, etc) and little narratives—where a narrative structure provides appeals to external legitimation while also attempting to actively engage its readers to such an extent that they can “test” and “earn” the knowledge transmitted themselves.

Through the character of R.P.W., Warren engages Jefferson's grand narratives in such a way that allows him to find non-contingent knowledge that can be tested and

proved in particular circumstances. He strives not for “dissensus” but rather harmony, by asserting that the multiple little narratives may serve to legitimate a truth or value that is not only locally determined, but that may also be relevant and activated in other little narratives. This reciprocating legitimation does not necessarily posit a new grand narrative to supplant the old one, but rather offers the poet, and the reader, a method of responding to the disorienting world. As Warren writes in the Foreword to *Brother to Dragons*: “Historical sense and poetic sense should not, in the end, be contradictory, for if poetry is the little myth we make, history is the big myth we live, and in our living, constantly remake” (xiii). In this sense, Warren resembles a cross between the *homo religiosus* of Eliade and the postmodern man of Lyotard. He does not question the grand narrative in order to replace it with a relative pragmatism (as some critics have accused Lyotard of doing), but rather disrupts it with little narratives in order to open it up to find symbols, or knowledge, that may be tested in other contexts and proved to extend beyond the local meaning. The particulars employed in the context of the little narratives represent an approach to knowledge that allow him to find “his way out of [the] particular situation and ‘open himself’ to the general and universal” (Eliade 211). This opening up does not, however, “aspire to exclusivity,” nor is it based on presupposition, as the Jeffersonian grand narratives are (Sim 37). The internal little narratives (between the characters in the poem) and the external little narratives (between the readers and the poem) of *Brother to Dragons* explores the interconnections of narratives to create a knowledge locally determined and, perhaps, widely applicable.

R.P.W. begins the poem by undermining Jefferson's enlightenment ideals with little narratives, but he ends the poem carrying with him the pig-nuts that serve as symbols that extend outward from the particular landscape to become "no longer contingent or particular, thus enabling [him] to transcend personal situations and, finally, gain access to the world of spirit" (Eliade 210). Warren upends the Lyotardian postmodern condition by using poetry to reintegrate the particular and the general, the relative and the absolute. Since the poem continuously employs "recourse to argumentation and proof," with the voice of the poet as participant in a dialogue with the other characters, it can be said to confront the "legitimation crisis" of a Lyotardian narrative (Sim 38), but it answers the crisis through the very use of the form to acknowledge the power of the particular symbol to indicate a non-contingent message—which in this case is that a sense of owning and belonging to the landscape and "the world of action and liability" cannot arise without a "recognition of complicity" (Warren 1953, 214-215). In the end, the multiple little narratives, including the one "of that fellow Smith," indict the grand narrative of Jeffersonian idealism, and vice versa.

Folk Tales, Great Men, and Practical Pig-nuts

When R.P.W. imagines and narrates the story of that "fellow Smith" who founded Smithland, he includes an empirical observation coupled with a prediction based on folk wisdom: "The hickory leaf hangs limp, tomorrow weather" (14). This may seem a tenuous tie to the Pignut Hickory that lingers at the end of the poem, but the thread can be followed through a number of intersections, binding together a useful and

practical tree for settlers and a particular local knowledge to the events in the poem, while also connecting the giants of American history with the common settlers who tried to enact their ideals.

The observation and prediction suggest the type of ownership and belonging that may arise from a sensitivity to a bioregional perspective. The Hickory is known as straight and unbending, and thus its name was suitably adapted to Andrew Jackson: Old Hickory. Jackson is geographically and tangentially tied to the settlement where the Lewis family built their homestead “Rocky Point,” due to the settlement’s proximity to what later came to be known as the Jackson Purchase (Merrill 115-16). As R.P.W. notes, Smithland is located just 15 miles west-northwest of Paducah, or rather the confluence of the Ohio and Tennessee rivers, which comprises the northern and eastern borders of the Jackson Purchase. Although nowhere nearly as ambitious as Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase, the Jackson Purchase does present an interesting parallel. Both Jefferson and Jackson are significant individuals in the South’s development and conception of itself, and both purchased tracts of land for the purpose of expanding the nation and encouraging settlement. Just as Jefferson dispatched his cousin Meriwether to explore and then promote the land acquired in the Louisiana Purchase, Jackson was an important figure in the settlement of Tennessee and Kentucky, encouraging friends and business acquaintances to invest in land on the frontier as part of a program to take possession of the land from the people who already inhabited it.

Jackson, the hero of New Orleans and the (white) South, the frontier president, is also tied to the events of the poem and the folklore that arose from those events. Warren

has Isham Lewis confirm the bit of folklore that told the story of Isham's escape after the murder, and his eventual death during the battle of New Orleans. R.P.W. remarks:

So that is true—the tale the riflemen
 Brought back to tell the homefolks when
 They'd finished that big turkey-shoot
 With Andy Jackson at the cotton bales? (122).

The stories told to the “homefolk,” that are subsequently handed down generation to generation through an oral tradition, add a sort of depth and concreteness to the ideas Warren engages in the poem. As was suggested above, folklore and oral tradition are crucial elements of *Brother to Dragons*. Through the very act of composing the poem, Warren is entering into an ongoing conversation and tradition localized in western Kentucky that reaches out beyond the confines of place and time (the poem's setting of “No place” and “Any time”). In the Foreword, Warren explains that the poem “had its earliest suggestion in bits of folktale, garbled accounts heard in [...] boyhood” (xii). The intermingling of folk tales and folk wisdom with historical record, and active localizing, dramatizes the interconnectedness of the grand narratives of American history, the daily lives of a small community on the banks of the Ohio and Cumberland rivers, and the present day. Old Hickory's shadow may not loom as large as Jefferson's shadow over Rocky Point; nevertheless it provides some shading and relief to the landscape R.P.W. navigates and charts in *Brother to Dragons* and helps close the distance between the ideals behind land acquisition and the realities of those who live on the ground. The history of Great Men touches the history of an insignificant frontier settlement and is

implicated in its tragedy. Warren's poem attempts to demonstrate that the opposite is true as well. The atrocities of the frontier, many unrecorded and nearly forgotten, have shaped America's relationship with the land, and are just as important to our history as the policies and ideals set forth by Jefferson. The narrative of progress, which began in the 17th century and was eventually articulated as manifest destiny, was embraced, distorted, and finally employed to rationalize the expediency of the despoliation of the frontier along with the dispossession of the Native Americans who dwelled there.

The importance of the pignut hickory in folklore, as well as its status as a specimen of natural history, and its relationship with the social history connected to the events of the poem, demonstrates its significance as a practical symbol. Ostensibly, when R.P.W. picks up those pig-nuts at the end of the poem, they will serve him as a *memento mori*, not just of mortality or the specific crime he explores, but also as a reminder of human frailty and error, and the subsequent destruction of the frontier. As such, they supplant the image of the murdered slave's discovered jaw bone which resulted in the prosecution of the brothers (a nod toward the traditional image of the *memento mori*). Yet they can also serve as a *memento vivere*, as a reminder of "the glory of the human effort [...] the nature of virtue" in response to a brutal world. They can remind R.P.W. of the possibility "Of joy" that the participants of the poem catch a glimpse of "like a wing-flash in thicket" (131). It is not insignificant that Warren employs natural imagery in this simile because it suggests the power of nature to affect human sensibility, while remaining beyond our reach. It is not just an instrumental employment of nature either, but an attempt to render a momentary, phenomenological

experience of nature that cannot be grasped nor possessed; it can only be encountered if the individual is sensitive, open, and observant of his or her environment. It is with this type of attunement to his environment that motivates and enables R.P.W. to encounter the pig-nuts at his feet—which someone with less sensitivity might overlook as just more litter on the forest floor.

The pig-nuts R.P.W. picks up have their husks intact which indicates that they still hold the potential germ of life. The green inside of the pig-nut is reminiscent of the passage from Dante's *Purgatorio* that Warren uses as an epigraph for *All the King's Men*: "*Mentre che la speranza ha fior del verde*"--"as long as hope shows something green" (Dante III.135). In the context of *Brother to Dragons*, the green inside of the pig-nuts extends beyond hope for any one person despite the centrality of the parallel conversions of the two protagonists, Jefferson and R.P.W. Warren employs the theme of hope with a sort of ripple effect, one that Warren refers to as "the web" in *All the Kings Men*. The web ties all of humanity together across space and time in complicity, but the vibrations sent out by one's touch of the web can be viewed more positively as well—where one selfless deed, or even the mere recognition of interconnectivity, can reverberate across time and place. In *Brother to Dragons* Warren employs the pig-nuts in place of the web; pig-nuts that not only contain the potential of a single tree with its many branches and large crown, but many successive generations leading to a forest, as well as the genetic material that links the pig-nut to all the hickory trees that came before. It is an apt symbol in a work that often draws attention to the connections between generations and how humanity's potential (for both good and bad) develops organically.

Pig-nuts, Acorns, and the Dark Forest

As a practical symbol and image the pig-nuts also connect a number of crucial moments in the polyvocal poem: Jefferson's metaphor of hope in the opening lines, the slave John's few lines in the poem, and a description of Lilburne's mental and emotional state just before he decides to murder John. When R.P.W. claims ownership of those pig-nuts he is claiming ownership of a synecdoche of the landscape that contains all these moments and all of the events of the poem and the knowledge he has carried away. The specific action of picking up the pig-nuts exemplifies Warren's attempts to transfer abstract knowledge into concrete wisdom. Using a part of nature in such a way may seem somewhat instrumental, an aesthetic appropriation of nature parallel to Jefferson's material appropriation of the Louisiana Purchase, and hence damaging to the development of an ontology that allows nature to exist in its own right. But there is a big difference between, as Killingsworth puts it drawing on the work of Bate and Heidegger, a "purely instrumental" appropriation of nature and a creative "concern for enhancing both sides of the interaction" between the human and natural world (*Walt Whitman* 5). Killingsworth suggests that the difference between the two provides a way to question "the interplay of human language and the objects of nature, paralleling the interplay of authors and readers." He argues that both "forms of engagement—from author and nature to author and reader—are matters of give and take" and that Kenneth Burke's sense of "the process of identification" which is "at the heart of both environmental rhetoric and ecopoetics, is traditionally associated with overcoming division in a setting of discord and domination" (5). Warren uses the pig-nuts as a poetic symbol in part to

provide the reader with a specific object through which the process of identification—from nature and author to author and reader to reader and nature—may be enacted. This action at the close of the poem represents a denial of Jefferson’s abstracting distance and idealism and rather offers a concrete object of nature to be contemplated by the reader.

R.P.W.’s poetic use of the pig-nuts sharply contrasts with Jefferson’s similar poetic use of a “dry acorn” while he introduces himself at the beginning of the narrative.

Brother to Dragons opens with Jefferson explaining that he cannot rest. As Warren imagines Jefferson’s ghostly persona, he has renounced his commitment to the Enlightenment ideals of human progress and the liberation of nature due to the knowledge of his nephews’ horrendous actions. Jefferson remarks that:

I tried to bring myself to say:
 Knowledge is only incidental, hope is all—
 Hope, a dry acorn, but some green germ
 May split it yet, then joy and the summer shade.
 Even after age and the tangle of experience
 I still might—
 Oh, grandeur green and murmuring instancy of leaf,
 Beneath that shade we’ll shelter. So, in senility
 And moments of indulgent fiction I might try
 To defend my old definition of man. (5)

When R.P.W. picks up the pig-nuts just before the last lines of the poem, he evokes these first words spoken by Jefferson. Warren’s pig-nuts are the hickory tree’s

correspondent to Jefferson's acorns from the oak tree. While the "real" pig-nuts, "with the husks yet on," serve as a symbol and *memento vivere* for R.P.W. and help illustrate interconnectivity, Jefferson employs a symbolic "dry acorn" to represent his abstract ideal of hope and expunge his feeling of guilt for his nephews' crime. The dry acorn and the extended metaphor, or rather the metaphorical conceit, serve to disconnect Jefferson both from nature, by using a natural object purely as a metaphor, and human interactions, by sheltering him. The juxtaposition of R.P.W.'s action at the end of the poem and Jefferson's metaphor at the beginning of the poem, indicates the distance between R.P.W.'s and Jefferson's worldview as depicted in *Brother to Dragons*.

As Warren casts Jefferson in this opening sequence, their philosophies are antithetical—Jefferson views knowledge, of the present and the past, as subordinate to an idea of a better future, an idea of progress. Even though it is only an idea, an abstraction, Jefferson can find shelter in his dreams of what America might turn out to be. Through a particularly venomous opening portrayal, Warren depicts Jefferson "sheltering" in the shade of his grand narrative: the reader is invited to contextualize Jefferson's leisure and imagine the unspoken slaves toiling on Jefferson's plantation in the hot sun and bright light of the actual world. The image of Jefferson here presented suggests that the abstract thinking, and dismissal of the knowledge of the past, allows the writer of the *Declaration of Independence* to profit on the sweat of his slaves. The rending of ideals from lived experience results in a gap through which tragedy runs in *Brother to Dragons*. The appropriation of nature in Jefferson's metaphysical conceit

parallels the attempted possession and control of nature in Jefferson's dream of an agrarian republic.

Jefferson's tree of hope, in whose shade he reclines, later becomes a "dark swale" over the slave John. Just moments before Jefferson's final conversion, when he acknowledges his bond to his murderous nephew and touches him in order to validate their connection, the victim of the crime speaks his only words: "I was lost in the world, and the trees were tall / I was lost in the world and the dark swale heaved. / I was lost in my anguish and did not know the reason" (194). The short passage is easily overlooked, appearing as it does at the height of tension during the rising action just before the climactic moment of the poem. Yet its location in the narrative attests to the lines' significance and the primacy of the dendrological imagery employed throughout the poem.⁶ According to the *OED* "swale" has a number of loosely associated meanings. It can be a "shady place" or "Timber in laths, boards, or planks" or even, in a distinctly American definition, a "hollow low place." There are vestiges of each of these connotations in Warren's use of the word: the "hollow low place" describes the rolling hills and bottomland of the Western Kentucky frontier where the Lewis cabin was situated; the "timber in laths, boards, or planks" is emblematic of the cut-over land and the exploitation of nature; and the shady place is symbolic of the dark shadows cast by human actions when they are viewed through Jefferson's "light of reason" (119). Jefferson admits as much when he echoes the last word in John's interjection,

⁶ In the 1953 version of the poem, Jefferson touches Lilbourne before John speaks. Warren's revision here further attests to the significance of John's words—in the later version they precipitate the climax rather than begin the dénouement.

appropriating John's meaning of the word "reason" from "cause" to a philosophical ideal of logic.

In an interview with Warren four years after the initial publication of *Brother to Dragons*, Ralph Ellison mistakenly suggests that the victim of the crime never speaks in the poem. Warren corrects him, recites the lines about John's "lostness" from memory, and explains that: "those three lines [...] were the first lines of *Brother to Dragons* that I composed—four years before I began the consistent composition of the poem" (Watkins et al. 42-43). The lines may represent some lingering vestiges of the original attempt to cast the story in the form of a ballad, but they also serve as a conjunction between Jefferson's metaphor of hope blossoming into a tree from a dried acorn, and Warren's symbolic action of carrying a few pig-nuts with him from the place where the crime occurred. Warren describes the slave John as a "pure victim" (43), and he functions not only as a piece of property of the murderer, but also as a victim of Jefferson's blind idealism. John is utterly "lost," without agency, in the dark shadows cast by Jefferson's ideals.

Warren parallels Jefferson's appropriation of organic imagery in his metaphorical conceit by using the same kind of instrumental aesthetics to describe the development of Lilburne's hate and rage:

So in the dark now let
 The dark flame lift, unfolding like a flower
 From the blind nutriment of Lilburne's heart—
 That rich detritus of all History,

Muck, murk, and humus, and the human anguish,
 And human hope (77).

Warren compounds the metaphor of rage as an elemental “dark flame” with a simile of its efflorescence as a flower. As if the yoking of a flame and a flower is not enough, the imaginative and ironic distance between the image of the flower (the “vehicle,” in I.A. Richards’s terms) and the “underlying idea or principal” of Lilburne’s unfolding hate, manifests the tension present in Lilburne’s heart (Richards 97, 125). The metaphysical conceit so violently yokes complex human emotion and natural facts that it demonstrates the disconnect between the two, particularly when humans attempt to appropriate nature for their own ends. While forcing proximity, the form paradoxically also demonstrates distance.

In a case of tragic irony, where formal and thematic distance are both in operation, Warren poetically demonstrates how Lilburne’s love for his deceased mother transmogrifies into murderous rage and provides the motivation to kill John. The organic imagery (the flower, “detritus,” “humus,” etc.) serves as a vehicle whose underlying principal (nature’s power of transforming death into nutriment for life) is ironically connected to the anguish John feels in the shadows of Jefferson’s dream. Lilburne’s hate grows out of the nutriment of the anguish of human hope—hope that is connected to Jefferson’s image of a tree of hope, in whose shadow John is denied that same hope and feels his own anguish. The growth and development of Lilburne’s rage and motivation to brutality is the obverse of the growth of Jefferson’s tree of hope. Justus argues that, “Lilburn Lewis, though conceived as a real and depressingly tangible person, functions

also (through symbols and mythic attributes) as the very embodiment of the unacknowledged secret self of Jefferson, the ‘coiling darkness’ that must be embraced” (Justus 39-40). When Jefferson finally overcomes his refusal to acknowledge Lilburne, and he embraces this dark half at the climax of the poem, he concedes his complicity with the crimes of humanity.

The kind of knowledge Jefferson simultaneously attains and expresses in his act of touching Lilburne demonstrates a sense of owning and belonging, with implications that extend far beyond his personal redemption. As Warren structured the narrative, Jefferson’s real conflict is not between his unbending commitment to human perfectibility and the fact of humanity’s brutal potential, but rather the complete reversal of his hope for humanity that results in despair. Warren suggests that both sides of Jefferson’s idealism are over-run with a sort of self-possession, an attitude that relies (impossibly) on complete control of the narrative of lived experience. Frederick P. W. McDowell explains that Jefferson “worships an intellectualized abstraction while disregarding the critical function of reason except as it reinforces his interested idealism” (572). His initial dream of hope ignores what history has taught him about humanity’s dark past. In this way, he attempts to control the narrative of the future and promulgate the ideal of human perfectibility, based on a “presupposition,” in Lyotard’s terms, that universal human perfectibility (and hence innocence) is achievable through the agency of human progress. This attitude relinquishes any sense of belonging to the world from which he originated. The relinquishment serves as another method of control; by removing a referent to the past, Jefferson is creating a new world, and hence controlling

its development and direction. By not acknowledging responsibility to the old world, he simultaneously severs any sense of owning it or belonging to it.

Warren imagines that Jefferson could not assimilate the murder into his worldview. Lewis P. Simpson explains that “the feature of the dark story of Jefferson’s nephews that seems to have struck Warren most forcibly is that [...] no scholar has found a single mention of the murder anywhere in his voluminous writings, public or private nor discovered any record of his ever having mentioned it in conversation” (“The Poet and the Father” 53). The internal conflict that results in such a rift of personality causes Jefferson to rebuke his earlier idealism only to replace it with a new form of idealism that cannot see beyond “the minotaur” in humanity, “a view badly distorted by an excess of outrage and revulsion” (Strandberg 499). He goes from possessing the future to being possessed by the past. Much of the poem consists of the working out of this dichotomy until Jefferson, with the aid of his sister Lucy, R.P.W., Meriwether Lewis, and each of the other characters in their own ways, reconciles his divergent ideals and recognizes the value of a more humble sense of owning and belonging to the entirety of human potential, potential for both glory and depravation. The Jefferson toward the end of the poem who joins the other characters in a chorus and sings: “Dance back the morning and the eagle’s cry. / Dance back the Shining Mountains, let them shine! / Dance into morning and the lifted eye, / Dance into morning past the morning star, / And dance the heart by which we must live and die” (120) is not the same Jefferson who declares at the beginning of the poem that: “to hold joy you must deny mere Nature” (8).

The sentiment Jefferson expresses—to “deny mere Nature” so that humanity can “leap / Beyond man’s natural bourne and constriction” (8)—is emblematic of the internal division that Jefferson suffers. The modifier “mere” underscores his conviction that although humans are in fact natural creatures, or in his words “beasts in boots, parrots in pantaloons” (6), we are endowed with the capacity to govern and control nature, not only in ourselves, but also in the world at large. “Mere nature” is insignificant and reductive when compared to the powers Jefferson attributes to human ability. Before Jefferson can be redeemed, he must overcome this separation between man and nature and reconcile his Enlightenment ideals with his newfound dark vision of man that has overtaken him in despair. On route toward that redemption, Warren, with the help of the many characters participating in the discussion, directs the reader through a tortuous history and dialogue that reveals the interconnectedness of man, place, environment, the past and present, Jefferson’s dream for his country, and the fruits of that dream.

Enlightenment Architecture and Rational Forests

In a chapter devoted to the Enlightenment in *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Robert Pogue Harrison argues that the “Cartesian distinction between the *res cogitans*, or the thinking self, and the *res extensa*, or the embodied substance, sets up the terms for the objectivity of science and the abstraction from historicity, location, nature, and culture” (107). The separation provides the needed distance for society to believe it can possess, control, and dominate the natural world. As Jonathan Bate argues:

“The major philosophical revolutions since the seventeenth century have constituted a progressive severance of humankind from nature that has licensed, or at least neglected, technology’s ravaging of the earth’s finite resources” (245).

Warren draws on Jefferson’s admiration for the architecture of the Maison Quarrée at Nîmes in order to illustrate Jefferson’s initial faith in Enlightenment values and his aversion to “mere Nature.” McDowell describes the cathedral at Nîmes as “a symbol of ideal human fulfillment and of Jefferson’s noble vision” (570) and William Bedford Clark explains that “for Jefferson, the *Maison Quarree* is a promise of a world realized along the lines of the Enlightenment vision of reason and order, a world peopled by men unfettered by ignorance and brute instinct” (173). Warren poses such hope in the perfectibility of man as a fundamental contradiction in Jefferson’s psyche, one which Jefferson acknowledges time and again throughout the poem. He views the ideas that came out of France during the Enlightenment as emblematic “Of sunlight and the sunlit spirit / That once itself shed light on all our faces,” yet as he journeys in France he sees in the Gothic architecture “vile parodies and mock-shows of the human shape / That might be beasts but yet were men,” and worse yet, he tells R.P.W., “I’ve met them on the street. / They are a breed / That does not decrease in number or / Significant influence in your own time” (27-28). Despite the reality of these “abominable relics” (27) Jefferson finds represented at the Cathedral at Amiens, which has been called the “Parthenon of Gothic Architecture,” he remains committed to the vision the Maison Quarrée provides: “the light / Of just proportion and heart’s harmony” (29). The poet sets himself in complete opposition to Jefferson when R.P.W calls the Maison Quarrée “a heap of

organized rubble” and “cold and too obviously mathematical” (29). Clark argues that “what Jefferson does not realize, however, is that Gothic architecture has its own order, an order following organic rather than geometric imperatives. It too represents a world-view, but one in which the fact of evil has its place alongside the good” (173). Jefferson is more comfortable with the geometric patterns of classical architecture that anticipate Enlightenment ideals than he is with the organic forms that resemble “mere Nature.” Warren subtly evokes the irony of Jefferson’s vision by having Jefferson refer to the Maison Quarrée as “that Square House,” juxtaposing Jefferson’s word choice with “The house—” he alludes to earlier, that is, the house Charles Lewis built where his son Lilburne later murdered the young slave. That “Square House” at Nîmes represents the ideals of the Enlightenment, while “The house” in western Kentucky represents the ironic fruition of Jefferson’s hope for the frontier. The disparity between the two houses, and what they stand for, demonstrates how the abstract hope of Jefferson’s vision can lead to the exploitation of a continent and the destruction of many of its people in the name of progress.

The separation of the *res cogitas* and the *res extensa* does not only affect one’s proclivity for certain styles of architecture. Jefferson’s inclination for classical architecture is emblematic of his idea of humanity and his concept of humanity’s proper role in nature, specifically in the frontier of his Louisiana Purchase. The Maison Quarrée represents Enlightenment ideals parallel to Descartes’ attempt “to empower the subject of knowledge in such a way that, through its application of mathematical method, humanity could achieve what he called ‘mastery and *possession* of nature’” (Harrison

108, emphasis added). Jefferson's distaste for the organic forms of Gothic architecture, and his praise for the "authoritative reserve and glorious frugality" of the Maison Quarreé, demonstrate his will to control what he views as a profligate nature. This will to power, in the sense of society's achievement over nature, is necessarily future oriented.

Although a society may attempt to project its grand narrative into the past through its selection and interpretation of historical events, it cannot actually control the past. The efforts expended in the present to control and possess nature promise a better future free from the limitations imposed upon humanity by an inscrutable, indifferent, and at times, hostile nature. For Jefferson, the Reason behind the architecture of the "Square House" speaks to him "Of a time to come" when man's "natural innocence / Would dance like sunlight over the delighted landscape" (29). Not only is it humanity's destiny to control nature, but nature itself will improve and "delight" under human control. Jefferson's goal is to emancipate man from a nature that he finds disturbing. This patronizing, colonizing, and possessive mindset can easily be extended and employed to rationalize nearly any form of New World imperialism as "progress" that presupposes its own truth and value. Jefferson's viewpoint is in keeping with the Enlightenment's "projective detachment from the past—a way of thinking which detaches the present from tradition and projects it forward into an ideal secular future ideally governed by the law of reason. The future remains Enlightenment's true heritage" (Harrison 114). Even Jefferson's gaze into the past, in his appreciation of the classical architecture, ironically projects him into a better future—a better future to be realized in what he sees as the New Eden of the American West. As time and history

progress, freedom from the past accumulates and the culture is left with a perpetually renewing innocence. Such innocence finds one of its expressions in a frontier ethic that legitimizes wearing out land, either by over-grazing or over-farming, on a promise of perpetual rejuvenation, even if such rejuvenation can only occur through continued westward expansion. Naturally, such a program is unsustainable, but nevertheless it persists in the dominant culture. Examples abound—in *Goodbye to a River*, the Texas writer John Graves remarks that “the old-timers used to brag in front of the feed stores in Weatherford and Granbury, ‘I’ve done wore out three farms in my time’” (29). In its modern form we see the mindset active in the cries of “Drill, Baby, Drill!” subsequently silenced by the BP Gulf oil spill, and then renewed as the memory of the oil spill dissipated, albeit with a less shrill call for opening up more land and offshore areas for further drilling. Use up one oil well, drill another, wear out one landscape, move to another.

Abstracting the West

Warren casts Jefferson’s dream of the West as entirely distanced, abstract, and full of an attitude of possession. Jefferson admits early on that he, “Never crossed / The Mountains to Kentucky and *my* West” (9, emphasis added). Although he has never seen it, he imagines an innocent, bucolic pastoral for the setting of the westward march to “redeem Nature”:

My West—the land I bought and gave and never
Saw, but like the Israelite,

From some high pass or crazy crag of mind, saw—
 Saw all,
 Swale and savannah and the tulip tree
 Immortally blossoming to May,
 Hawthorne and haw
 Valleys extended, prairies idle, and the land's
 Long westward languor lifting
 Toward the flaming escarpment of the end of day. (10)

Aaron Shaheen argues that Jefferson's description of the West is evocative of a prelapsarian Eden, a land of "fruition, fertility, and abundance," or if not Eden, at least the future-oriented Promised Land. Jefferson speaks here as a prophetic leader and patriarch, as if he paid for the Louisiana Purchase with his own money and generously donated it to the country, never mind the questionable legality of the acquisition at the time. Nevertheless, as Shaheen explains, "The land that Jefferson has purchased for his nation is a maternal landscape, one that—like a generous mother—provides food, comfort, and shelter for the light-bringing settler" (78). From Jefferson's privileged position in Philadelphia and at Monticello, it is easy to imagine the bountiful mother awaiting her children beyond the mountains.

For the actual early settler, such as Lilburne, the landscape of the American frontier is anything but a generous mother. Without the distancing comforts of the accoutrements of "civilized" life, the settlers find themselves thrust into a disturbing proximity to nature. Compare Jefferson's bucolic description of the West with

Lilburne's: "Woods are dark and the river stinks all summer, / And the world's a sty, and the world all stinks and stews" (Warren 57). Warren demonstrates the discontinuity of the abstract ideal of possession with the lived circumstances of the frontier. The settlers are confronted with a wild and unruly nature, one that resists their attempts to "emancipate" it from its ungovernable form, and discover that despite their attempts, they cannot claim possession of the environment as easily as they hoped. Without all the means available to their peers in the long settled societies back east, the settlers find themselves overshadowed by a dark heart of nature, rather than bringing the light of reason to the wilderness. Nature asserts its possession of the settlers when they first arrive on the frontiers.

As Shaheen argues, making reference to Annette Kolodny, the image of the American landscape as the generous mother is not the only interpretation of that landscape: "the nineteenth-century idea of the land changed from the Mother to the Virgin who, quite lustily, 'awaits impregnation'" (75). Warren depicts the "light-bringing" settlers as rapacious, moving into a land they view not as a "generous mother" but rather as a "jolly trollope" waiting for "sexual possession" (Shaheen 75). I return to that moment early in the poem when R.P.W., in his role as the skeptical postmodern man, imagines the namesake of Smithland moving into the "virgin" territory of western Kentucky where the Lewises later settled:

He had a right to hope, that fellow Smith,
 In that heyday of hope and the westward heart's extravagance,
 When *Grab* was watchward and earth spread her legs

Wide as she could, like any jolly trollop
 Back in the bushes after
 The preaching or the husking bee, and teased:
 “Come git it, boy, hit’s yourn, but git it deep.” (13)

The juxtaposition of Jefferson’s view of the land as the generous mother, and the manifestation of the settler experience as presented by Warren, serves to demonstrate the tragedy of the Enlightenment’s separation between the *res cogitas* and the *res extensa*. While the “thinking self” (illustrated by Jefferson’s pastoral and maternal view of the landscape) looks to a future of progress, the “embodied self” (illustrated by R.P.W.’s description of the settler zeitgeist) tears into the land with no further thought than the immediate gratification of a seemingly boundless free territory. The divide between these approaches to the landscape allows for the tulip tree in Jefferson’s pastoral vision to be transformed, much later in the poem, into “that tulip-wood” butcher block upon which Lilburne’s slave was stretched out to be brutally murdered (82).

Although Jefferson’s vision of the western American landscape can be interpreted as a representation of the generous mother, that does not negate his vision’s *possessive* quality. On at least two occasions in the poem, he declares that the land acquired in the Louisiana Purchase is “My West.” Furthermore, although he regrets he never has the chance to set foot in the Western landscape, he remarks that he “sent *my* Meriwether there / [...] *My* cousin, *my* near-son / [...] I said I cannot go, / But *my own blood* will go” (9 emphasis added). Meriwether functions as more than just a surrogate for Jefferson, as Warren clearly demonstrates through the repeated use of the possessive

pronoun. Jefferson's possession of the west is made possible only through the separation of the *res cogitas* and the *res extensa*. Jefferson adopts Meriwether as an extension of his dream and as an extension of himself—his own blood will be the forbearer of light into the frontier. The irony of course, as Warren points out, is that it was another blood relation that killed Jefferson's hope for a perpetual innocence in the frontier: "One Lewis [Meriwether] opened up the West, and two Lewises [Lilburne and Isham] were devoured by it"(qtd. in Watkins et al. 5).

Meriwether's mission is "To name and chart and set the human foot" on the land, or in other words, define the landscape and claim possession of it. In *Creek Paths and Federal Roads: Indians, Settlers and Slaves and the Making of the American South* Angela Pulley Hudson addresses the issue of "how people define place differentially" and argues that such examinations "help us to understand how they generate a sense of cultural identity and how they narrate and situate their own histories" (2). During the Lewis and Clark expedition several other similar surveys were taking place. Hudson explains that treaties with the tribes in whose land, or on whose boundaries, the surveys were occurring, would often include provisions for the effected tribe to assist with the survey. The surveyors assured the Indians that this would be to their mutual benefit, but some tribes, such as the Creeks were "skeptical of these pronouncements, since surveying was often a mechanism of colonial control, an effort on the part of the settlers and speculators to know, name, and ultimately possess the land" (39). Although Hudson posits "knowing" and "naming" as precursors to possession, it is important to note that

they are part of a sequence, or “mechanism,” with the ultimate goal of control, or possession.

Through the act of naming a feature of the landscape the surveyor sets boundaries and limits on natural objects while also asserting a sort of exclusive propriety over that object, either for himself, or the organization he represents, be it a government, or logging company. For the individual who conducts this type of surveying, the land cannot really be known until it is named or otherwise marked with the surveyor’s stamp. The land is significant only insofar as it can be claimed as an extension and property of the surveyor’s identity, again whether as an individual or as a representative for a larger organization. This knowledge, this identification through naming, asserts the claim of possession. The individual naming the feature of a landscape serves an Adamic function and provides it with what is ostensibly its permanent identity, to be recorded not only in the minds of the subsequent individuals who identify the feature by name, but on maps and signs as well. When the settler or surveyor names a feature of the landscape he is extending his identity into that feature of the landscape, establishing its significance in his literal and metaphorical worldview. He has claimed the right to name it, and thus has claimed possession of it. While naming and charting can be instrumental means of abstracting the materiality of the landscape in the name of possession, setting “the human foot” on the land is, in Jefferson’s view at least, an embodied claim of possession, even more crucial than the names on maps or the legal documents establishing titular ownership.

The irony of Meriwether's mission—"To name and chart and set the human foot" on the land—is that much, if not all of that land, had already been named, charted, and felt the print of human foot. Steven D. Ealy explains that "Jefferson's vision of the West as a land flowing with milk and honey and human possibility blinded him to the human realities that the Louisiana Purchase and his policies set in motion. These realities included [...] the displacement or destruction of the native peoples already inhabiting but not working the land (a key point always made by the spiritual heirs of John Locke!)" (100). Ealy makes a salient argument, except, like the heirs of John Locke that he admonishes, he suggests that Native Americans did not work the land, an observation not borne out by history and archeology (see Doolittle, among others). Native Americans' methods of working the land go unrecognized or unacknowledged because they often bear little resemblance to the Enlightenment conception of what "working the land" should look like. The ideal form of land that has been cultivated may have its apotheosis in the ordered gardens of Versailles, a far cry from land that has subjected to managed burns and left fallow for rejuvenation; the gardens are clearly a distanced possession of nature while a managed burn exhibits a more proximate sense of ownership.

In Harrison's study of forests, and particularly in his analysis of managed, monoculture timberland and their geometric forms, he convincingly argues that the "Enlightenment remains our dominant cultural heritage" (108). For Warren that cultural heritage, and Jefferson's impact on it, is particularly personal. He explains in an interview that Jefferson "gave us [America] more than any one person, gave us our self-

image” (Watkins et al. 210). In another interview he refers to himself as a “Jeffersonian Democrat” (77), and later explains that the foundations of the Nashville Agrarians’ beliefs were “arrived at through experience, personal experience and Thomas Jefferson” (230). Warren’s qualification of “personal experience” parallels a “bioregional imagination that inspires and grows out of practice” (Lynch et al. 10), and exhibits an ecopoetic engagement with the natural and cultural environment, while also suggesting Warren’s enduring skepticism of the abstract idealism evident in Enlightenment beliefs. Yet the comment does recognize that Jefferson’s ideals were not worthless, and that they can be enacted successively as long as they are synchronic with a bioregional imagination and an ecopoetic position.

The Agrarian Father

One of the great ironies of *Brother to Dragons* is that, as the most famous and successful of the Nashville Agrarians, Warren takes to task one of the founders, if not the most important voice, of the American, and indeed the southern, agrarian movement. It may be ironic, but it is in keeping with Warren’s oeuvre, considering his abiding skepticism toward people who attempt to separate their ideals from the mess of daily life. The character of Jefferson represents another avatar of the “man of idea” who is so frequently the subject of Warren’s work. The enigma at the root of the poem is the contradiction in Jefferson’s philosophy and life and the difficulties these contradictions raise for an agrarian philosophy. The same person who wrote the Declaration of Independence also risked mortgaging his slaves in order to finance the remodeling of

Monticello (Schwabach n.p.). In his discussion of Jefferson's impact on the American conception of the "middle landscape," Leo Marx concludes by examining some of these contradictions and how they relate to his agrarian and pastoral ideals:

There is no way, finally, to cancel out either his ardent devotion to the rural ideal or the cool, analytic, pragmatic tone in which he dismisses it [...] He praises the noble husbandman's renunciation of worldly concerns, but he himself wins and holds the highest political office in the land; he is drawn to a simple life in a remote place, but he cherishes the fruits of high civilization – architecture, music, literature, fine wines, and the rest; he wants to preserve a provincial, rural society, but he is devoted to the advance of science, technology, and the arts. (135)

Brother to Dragons addresses many of these paradoxes, and in contrast to Jefferson's "cool, analytic, pragmatic tone," Warren presents a tone of passionate pragmatics; he acts as a hawk against the kind of idealism Jefferson demonstrates. But the poem also imagines a possible reconciliation among Jefferson's Enlightenment idealism, his dream for the Republic, and a reciprocal relationship with the land.

In the 1979 version of the poem, Meriwether Lewis is instrumental in bringing about Jefferson's redemption, more so than in the 1953 version. During a lengthy monologue describing his trek across the continent to fulfill his kinsmen's mission, Meriwether rebukes Jefferson a number of times for convincing him of the possibility of humanity's perfection. The account of the journey is studded with examples of man's fallen nature as well as the hardships and dangers of travelling through the western

wilderness. But the tale also relates moments of tenderness, generosity, beauty, and awe—in the society of the explorers and Native Americans who assisted them on their journey, and in the natural phenomena they encountered. Those moments are enough to make Meriwether believe in the possibility of Jefferson’s dream, although as Warren casts the narrative, it betokens a philosophy not of possession, but a more measured response of a reciprocal relationship of owning and belonging to the landscape that Meriwether crosses. It is not until Meriwether returns to civilization and Jefferson appoints him governor of the territory, that he is disillusioned by Jefferson’s “lie” of human perfectibility. Embroiled in accusations of corruption, Lewis commits suicide en route to Washington D.C. to clear his name. Warren has him explain in the poem:

I rode toward Justice. I would kill the slander
 That I—I who had slept under the big stars—
 Would peck at dollars as a sparrow at dung.

 Oh, the wilderness was easy!—
 But to find, in the end, the tracklessness
 Of the human heart. (114)

Meriwether’s words articulate his disdain for material wealth, and his incomprehension that anyone would believe that after choosing to spend two years in intimate daily contact with the natural world he would be susceptible to avarice. Meriwether’s attitude toward the environment is presented as categorically opposed to the attitude of possession as articulated by the frontier settlers such as “that fellow Smith” and the other

Lewis who settled in Kentucky. In fact, he employs a bioregional and ecopoetic perspective in his accounts of his journey through the west. Warren positions Meriwether and his sensitivity to the environment in juxtaposition to his “civilized” countrymen in the East who cannot imagine a relationship with the land that is not based on exploitation. The tragedy for Meriwether is not being able to reconcile what he has learned in his close proximity to the land and the people who dwell on it, with what he has confronted in his fellow citizens when he returned to “civilization.” He represents an individual who carried and nurtured Jefferson’s dream of hope as he explored the Western territory, only to be dismayed by the suspicion, accusation, and envy he finds still quite active in the “civilized” East. Warren suggests that Meriwether was unable to navigate the complicated social and political ground, which led to feelings of defeat and betrayal, and finally, despair.

Warren employs Meriwether’s monologue and his accusations against Jefferson to set the stage for Jefferson’s final redemption. Reeling from Meriwether’s tale, Jefferson is confronted by Lilburne and Lucy. As Lilburne stands silently by, Meriwether and Lucy, along with John, convince Jefferson to renounce his idealism and touch Lilburne in an act of “recognition.” Jefferson’s redemption affects Meriwether to the point that he acknowledges that “the dream remains” albeit “in the shade of the human condition” (118). The metaphoric boughs on the tree of Jefferson’s initial, idealistic dream of hope, which became the tall trees and “dark swale” that overshadowed the slave John, are now reshaped into the branches of the human condition that demonstrate a vital knowledge of human potential. Meriwether’s presence

at the final redemption allows Warren to include a tribute to the Native American Ghost Dance. As the one character in the poem who was most taken in by Jefferson's dream, and the one character who has had close contact with the Native Americans, Meriwether is best suited to introduce the final reconciliation of the various ghosts in poem by referencing the dance. It serves a dual purpose by alluding to the Native Americans, mostly absent from the poem to reflect their dispossession of the frontier, who suffered under the policy of Westward expansion, as well as the ghost-like characters who participated in the dialogue. The dance, and the joining together of participants in song, signals not only a renewed dream of hope, but also an atoning and harmonizing of the experiences, dreams, and knowledge of the conjured ghosts.

The Agrarian Son

Jefferson is not, however, the only character in *Brother to Dragons* who goes through a transformation and struggles with an attitude of possession. Justus argues that R.P.W. "is no disinterested conjurer" of the ghosts in his "Tale in Verse and Voices" but rather that "through his dialectical parryings he attempts to guide them into his own control" (61). Although R.P.W. conjured up these spirits he cannot hope to control and possess them: at times he may direct the trajectory of their discussions, but more often than not in this polyvocal poem, the other characters assume control of the narrative. Moreover, on a number of occasions, Jefferson rebukes the cynical R.P.W.—as a sort of reversal of grand and little narratives. Inserting the voice of the poet in the drama may serve to either acknowledge the poet's manipulation of the narrative, or to subtly conceal

it by suggesting that the presence of the poet's voice, R.P.W., is enough of an acknowledgement by Warren of his manipulation of the characters and the colloquium. But the presence of the R.P.W. character may distract the reader from the manipulations of the actual author—it only gives the impression that the author has given up “authorial omniscience,” when the omniscient narrator, the writer Robert Penn Warren, is in fact the sole abettor and proprietor of the text (Nakadate 115).

Warren does, however, demonstrate that Jefferson has value for the “aggressively modern [...] man too schooled in the naturalistic to be put off by visions of man's glory, a man too familiar with ‘progress’ in twentieth-century Kentucky to sentimentalize” (Justus 61). Jefferson's rebukes aimed at R.P.W., and the exchange of position of grand and little narratives, allow Warren to demonstrate that there is some validity to Jefferson's original ideals. Like it or not, R.P.W. needs to learn that Jefferson, and his idealism, are part of the fabric of the past, and that Jefferson had a major hand in stitching together the values that make up the quilt of the South. R.P.W. cannot completely dispossess, and be dispossessed of, Jefferson while still attempting to own and belong to the place he holds dear. Warren employs the two trips R.P.W. makes to Smithland, culminating in the collection of the pig-nuts, to demonstrate that R.P.W. experiences “a redemption parallel to Jefferson's” (Justus 62). The trips are necessary to provide R.P.W., and by extension the actual Warren who made those trips, with the concrete specificity needed to come to terms with the past and the nation's developing relation with the land. The land is not so much a means to redemption as it is one of many facilitators present in the process of redemption—a process that is not complete

until the composition of the poem is complete—and perhaps even then only continues to unwind as the poem ripples out into the culture.

Many critics of *Brother to Dragons* have commented on R.P.W.’s visits to the site of the Lewis cabin (see Strandberg and Justus among others), with Dennis M. Dooley offering, perhaps, the most thorough account of the significance of those visits in terms of theme and structure. Dooley describes the two visits in terms of three digressions, akin to one of Warren’s favorite devices in his novels: the interpolated story which mirrors or comments on the action and themes of the larger story. In Dooley’s account, the first visit encompasses the first two digressions, and the final visit the last digression. While “digression” might not be the appropriate term to describe the technique as employed in *Brother to Dragons*,⁷ Dooley notes that “the main action of the poem [...] is framed by R.P.W.’s conversion”(30). R.P.W. moves from a naturalistic proximity and ironic distance from his environment to a bioregional proximity and ecopoetic interconnectivity. Before R.P.W. actually arrives at the site of the cabin he describes his journey (presumably from his family home in Guthrie, Kentucky, judging by the directions he provides) through a veritable summer wasteland in the countryside of western Kentucky. From his car he sees nature undone by itself (the “sun-bit land” and “sun-blasted field”), by man (“the ruined coal tipple and the blistered town”), by both man and nature (“Blunt hills eroded red”), and by some nameless evil (“A face

⁷ The final “digression” closes the narrative poem, and as Justus explains, “for the reader the spiritual experience of R.P.W. is as significant as R.P.W.’s manipulation of Jefferson” (18)—and hence not a digression at all but an integral aspect of the narrative. Furthermore, Dooley was working with the 1953 version of the book, which lacks the seven section breaks that Warren introduced in the 1979 version. These section breaks help distinguish separate episodes and make them appear less like digressions in one long narrative, and more like interrelated commentaries on a larger theme.

fixed at us and the red eye glared / Without forgiveness, and will not forgive”) (Warren 12). At this early point in his development, he maintains his distance from the environment until he is compelled by “nature” to stop his car and “void the bladder” in the midst of the wasteland before continuing to his destination.

R.P.W.’s description of this journey portrays his cynical nature before his conversion and “his need to dissociate himself” from a naturalistic vision of man as well as Jefferson’s initial dream of man’s potential perfectibility (Dooley 22). He wants nothing to do with what he interprets as the legacy of the early settlers and the “heyday of hope and the westward heart’s extravagance” (Warren 13). Instead, he avoids contact with the environment by remaining safe within his machine. By distancing and dissociating himself from the landscape, he refuses to accept responsibility and behaves thoroughly self-possessed in his modern cynicism. Warren, however, introduces a subtle shift in character when R.P.W. finally arrives at the property where the Lewis cabin is located, although the shift is cloaked and shadowed by continued pessimism. At first, he remarks that there is “nothing but rubble” at the site, and he observes that the present owner of the land, Mr. Boyle, is “quaint [...] or could be made to seem so” (20). But in this stage of his development, R.P.W.’s tone begins to soften. He is sympathetic to Mr. Boyle and his “country manners,” who nevertheless cannot imagine why this “stranger, and a fool” would want to climb the bluff in the summer sun in order to see some ruins. R.P.W. explains that he “yearned to be understood, to make communication, / To touch the ironic immensity of afternoon with meaning” (20). Although this last statement may seem hyperbolic compared to the “quaint” country manners of Mr. Boyle, thus further

articulating the cynical nature of R.P.W., it simultaneously expresses the profound motivation that has driven R.P.W. to the ruins of the Lewis cabin. He fails to achieve communion with Mr. Boyle at the time, but through his act of reflection and the composition of the poem, he creates an imaginative communion that touches not only the “afternoon with meaning” but also communicates meaning to his readers.

As Justus points out, while the poem as a whole is set in “no place” and at “any time,” it is structurally “anchored firmly to actual times and places” (18), complete with specific dates (month and year), and detailed directions (both by highway to the property and by foot up a bluff to the ruins). The specificity of the narration suggests R.P.W.’s (and in this case, Warren’s) aversion to the kind of abstract thinking he criticizes in Jefferson and highlights his bioregional imagination. The specificity also suggests the beginnings of a mode of owning and belonging, of an invested proximity, to the landscape he encounters. By recording the directions and identifying the natural elements he encounters (trees, bushes, vines), Warren/R.P.W. demonstrates that he has internalized the landscape and brought forth its significance through the creation of his poem—the environment has become a part of his experience, and hence it is meshed with his being. His conversion, however, is not yet complete.

The naturalistic tendencies of the modern man come through when he encounters a large Black Rat Snake at the ruins of the cabin. R.P.W. denies “the traditional religious and Freudian implications of the snake” (Dooley 25) and instead sees it as “only natural” (Warren 24), or in Jefferson’s words “mere Nature,” thus establishing a distance between nature and culture and refusing to acknowledge that the snake is both a natural

fact and culturally relevant. In this manner the snake can either be possessed by the natural sciences (R.P.W. provides the scientific, trinomial name of the snake: *Elaphe obsoleta obsoleta* in an effort to dispossess it of its mythic and symbolic power), or it can possess the cultural construction (where a snake is never just a snake but rather always has some greater symbolic significance attached to it). In either case, R.P.W. does not fully acknowledge that the snake, as both a synecdoche of nature and a metonymy in culture, owns us and belongs to us. We are a part of that nature the snake represents while we simultaneously create the snake's, and by extension, nature's, meaning. Warren ironically displays the chinks in the wall between nature and culture when R.P.W. articulates the cultural constructions (the manifold symbolic meanings of the snake as well as the many common folk names: "Black Snake, Black Pilot Snake, the Mountain Blacksnake"), while dismissing the cultural significance (the snake is "only natural"). Though R.P.W. finally anthropomorphizes and subordinates the snake, through signifying to human experience (an act of possession if there ever was one), he hints that a conversion to a more sensitive and eco poetic attitude is imminent: he describes the snake as "benevolent and sad and sage, / As though it understood our human limitation, / And forgave all, and asked for forgiveness, too" (25). The possessive quality of anthropomorphizing and subordinating the snake is reduced by the qualifier "as though," and more importantly, by the sense of reciprocity imbued in the dual forgiveness. Anticipating a reader's belief that the snake is merely a poetic symbol, R.P.W. insists that "This really happened, the big black son-of-a-bitch / Reared from the stones, and scared me, for a fact. / There's no harm in them, though. And they kill rats"

(25). His poetic employment of the snake ends with an acknowledgement of the snake's own being, rendered in a sort of ecopoetics through his phenomenological experience of fear and surprise upon encountering the snake.

Moments before the black snake appears, R.P.W. experiences a sort of communion with his natural surroundings à la Romanticism:

There was the quiet, high glade,
 Blue grass set round with beeches, quietest tree.
 The air was suddenly sweet, a hint of cool,
 I stood in the new silence and heard my heart.
 And there it was: the huddled stones of ruin,
 Just the foundation and the tumbled chimneys,
 To say the human hand, once here, had gone,
 And never would come back. (23)

But R.P.W. is not a Romantic, and just as he begins to feel “the first / Faint tremor of that natural chill,” he sees the eyes of the snake as it emerges from “some deep aperture among the stones” (24). In the space of a few dozen lines, he moves from a Romantic sensibility, to a recognition of traditional symbols, to a naturalistic view of his experience. A sense of disappointment, of failure even, pervades the narrative of the first visit to the ruins. The narrative of the visit does not offer any kind of conclusion, but rather just breaks off when Jefferson, somewhat impatiently, intrudes on R.P.W.'s meditations. He concurs with R.P.W.'s observation that black snakes kill rats, and adds that he “was a farmer once, / And know[s]” (25). The scene evolves into the moment

when Jefferson rebukes R.P.W., and then proceeds to defend his knowledge of the naturalistic aspects of “Great Nature.” Jefferson employs a dendrological motif and explains that he was “born in the shadow of the great forest / And [...] always / Carried the shadow of the forest” (26). This line connects to, and foreshadows, the slave John’s anguish beneath the compounded canopy of Jefferson’s shadow—John is “lost” in the shadows of Jefferson’s Enlightenment ideals as well as the shadows of his revised, dark vision of human nature. Despite the shadow of what might be called, anachronistically for Jefferson, naturalism, or perhaps due to that shadow, Jefferson remains committed to the proposition that “man must *redeem* Nature” (27, emphasis added). The choice of words here is instructive, again demonstrating Jefferson’s attitude of possession with his use of the dual meaning of “redeem”—both its religious-spiritual connotation and its legal-economic connotation. We buy (redeem) nature under the illusion that our possession of it atones for the sin of natural existence (redeem in the other sense). He not only believes that nature can be controlled by man, but that it is also man’s right and duty to recover a possession of nature in the sense of the innocent garden lost by Adam and Eve.

The cynical R.P.W., however, seems to articulate the opposite, that is that nature holds primacy over man. He expresses nature’s primacy while conveying his sense of disappointment in his excursion. When Jefferson mourns the death of his dream at the house in Western Kentucky, R.P.W. explains that nothing remains there: “I assure you it is gone. I know the place” (12). He journeys to the location in order to gain some concrete knowledge and understanding, but instead finds “nothing but rubble” (19), “the

foundation and the tumbled chimneys” (23). Furthermore, these bleak ruins of human habitation are all that remain “To say the human hand, once there, had gone, / And would never come back” (23). Man’s attempt to tame and control, to redeem, this small section of the frontier ended in tragedy and is all but forgotten. Nature has begun her slow march to reclaim the blighted land: “brush to fight / Saw-vine and sassafras, passion-vine, wild rose, / But the roses gone” (22-3). The land that was once cleared in the service of cultivation and the nation’s progress is yet again overrun by a wild, unruly nature. But still, the reader may observe Warren’s ironic undermining of R.P.W.’s disillusionment. The human hand that originally “improved” the land may be gone, but the human hand has indeed returned—in the form of the poet searching for answers. Although he is interrupted by Jefferson and presumably leaves the ruins literally untouched, he returns for a second visit five years later, recounted at the end of the poem.

Gone is the pessimism during his second visit, although some skepticism remains about the progress of Smithland—economic solvency correlated to the “dark audit of blood / In some Korean bunker.” The economic rhetoric is employed here to suggest an ironic sense of distance from the web of complicity. The skepticism and irony, however, is tempered with a keen sense of humility; he wonders, “what ledger has balanced yet” “in the great bookkeeping / Of history” (127). The greatest marker of his humility is demonstrated by his revision of the landscape surrounding the ruins of the Lewis house: “those fine beech trees that I celebrated, / They just aren’t there at all [...] I had plain misremembered, / Or dreamed a world appropriate for the tale” (128). By

acknowledging the poetic license he took in describing the first visit, he undercuts the sentiments of that first visit, and acknowledges the limitations of poetry—poetic vision can obscure or invent natural facts, and may not be as redemptive as R.P.W. makes it out to be, and could rather be just as instrumental, distancing, and possessive as the Jeffersonian idealism that Warren indicts.

During an apostrophe to the river, R.P.W. celebrates nature's power to renew itself without losing its original essence while suffering the "filth and the waste / Of the human establishment" (130). The naturalistic tendencies expressed during his first visit to the ruins are modified to a position that views nature not as a simple mechanism that possesses all existence, but rather as a process that exemplifies continuity and endurance. By today's standards, it may seem somewhat ecologically naïve to assume that nature can repair herself despite our despoliation and pollution, but Warren is suggesting something akin to deep ecology—even if we succeed in rendering the natural world uninhabitable and sterile through pollution and desertification, nature will still exist; human life and culture may be extinguished, but elemental nature will abide. For the present, he decides that the river will serve "as image and confirmation / Of some faith past our consistent failure / And the filth we strew" (130). However, in lines excised from the 1953 version of *Brother to Dragons*, R.P.W. again backtracks, and more fully describes his poetic vision of the natural world and the interplay between nature and humanity:

But even as I experienced this mood,

I knew that though the great river might be

Image, it could not be confirmation,
 For even the grandeur of Nature may not be
 Our confirmation. It is image only. (210-11)

Nature can serve as an image, but it has no voice to confirm (or deny) the meanings that the poet, or society as a whole, imposes on it. Justus explains, “That the promptings of nature must be read not as superstitious premonitions but as images consonant with human nature” (67). While we need to recognize our bond with nature, we must not confuse our interpretations of natural phenomena as communications from the natural world. The “natural denizens, R.P.W. makes clear, must not be freighted with emblematic meaning beyond the human need for investing them with meaning [...]. That is, nature is true to her neutral surface, reflecting perhaps but never commanding human states of mind; and the fact that water, stone, balsam, and owl can only be ‘mirror’ to the heart’s illumination is for R.P.W. a lesson both moral and aesthetic [...]. Man the maker must constantly guard against presumption in helping shape nature for his own uses” (Justus 67). Guarding against the presumption does not, however, preclude humanity from attempting to represent nature’s abiding presence; nor does it negate the sometimes numinous quality of nature. As the excised passage continues, R.P.W. affirms a provisional Wordsworthian sense of sublime nature, its presence lifting the human heart if the poet is open to it:

There is, indeed, the bickering glitter of waters sun-bit to glory.
 There is the taciturnity of stone black at the massif’s jut of noblest
 exposure,

Beyond the bloom-gaud of cirque, and the balsam's silence.

There is the wing-whistle of bomb-plunge of gannet, and the moonlit

unwhisper of owl-swoop.

And there is, always, the philosophic peace of a certain pasture at

evening, not seen since boyhood. (211)

These lines may be a little over-wrought, and thus were cut from the later version of the poem. However they do attest to Warren's complicated emotional response to his environment and his attempts to render not only his response, but that environment in its self. The sublimity of the moment is qualified: the "bickering" glitter of water and the "taciturn" stone suggest somewhat of a chastened response to his environment—where the environment will not bend entirely to his needs and desires. The negation of even the faintest sound ("unwhisper") in the description of an owl's flight, provides a finely tuned, mimetic accuracy and eco-poetics.

In this continuously recursive and dialectical poem, R.P.W. can still acknowledge nature's affect on him: "And so I stood on the headland and stared at the river / [...] I looked at the shrunken ruin, and the trees leafless. / The winter makes things small. All things draw in. / It is strange how that shift of scale may excite the heart" (215),⁸ while also asserting that individuals must create meaning and significance out of the objects before them: "If there is glory, the burden, then, is ours. / If there is virtue, the burden, then, is ours" (211). Instead of imposing, through poetic lyricism, some greater significance on the natural world than it actually contains, R.P.W. claims

⁸ These lines are retained in the 1979 version, page 131.

an artifact of the natural world—the pig-nut—to remind him of the delicate balance between the cultural construction of nature, the wholly otherness of nature, and the interconnectedness and interpenetration of the human and natural world, past, present, and future. The human hand, which R.P.W. claimed had left the ruins behind forever, has returned. Instead of leaving a mark on the landscape, or marking his territory, in an act of possession, R.P.W. takes a piece of that landscape with him—a piece of the landscape full of genetic memory and the potential for growth. Now he confides that “To this day [I] have not gone back, but hold, / In my heart, that landscape” (132), at last achieving a sense of owning and belonging that is not possessive, but rather indicates a kind of usufruct stewardship—reciprocal in that he holds onto it while it resides in his heart.

CHAPTER III

TROUBLED LANDSCAPES IN W.E.B. DU BOIS AND ZORA NEALE HURSTON

“There is joy in the woods just now,
 The leaves are whispers of song,
 And the birds make mirth on the bough
 And music the whole day long...”
 Claude McKay “Joy in the Woods”

“My granddaddy told me the KKK hangs out in those mountains. Why would I go?”
 (qtd. in Grossmann)

“Every picture you see of a lynching is in some kind of rural area. For Native Americans and Hispanics, their situations are different. But for black people, I think in the back of their minds, it’s ‘I don’t feel safe in those places’” (Mickey Fern, qtd. in Grossmann)

The excerpt from McKay’s poem used as an epigraph to this chapter is a bit misleading. The bulk of the poem addresses the hardships faced by poor blacks who labor under a system not much different from slavery. The poem does, however, end on a note expressing a desire for access to the same pastoral that the white culture has: “For a man-machine toil-tired / May crave beauty too—though he’s hired.” The entire poem, along with the other two epigraphs, suggest the many complexities involved in African American attitudes toward the natural world and the feelings of being denied access to those locations celebrated by nature writers. The benefits and pleasures of proximity to the natural world, either through extended stays or brief visits, in pastoral celebrations or wilderness adventure narratives, often seems either unavailable or undesirable to many African Americans. Whether through the oppression of poverty or the danger of physical violence, nature is viewed as off limits and the purview of a distant culture in a distant landscape. Yet in this chapter I argue that W.E.B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston

attempt to close the distance between African Americans and the landscapes celebrated by the dominant, white culture, as well as declare the value of proximity to natural environments, while also acknowledging some of the inherent dangers of proximity to nature. They each employ some aspects of traditional forms of nature writing, the pastoral and wilderness narratives, to provide models of alternative methods of enjoying, using, and understanding human relationships with the natural world. They use these traditional forms to expose the ways we imagine and create the environments we inhabit and to expose the necessity of mobility for a just and fulfilling reciprocity with nature. Depending on the position of the subject, and his or her control over that position, distance and proximity can be both a blessing and a curse. Both writers uncover traditional appeals to imagine and advocate alternative responses to the environment exhibited in black southern culture. Possessing property, owning land, and belonging to a place all play significant roles in the writings discussed—the first is viewed with suspicion as a tool to dominate both land and people; the second is understood as an indispensable requirement for an empowering position of freedom and a fulfilling life, often denied to African Americans in the South; and the third presents a struggle to reconcile the history of an oppressed people with a sensitive connection to the land.

In *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations*, Kimberly K. Smith traces the development of black environmental thought from the early abolition movement to the Harlem Renaissance, that eventually led to the birth of the environmental justice movement in the 1980s. She argues that the history of slavery provides an “ambivalent legacy” for black Americans to overcome when negotiating a

relationship with the natural world: “The slave system forced slaves into an intimacy with the natural environment but also tended to alienate them from it” (10). The slaves’ intimacy with the natural world could at times empower them, especially when it pertained to their knowledge of natural folk remedies. But by embracing this legacy, southern blacks would also be implicitly embracing a history of bondage. From the slave period onward a sense of attachment and knowledge of the natural world served as “a marker of slave status” (38). As Eldridge Cleaver reported in the late 1960s, “even today one of the most provocative insults that can be tossed at a black is to call him a farm boy, to infer that he is from a rural area or in any way attached to an agrarian situation” (qtd. in Dolin 19). As if the physical threat of violence associated with natural, rural areas expressed in the epigraphs to this chapter are not enough to cause African Americans to dissociate with rural landscapes, even the mere suggestion of an association with the natural world is a deep insult for many. Popular black culture is urban, and is not likely to change anytime soon, unless, as the Yosemite Ranger and writer Shelton Johnson remarks, Oprah Winfrey or Snoop Dogg goes on a camping trip. In sympathy with the notions expressed in the epigraphs, Johnson believes the dissociation with nature in African American culture is a “memory of the horrible things that were done to us in rural America” and a “scar left over from slavery” (qtd. in Fimrite n.p.), that seems for many Africans Americans better left covered up—a painful reminder of the past.

Rather than deny a history of proximal association with rural landscapes, some early African American thinkers encouraged a continued development of agrarian

lifestyles. Smith argues that “The antislavery movement was, after all, an agricultural reform movement” (39). Black agrarianism became a powerful tool for self-expression, autonomy, and advancement. Eugene Gatta explains that there is a long history of all Americans associating “dreams of freedom and inner renewal with unsettled territories” (175), and some early black thinkers encouraged the pursuit of this dream. Abolitionists and social critics during the Reconstruction era responded to Jefferson’s call for a nation of yeoman farmers (Smith 39) and promoted the idea that “man’s natural calling is to cultivate the earth” (43). Frederick Douglass was among those who supported a back to the land movement—encouraging urban blacks to leave cities, acquire land, and take up an agrarian life (52). Douglas may have expressed not a little ambiguity on this stance though, as is demonstrated in Michael Bennett’s argument that Douglass helped spur the anti-pastoral movement in black thought, particularly in his *Narrative* that demonstrates a disdain for rural life and advocates a movement toward the urban centers of America. Douglass’s ambiguity on this point may be attributed to a reluctance to embrace a movement that viewed African Americans as “the true American peasantry” (Smith 10), and could serve to continue the cultural oppression of black Americans. Indeed, conceptions of African Americans as “the true American peasantry” were easily co-opted in support of the theories of scientific racism. To overcome the ideas of scientific racism, black intellectuals privileged experience “rather than racial essence as the key connection between humans and their physical environment,” and fought to include an historical sense of the land as a “powerful alternative to the romantic, essentialist ideas that were dominating American environmental thought in the early twentieth century”

(10-11). Smith argues that this influenced the Harlem Renaissance and how African Americans depicted city life—finally leading to “perspectives on urbanization” that “laid the groundwork for the environmental justice movement” (11).

Irony and W.E.B. Du Bois’s Southern Pastoral

As a highly educated northern African American whose life experience was more urban and cosmopolitan than rural and regional, Du Bois writes about the South primarily from the distanced position of an outsider-observer. Paradoxically, he also writes as an insider and a victim; as an African American living and traveling in the South, he had to abide by the same Jim Crow laws as the “native” population and thus he could identify with the locals despite the distance created by his education and background. When Du Bois discusses race relations in the South and how African Americans relate to the land, he oscillates between the status of an insider and an outsider; he moves back and forth from a position of proximity to one of distance. His dualistic standing in regards to societal questions in the South is also reflected in how he represents environmental relationships. At times he celebrates and encourages a sense of owning and belonging to the land only to finally find it untenable for African Americans in the South at the turn of the century. He moves beyond the black agrarianism endorsed by abolitionists and the African American intellectuals of the antebellum and reconstruction eras, and draws on “Romantic intellectual currents” in his attempts to demonstrate the environmental racism and injustice that precludes a progressive relationship with the land and social equality for African Americans in the South (Smith

97). Du Bois maintains that the distant landlords who possess and control the land while profiting on the low wages of local residents, as well as a local power structure meant to keep African Americans from advancing, create practically insurmountable obstacles for realizing and maintaining black land ownership, and make any sense of belonging unpalatable.

Du Bois introduces celebrations of the black peasant community, along with nostalgia and other conventions of the pastoral, in order to invert them in a move to indicate a sense of environmental injustice. Smith argues that *The Souls of Black Folk* “announces a new theme in black environmental thought: the Romantic conception of southern blacks as a peasant community with an organic connection to the land” (98), a theme that Zora Neale Hurston also addresses a few decades later. This conception can quickly become problematic; it can be used as evidence to support scientific racism that aims to keep the black population bound to the land and barred from economic, social, and even geographic mobility. Nevertheless, Smith explains that “Du Bois’s characterization of blacks as a ‘folk’ can be read as a response to [the] modern movement away from the land, an attempt to express what was valuable about southern black agrarian life even as it dissolved under the forces of modernization” (98). This reinvigoration of value for an experience of an era that was ending, along with the concurrent romanticization of that era, demonstrates a sense of nostalgia and serves to position Du Bois squarely within a pastoral tradition. Greg Garrard explains that “Classical pastoral was disposed [...] to distort or mystify social and environmental history, whilst at the same time providing a locus, legitimated by tradition, for the

feelings of loss and alienation from nature to be produced by the Industrial Revolution” (39). Clearly Du Bois’s work is not intended to “distort and mystify social and environmental history.” Although *The Souls of Black Folk* does express “feelings of loss and alienation from nature,” these feelings do not necessarily, as Smith indicates, stem from modernization, urbanization, and industrialization of the African American experience. The sense of loss and alienation felt by African Americans in the rural south described by Du Bois stems from being forced into positions of antiquation, rural ghettoizing, and difficult manual labor with little hope for profit by an oppressive social system designed to prevent mobility. Oddly enough, though, Du Bois presents moments of nostalgia, in a number of permutations, scattered throughout the book. To adapt Leo Marx’s understanding of pastoral, they range from simple nostalgia—in the sense that it is used pejoratively—to instances of more complex nostalgia.

Rather than read the Romantic conception of southern blacks as a nostalgic attitude of the simple pastoral, I read it as a performance, or what Smith refers to in another context as “complex rhetorical acts growing out of and reflecting” blacks’ “unique experiences” (42). In this sense, as she remarks, Du Bois’s rhetoric is what Henry Louis Gates describes as “two-toned,” or to use Du Bois’s formulation, an expression of double consciousness, one that participates “in both the dominant American culture and a distinct black tradition” (42). On occasion, Du Bois’s use of nostalgia is a complex and honest “home-sickness,” one that mourns the tragic loss for Black Americans of a deep connection to the land and its accompanying lore. Stephen Fox explains that nostalgia can engage “the conflicts between memory, place, loss, and

desire.” In this sense, nostalgia “no longer seems quite so passive and uncritical. It is a subjective human emotion that regulates reactions to historical changes, impelling its subjects to seek consolation in what is known but also fortifying them with encouragement to confront disruptive and destabilizing unknowns” (Aubry and Fox n.p.). Reconstruction promised to salvage the connections slaves made with the land despite their status as slaves, and to build on these connections in an effort to improve black Americans’ status. Despite the failure of Reconstruction’s promises, Du Bois still draws on the deep connections some African Americans made with the land in order to provide the encouragement necessary to confront the “disruptive and destabilizing” forces of Jim Crow and the environmental injustices he sees in the South. More often, though, Du Bois employs nostalgia and pastoral ironically to promote the geographical cultural movement away from rural agrarianism toward urban environments where he thinks social and economic mobility is more available. He is not just responding to and celebrating what was valuable about rural life lived close to earth, but also subtly arguing that what was viewed as valuable could be, and more often than not is, used by the dominant culture to prevent mobility and social progress. He concludes that a reinvigoration of black peasantry such as that promoted by Washington is impossible, bygone, and undesirable, while it paradoxically still retains some value.

Two chapters from *The Souls of Black Folk* are particularly striking for what they suggest about Du Bois’s views on the natural world, race, and African Americans’ relationship with the environment in the South. “Of the Meaning of Progress” and “Of the Black Belt” are distinct in the work because Du Bois employs and foregrounds

narrative over the more systematic argument that drives most of the other chapters. The narrative structure provides Du Bois with an opportunity to celebrate the traditional, and problematic, conception of African Americans' connection to the land, while eventually disparaging any future potential the connection might provide due to the racial injustices that prevent a healthy reciprocity. The narrative structure also allows Du Bois to engage the familiar genre of pastoral from a variety of perspectives. He employs these positions rather provocatively, often offering bucolic descriptions of the rural South only to undercut them with irony, suggesting that the pastoral appeals for a reconnection to the land are unavailable for African Americans in the South. Du Bois promotes an early form of environmental justice in calls for black land ownership, but even when legal possession of the land is realized, Du Bois finds that African Americans' ownership is untenable. Any sense of belonging is also rendered untenable due to the history of slavery and an oppressive social system that aims to keep African Americans from progressing economically and socially by compelling them to a position of peasantry and serfdom. During the Reconstruction and the subsequent Jim Crow eras, a sense of belonging to the land for African Americans becomes a decree or sentence handed down by the dominant culture, instead of a choice enacted by local residents. In simple pastoral depictions of the southern countryside, the African American is represented as the humble, joyful shepherd tending to his crops. In complex and anti-pastorals of the southern countryside, the African American—just like the white sharecropper, addressed in the next chapter—is more likely to be depicted in a position of drudgery and debt, tending to a land that he has no hope of ever owning.

In his critical study, *Pastoral*, Terry Gifford distinguishes a number of uses of the designation “pastoral,” from the traditional literary form to a “skeptical” or “pejorative” use of the term that implies the “the pastoral vision is too simplified and thus an idealization of the reality of life in the country” (1-2). Du Bois’s appropriation of the form demonstrates his complex understanding of this scale, often moving from one end to the other. The tensions created by the back and forth push and pull between the traditional form and a more skeptical approach suggest the troubling ambiguities of pastoralism for African Americans while also demonstrating the pastoral mode’s persistence and power over the imagination despite its sometimes negative associations. In employing pastoral conventions and rhetoric familiar to his white audience, Du Bois also enacts a tradition of black intellectuals’ use of familiar conventions, albeit in “unexpected and creative ways” (Smith 42). He initiates the pastoral genre only to reverse it and move toward the anti-pastoral, the apotheosis of the skeptical end of the scale, which as Gifford remarks, “has its origins in outrage and compassion, in showing how a nation can alienate its land workers from their inner nature and from the land itself” (131). Pastoral, as employed by Du Bois, troubles issues of owning and belonging, particularly when it collides with issues of social/racial environmental justice and the lack of power for a disenfranchised, dispossessed, and displaced population to legally own land.

The traditional literary mode of pastoral serves as a vehicle for both “Of the Meaning of Progress” and “Of the Black Belt.” Each chapter features a retreat from the city toward the rural countryside and a return, both in the form of a return to the city and

the return of “insights relevant to the urban audience” (Gifford 2). In the former chapter, the “young and happy” Du Bois joins other Fisk students who “sallied forth in lusty bands” from Nashville for the “hills of Tennessee, where the broad dark vale of the Mississippi begins to roll and crumple to greet the Alleghenies” (45). In the latter chapter, the reader is invited to join Du Bois (as part of a first person plural) as he journeys by rail through Georgia, passing through cities until arriving in rural Dougherty County, “the rich granary whence potatoes and corn and cotton poured out” (86). Both chapters feature iterations of “the life of the shepherd” (Gifford 1). In “Of the Black Belt” Du Bois encounters a number of black peasants who represent the life of shepherd, although Du Bois’s representation of these “shepherds” relies more on the conventions of complex or anti-pastoral than simple pastoral. In “Of the Meaning of Progress,” the county school commissioners act as shepherds for the young teachers trying to find summer employment and as shepherds of the school systems they oversee. Du Bois himself takes on the role of the shepherd as he attempts to guide his pupils through “book learning.” He describes another shepherd-like character as “illiterate, but versed in farm-lore, as his nodding crops declare” who “just moved out of yonder moss-grown cabin with its one square room” (81)—a character who might have leapt from the pages of Wordsworth into the rural world of the South. There are even touches of the pastoral inclination to the pathetic fallacy: “The road ran down the bed of a stream; *the sun laughed* and *the water jingled*, and we rode on” (47 emphases added); and nostalgia for a lost era: “Once upon a time we knew country life so well and city life so little [...]. Now the world has well-nigh forgotten what the country is” (80).

One family in particular exhibits just about all the characteristics of the traditional pastoral form: Du Bois, the urban intellectual who has traveled to the rural countryside, admits that he “liked to stay with the Dowells, for they had four rooms and plenty of good country fare. Uncle Bird had a small, rough farm, all woods and hills, miles from the big road; but he was full of tales,—he preached now and then,—and with his children, berries, horses, and wheat he was happy and prosperous” (49). The Dowells, and Uncle Bird in particular, seem to be living the pastoral dream: hearty food, surrounded by woods and hills far away from the road that leads to the corrupting influences of civilization, versed in lore, surrounded by all the accoutrements of a rural lifestyle lived close to nature, and given to preaching on occasion. Like many of the other black families Du Bois encounters in the countryside, he portrays them as exhibiting a deep, yet simple, communion with the land on which they live and work. A sense of reciprocity, of owning and belonging to the land, is evident, and even a necessary aspect of such simple pastoral. A sense of harmony, of work and leisure, and a close proximity to the natural rhythms of the earth all pervade the idyllic scenes explored by Du Bois. The people and families who receive the most attention own their land, and they serve to demonstrate the hope and possibilities of land ownership. However, if pastoral is a vehicle for both of the chapters, the much more pernicious engine of irony is the motor that drives the vehicle and creates the friction and tension that pulls it along the backcountry roads. Du Bois employs the pastoral to celebrate an idea of owning and belonging to the land—but it remains just that, an idea, and an unrealized dream for the people he encounters and writes about during his journey. Over time ownership debases

into mortgage, hard work improving property and fields reverts to tenant farming and sharecropping that depletes the soil.

The use of pastoral conventions allows Du Bois to embrace both the literary tradition and the bucolic scenes he describes under its aegis. When he employs the pastoral mode on its own merits, Du Bois ostensibly situates himself in close proximity to the natural environment, claiming it as his own. Unlike his pupils and the other subjects he writes about, he is not a farmer-peasant, yet he still demonstrates that he is “suited for” the rural pastoral-agrarian life, at least in theory at the beginning of his foray into the rural country around Nashville. He immerses himself in the life of the little community and becomes a part of that community and establishes proximity to the pastoral form and life through his imaginative recognition and appreciation for that life. But more importantly, his use of the traditional pastoral serves as a double positioning: he establishes a connection to the local community while also demonstrating his cultural proximity to his mostly white, educated audience. He is at once the shepherd and the civilized poet celebrating folk-ways. He appeals to the audience on their ground, inviting them to participate in the form. To employ Du Bois’s metaphor, he moves to the dominant culture’s side of the veil, and takes their view of a simple rural lifestyle, distorted and colored as it is by the obscuring veil. After initially aligning himself with his audience, he then pulls back the veil with irony. The pastoral depictions of the countryside lure his audience to his position, then simple pastoral gives way to the irony of complex pastoral, which demonstrates the environmental injustice and racism that

shadows the bucolic scenes, and leads finally to exposing and rejecting the harsh realities of the pastoral for African Americans in the South.

After initially drawing in his audience with simple pastoral, he undercuts it with complexity and irony, bringing his audience to an even closer proximity to his position. As M. Jimmie Killingsworth explains, “Irony [...] turns standard meanings and expectations upside down,” with the ultimate goal of establishing an “alignment under a banner of shared values” with an inner circle of readers (*Appeals* 131-32). Du Bois introduces Josie’s family early in “Of the Meaning of Progress” and describes their pastoral existence replete with “a dull frame cottage [...] perched just below the brow of the hill amid peach-trees,” the “quiet, simple soul” of the father, a “strong, bustling, and energetic” mother, and a “crowd of children” (46). The paragraph describes a fertile scene, but something of a subtle complex pastoral sneaks in at the last moment: “All knew that it was a hard thing to dig a living out of a rocky side-hill” (47). The image of “peace and harmony in a green pasture” (Marx 25) created by the pastoral description at the beginning is inverted and reversed by the closing statement—introducing the undercurrent of irony. The subtlety completely gives way by the time Du Bois recounts his return to the same location some ten years later, destroying any hope of a pastoral dream. He finds nothing but hardship, dissolution, and death. Josie is dead, and Du Bois reports that “The hill became steep for the quiet old father, and with the boys away there was little to do in the valley” (51). The peace and quiet, the harmony of the small community, has transformed into a “strange stillness” that pervades the countryside; “for death and marriage had stolen youth and left age and childhood there” (53). Farmers are

in debt, some of his former students have grown into “fat, lazy, farmhands,” and still others have fled for work in cities (50-53). A moment of pastoralism seems to seep through, only to be inverted again: “When the spring came, and the birds twittered, and the stream ran proud and full, little sister Lizzie, bold and thoughtless, flushed with the passion of youth, bestowed herself on the tempter, and brought home a nameless child” (51). The scene reflects the dangers of being lulled into a pastoral dream.

Du Bois reverses the enchantments of the pastoral with the use of an even stronger irony in the chapter “Of the Black Belt.” The anti-pastoral actually becomes the enchanting image, distracting Du Bois from the pastoral scenes he later describes. A town in Dougherty County, Georgia, that appears from a distant aspect to be a thriving village, quickly becomes a ruined settlement as the traveler nears it: “the buildings were rotten, the bricks were falling out, the mills were silent, and the store was closed” (84). Du Bois imagines the town is under some spell. Here, as in other passages, Du Bois does not just blame the oppressive social order of the South for the state of ruin he encounters, but acknowledges a web of complicity. He learns from an “old ragged black man,” who in another scene might have been painted as a simple shepherd, that the town’s dereliction was caused by “the Wizard of the North—the Capitalist.” Du Bois even acknowledges that slavery itself would not have existed if the world market did not accept the cheap cotton that it produced, and hence supported the subjection of the land and race: “Twenty thousand bales of ginned cotton went yearly to England, New and Old” (85). The connections established in this scene demonstrate a sense of environmental injustice—where distant powers reap all the benefits from those forced

into proximity with the heaviest burdens. Du Bois complicates the pastoral images of the southern landscapes by integrating a network of guilt that stretches across time and place. The destitution and destruction of a small agricultural community is tied to world markets, the row crops and dusty roads are connected to the avenues and markets of Boston and London in an effort to close the obscuring distance of time and place and establish a proximity of consequences.

The conditions Du Bois witnesses in Dougherty county are caused in part by the nation's and global economy's view of the South as a "sacrifice zone" (Schueler n.p.), where the land and the people can be safely disregarded or thrown away, to the benefit of the dominant culture. This view of the South persisted through reconstruction, the Jim Crow era, and even today. The Southern environmental activist Donald Schueler explains that the South serves as "a dump for the rest of the nation's toxic detritus," a dump that is welcomed and encouraged by local boosters and politicians who reside at a safe distance from the despoiled and toxic landscapes (Schueler n.p.). He quotes Jim Price, the Sierra Club's Southeast staff director at the time, who explains that a "colonial attitude" operates in the South, "a conscious decision by local government and big business to prey on folks who are politically and economically weak" (n.p.). Much like in the desert southwest and in so-called "developing nations," landscapes that are distanced from the cultural, political, and economic powers which benefit from them are sacrificed, along with the populace, in exchange for cheap land, cheap labor, and cheap products.

Rob Nixon, among other environmental justice critics, has shown how distant powers that control local conditions gain a sense of enchantment by the very nature of their power and distance which renders them untouchable and abstract to the local populace. Likewise the sacrificed landscapes and peoples are distant from the populations that benefit from them, and hence the political, economic, and environmental violence enacted on those distant landscapes can take on a somewhat abstract and enchanting aura. Du Bois articulates the enchantment felt by the abused populaces with a sense of loss and dejection that oscillates from an ironic romanticized attraction to a by-gone golden age complete with once majestic, now ruined, mansions, to a sense of gloom and powerlessness at the hands of, among other things, the “Wizard from the North—.” He explains how the “Capitalist” bought up land made cheap by the broad economic hardships in the South during Reconstruction, only to abandon it to dereliction after his agents embezzled funds: “So the Waters-Loring plantation was stilled by the spell of dishonesty, and stands like some gaunt rebuke to a scarred land” (84). Part of the tragedy for Du Bois is that, although the land is scarred, it is still fertile in this “Black Belt,” and there are plenty of individuals willing and able to work and live on it, only the abstracted economics of the “Northern Capitalist” who possesses the land prevent the local population from profiting from it, and transform what might be a scene of complex pastoral into a darkly enchanting scene of anti-pastoral.

When Du Bois departs this location of anti-pastoral, he admits that he “could not shake the influence of the silent scene.” The peace and harmony of the pastoral is

conjured into a disquieting and troubling stillness. As he rides away, he attempts, unsuccessfully, to return to the pastoral mode:

Back toward town we glided, past the straight and thread-like pines, past a dark tree-dotted pond where the air was heavy with a dead sweet perfume. White slender-legged curlews flitted by us, and the garnet blooms of the cotton looked gay against the green and purple stalks. A peasant girl was hoeing in the field, white-turbaned and black-limbed. All this we saw, but the spell still lay upon us. (84)

He constructs a romanticized pastoral scene and presents it as a concrete reality. But in an ironic reversal, this “reality” has no power over the enchantments of the derelict land he just departed. While celebrating and inflating a pastoral vision by rendering it as a reality as compared to the “spell” of the derelict land, he simultaneously lets the air out of the pastoral scene by invoking the anti-pastoral of the landscape marred by the “Northern Capitalist.” He becomes possessed by the anti-pastoral that engulfs the pastoral. He and his readers are distanced from the bucolic depictions, suggesting the inaccessibility of pastoral, particularly for African Americans in the rural South.

Resistance and Mobility in the Swamp

Du Bois’s ironic reversals of the pastoral genre are also extended and interjected into his representations of a small tract of wilderness. As he does with pastoral, Du Bois employs some traditional conventions of wilderness descriptions and concepts only to reverse and invert them. In analyzing the pastoral genre, Garrard offers a critique of

British Romanticism's obsession with sublime wilderness landscapes. He argues that the Romantics tended to overlook aspects of nature that were "more important and under more severe pressure ecologically but less 'picturesque', such as fens, bogs, and marshes" while celebrating "sublime" landscapes that are "never seriously in endangered" nor possess much biological diversity (43). With a reference to Rod Giblett's book *Postmodern Wetlands*, Garrard explains that "swamps have long been viewed with fear rather than admiration in Western culture, to be filled or drained where possible" (43). Although David C. Miller finds that during the 1850s "the swamp overcame, in the minds of many thoughtful Americans, its age-old stigma," he too admits that the negative associations "remained current, at least in the popular mind, right up to the present" (3). William Cronon makes much the same argument when he suggests that "less sublime landscapes simply did not appear worthy" of the protection afforded to the "sublime" landscapes of the first national parks. It wasn't until the 1940s, Cronon observes, that the first swamp would be honored in Everglades National Park ("The Trouble with Wilderness" 73). Du Bois's wilderness swamp, the Chickasawhatchee, is still not federally protected, despite its ecological importance as a habitat for endangered species, and its multiple hydrological functions (see "Preliminary Aquatic Assessment").⁹ Notwithstanding this tradition of disregard, or even outright hostility and animosity toward swamps and wetlands, Garrard finds in poets such as Seamus Heaney an advocacy for such landscapes.

⁹ Although it does not enjoy federal protection, the swamp was purchased by the state of Georgia in 2002 and is now designated a Wildlife Management Area.

In the United States, Thoreau celebrated swamps in his essay “Walking,” where he refers to them as a “sacred place,—a *sanctum sanctorum*” (647) and insists that “Hope and the future” do not lie in “lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps” (646). The essay as a whole, in typical Thoreauvian fashion, is meant to be provocative, “an extreme statement” (627) and he admits that his readers may find him “perverse” for his celebration of swamps (647). His embrace of landscapes typically disdained by the broader culture carries with it a tone of admonishment, but it also suggests a genuine passion and promotion for alternative, wilderness landscapes and the possibility of solace, salvation, and re-creation in “the thickest and most interminable and [...] most dismal swamp” (647). He remarks that he derived more of his spiritual and emotional subsistence “from the swamps which surround” Concord than “from the cultivated gardens in the village;” he celebrates the site of an “impermeable and unfathomable bog;” and he insists that he would rather dwell in a “Dismal Swamp” than in “the most beautiful garden that ever human art contrived” (646-647). The reference to a “Dismal Swamp” would have perturbed Thoreau’s readers with the weight of its allusion to the Great Dismal Swamp, Harriet Beecher’s Stowe’s book *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (published in 1856—just a few years before “Walking” appeared in print),¹⁰ and the swamp’s history as a

¹⁰ “Walking” was published in May 1862 in *The Atlantic Monthly* shortly after Thoreau’s death. Joseph J. Moldenhauer reports that “The origins of this essay lie concentrated in Thoreau’s Journal entries of November 1850 and January-February 1851” with some material dating even earlier (561)—that is well before the publication of Stowe’s *Dred*. On a number of occasions, Thoreau presented forms of the essay as lectures. However, based on the cross references between his *Writings* and his *Journals*, the section of the essay concerning the swamp is entirely new material, minus one passing reference in the *Journals* to swamps as “sacred places” (Borst 373). This suggests that although most of the essay was written and presented before Stowe published *Dred*, Thoreau added his celebration of the swamp and the allusion to

location of a maroon society, a settlement of escaped slaves. Thoreau's approach here provides striking parallels to Du Bois's writing decades later. Du Bois seems to appropriate some of these perturbations in "Of the Black Belt," where he too speaks a word for the impermeable and dismal wetlands with resonances of escaped slaves and an alternative cultural tradition.

While traveling through rural Dougherty County, variously celebrating the black peasantry through simple pastoral, then exploring the ambiguities of complex pastoral, and finally injecting a sense of anti-pastoral, Du Bois arrives at what can best be described as a particularly southern wilderness setting: the Chickasawhatchee swamp. Like Thoreau, he begins by celebrating its fecundity and natural beauty, its "wildness," albeit while still acknowledging the evidence of human manipulation as well as cultural oppression:

The swamp grows beautiful; a raised road, built by chained Negro convicts, dips down into it, and forms a way walled and almost covered in living green. Spreading trees spring from a prodigal luxuriance of undergrowth; great dark green shadows fade into the black background, until all is one mass of tangled semi-tropical foliage, marvelous in its weird savage splendor. Once we crossed a black silent stream, where the sad trees and writhing creepers, all glinting fiery yellow and green, seemed like some vast cathedral,—some green Milan builded of wildwood. (84-85)

the Great Dismal Swamp sometime nearer to 1862 while he was preparing it for publication during his last months which coincided with the outbreak of the Civil War.

The wild and lush aspects of the passage evoke something of William Bartram and his *Travels*, at least the tamer moments of his narrative when he isn't fighting alligators and indulging in what has been referred to as his "lush rhapsodizing upon nature" (Cowdrey 62). Du Bois's depiction of the swamp even suggests something of the earlier explorers' "come hither" tracts which promoted settlement of the new world based on its natural beauty and abundance (see Edelson, especially 111-115). Throughout the chapter, Du Bois depicts the land and the neglected plantations as fecund and ready for development and agriculture—only lacking the human industry and opportunity of free hands to work the land; an opportunity and industry lacking due to the tragic denial of African Americans to freely farm and operate under the oppressive social order. The swamp is situated in the midst of the fecund black belt, a symbol of luxuriance and the sublime beauty of nature.

Although Garrard faults the English Romantics for neglecting wildernesses such as wet-lands and swamps, the southern environmental historian Albert Cowdrey establishes a link from Bartram back to the Romantics, particularly Coleridge and Wordsworth, who favorably read the depictions of the southern swamps described by the "botanizing American ne'er-do-well." He explains that "Bartram's springs became Coleridge's fountains of Xanadu" (63). The intertextuality from Bartram to the Romantics and back to Thoreau's promotion of bogs, reverberates in Du Bois's description of the Chickasawhatchee. Elements of wildness, the sublime, and "come hither" tracts further blend with a recognition of a darker aspect of nature, as a place hostile to human preoccupations and concerns for the landscape. Du Bois's rendering of

the “mass of tangled semi-tropical foliage,” “its weird savage splendor,” and the “fiery yellow and green” resembles the other traditional pole of wilderness descriptions in American thought going back to early settlers. Roderick Frazier Nash reports on the “tradition of repugnance” toward wilderness evident in early American writing, where wilderness “constituted a formidable threat” to settler’s survival, and represented an “uncontrolled and terrifying” landscape hiding “savage men, wild beasts and stranger creatures of the imagination” (24). The wilderness eventually “acquired significance as a dark and sinister symbol” (24). Du Bois’s wilderness swamp incorporates both poles of the human interpretation of wilderness—a romanticized land of mystery, wonder, and fertility, as well as a harrowing and howling landscape of danger.

Depictions of wilderness as dark and mysterious locations with lurking dangers rely on the same separations between humanity and nature that Cronon finds so troubling in contemporary conceptions of wilderness. Cronon sets about debunking the myth of wilderness in the guise of a pristine, “virgin” land—the obverse of wilderness as dark and dangerous, but nevertheless a perception of wilderness that removes it beyond human influence. Both of these perspectives on wilderness lead to conceptions of nature as wholly other from human culture. One aspect of the myth that Cronon finds so troubling is its denial and flight from history. During the frontier era, the lands that became the national parks were viewed as dark and dangerous, but once they were “set aside within the fixed and carefully policed boundaries of the modern bureaucratic state, the wilderness lost its savage image and became safe [...] meanwhile its original inhabitants were kept out by dint of force.” He argues that “The removal of Indians to

create an ‘uninhabited wilderness’ [...] reminds us just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is” (“The Trouble” 79). Du Bois is clearly constructing an image and conception of the wilderness swamp, a conception that may seem somewhat muddled at first, drawing as it does on the polar opposites of wilderness as a savage and dangerous place and as a bountiful virgin. But he does not contribute to the myth of the wilderness because he includes, and even favors, the human history of the place. Du Bois celebrates the swamp not only for its natural beauty and fecundity, nor just for its distinction as “a place apart from, and opposed to, human culture” (Garrard 60), but also for its historical significance and its position as a location of resistance to the oppressive, dominant culture. As he travels deeper into the swamp, he begins to imagine the events that took place there during the Second Creek War. The following passage seems to reinforce the view of wilderness as a dark and dangerous location, in need of conquest, but upon further scrutiny, it becomes a place of heroic resistance. After crossing the “black silent stream” Du Bois continues:

I seemed to see again that fierce tragedy of seventy years ago. Osceola, the Indian-Negro chieftain, had risen in the swamps of Florida, vowing vengeance. His war-cry reached the Red Creeks of Dougherty, and their war-cry rang from the Chattahoochee to the sea. Men and women and children fled and fell before them as they swept into Dougherty. In yonder shadows a dark and hideously painted warrior glided stealthily on, —another and another, until three hundred had crept into the treacherous swamp. Then the false slime closing about them called the white men

from the east. Waist-deep, they fought beneath the tall trees, until the war-cry was hushed and the Indians glided back into the west. (85)

By the time these events occurred, the Creeks had already been officially removed from Georgia through a policy that continuously expropriated sections of the original Creek homeland with broken treaty after broken treaty. The historian John T. Ellis explains that “The military success of their Seminole cousins in Florida encouraged” the Creeks to rebel against the American attempts at removal (184). The battle Du Bois refers to was a part of what came to be called the Second Creek War (1836-1837), a conflict that occurred “in the unobserved interspace between [General Thomas] Jesup’s removal efforts in Alabama and the dramatic Seminole War in Florida” (264). While Osceola began his struggles in Florida, small bands of Creeks invaded western Georgia. The Creeks had some success, at first raiding and destroying the “once beautiful village of Roanoke” (260), then moving south toward the Chickasawhatchee Swamp. They killed a number of settlers in Dougherty County before eventually being driven out of the swamp by Georgia militiamen. The Battle of the Chickasawhatchee Swamp proved somewhat decisive. Many Creeks were killed and they were left with few options: “departing of their own will or in chains” or “joining the Seminoles in a war that was an extension of the out-break of 1836” (Southerland and Brown 132). From a “microscopic view” of the war, Ellison writes that “The Creek rebels saw war as the only alternative to two unacceptable paths: leaving their homeland to face a tenuous existence in the West or staying in New Alabama and treated as less than human.” From a macroscopic view he argues that the war “is exactly the same as many other Native

rebellions in that it was the ultimate act of resistance against economic subordination and dependency within a larger world system” (185).

This second view of the Creek rebellion informs Du Bois’s depiction of the swamp and provides a demonstrable break from pastoral notions and a Romantic tradition to one that is specifically African American and Southern. Cronon’s critique of the myth of wilderness breaks down here; there is no “denial of history” but rather an embrace of history. It can be argued that Du Bois is still rendering the swamp as separate and “other” from the dominant culture—a threatening place that was rightfully conquered. But when considered within the established trend of irony, Du Bois’s portrayal of the wilderness swamp suggests there is something more at work. On the surface, he elicits sympathy from his (white, educated) audience through his use of traditional conceptions and genres—the polar opposites of the wilderness as a fecund and promising location and as a savage and dangerous place. The savagery of the wilderness is then transformed into an emblem of heroic and tragic action—where a brave underdog resists a powerful entity only to be conquered. He shapes and molds the narrative to suit his purpose of gaining the sympathy and trust of his audience. Lurking beneath the surface of these traditional forms and concepts is a deeper appeal for Du Bois, a sort of enthymeme consisting of an historical, alternative relationship for African Americans with the wilderness and the swamps in the South. For some slaves the swamps did not represent a location of savagery or simple beauty divorced from human history, but rather a place of refuge and alternative civilizations, a place of belonging. The wilderness refuge was not merely a temporary relief from the struggles of day-to-

day life, a weekend getaway—although it did at times serve that function as well—but a refuge that operated as a resistance to “economic subordination and dependency” (Ellison 125).

Outside of Du Bois’s mention of the “Negro convicts” who built the road through the swamp, and his allusion to the “Indian-Negro chieftain,” there is no other mention of the importance of such wilderness spaces for African Americans in the South. Yet the reference to the Creek Indians, and the allusion to, and the possible misidentification of Osceola as an Indian-Negro, uncovers a deeper meaning of the swamps in the southeast for African Americans. In her book-length study of Osceola, Patricia R. Wickman reports that Osceola might have had some African blood (6). His maternal grandfather may have been black or Spanish, but the historical record is not clear. It is known that his maternal great-grandfather was a Scottish immigrant who mixed with and became an influential leader among the Tallassee Indians. Overall, Osceola’s genetic heritage seems to have been largely white European, but his cultural heritage was nevertheless almost entirely Native American, being a descendent of white immigrants who married into, traveled, and fought with the Maskókî people of the southeast (Wickman 30-56). Though he was certainly not officially recognized as a chief among his tribal peers, he was a legendary leader who fought bitterly against the removal program of the United States. So why would Du Bois classify him as part African and a chief? A possible answer leads to a better understanding of the importance of the marginal environments for southern blacks, and the deep foundations supporting Du Bois’s views of the Chickasawhatchee Swamp.

Du Bois may have simply confused the historical records that reference Osceola as “mixed blood” and a “half breed,” erroneously assuming that he was of black and Indian rather than white and Indian ancestry. But given Osceola’s close association with escaped slaves and the Black Seminoles in the southeast, it is quite possible that the Black Seminoles “claimed” Osceola, and that Du Bois is basing his designation of Osceola as a Black Indian on a local oral tradition he gleaned from his sources in Georgia. Other historical details suggest there is still more to Du Bois’s reference and provides an even better sense of the importance of wilderness swamps in African American culture. Although Osceola was never technically a chief, as Du Bois reports, he was a charismatic and legendary leader with many followers, including significantly a “few African slaves” (Wickman 11). While the Creeks and Seminoles, among other tribes of the southeast, kept African slaves, Kenneth Wiggins Porter reports that their brand of slavery “differed so much from the treatment of slaves by whites that it was a difference of kind rather than of degree” (428). Both free and enslaved blacks lived and mixed with tribes, and as Katja May explains, “the difference between the status of free and enslaved blacks among the Creeks was minimal.” Slaves were free to “own property, travel from town to town, and marry into the Creek ‘owner’s’ family,” and “their children would be free” (41). It is easy to imagine why these “slaves” would fight for, and alongside, their tribal “owners” against the establishment of the South, and why Du Bois would call on a Native American heritage in a chapter devoted to struggles of African Americans in the “Black Belt.”

Free blacks and slaves living with the Creeks and Seminoles, along with slaves who escaped from their white owners, were all actively involved with the Creek and Seminole wars. Many African American Indians who escaped from slavery were even leaders in the Second Seminole War (Minges 469). Porter explains that during the Seminole War, the white populace was horrified by “the enthusiasm with which plantation slaves rallied to the hostiles” (434), and that the African Americans who fought alongside the Indians were known “as well-armed and brave warriors” (428). When Coi Hajo, a rival leader among the Seminoles, reached a “clandestine agreement” with the military to “surrender the Negroes taken during the war,” some of the black fighters “banded together for defense” and found support from Osceola (439). The escaped slaves and free southern blacks played such an important role that the leading American general, Thomas Jessup, stated that the Seminole war “is a negro, not an Indian war” (quoted in Porter 427). Jessup worried that if the Indian resistance at removal was not speedily put down, “a general slave insurrection might ensue” (427). Jessup may have been exaggerating somewhat, but his comments, along with the long history of African-Indian relations, suggests that Du Bois is drawing on an alternative history and perhaps a local folk tradition that southern African Americans “claimed” Osceola as their own. Tied up with this tradition of African American resistance, is the historical fact that black southerners often found solace, mobility, and a degree of freedom in the swamps and wilderness areas surrounding the plantations. In many ways, slaves claimed these territories as their own—a kind of ownership not in deed, but through close proximity. The Chickasawhatchee Swamp, although a small wetland

compared to the Great Dismal Swamp and the Everglades, is an emblematic wilderness that provided a subjected race with power and mobility. For African Americans these wilderness spaces were not forlorn territories divorced from humanity, they were arenas of resistance, self-determination, ownership, and alternative societies.

There is a long tradition of southern African Americans finding solace in the marginal spaces around the plantations—places that provided more immediate safety and freedom than the arduous journey north. Melvin Dixon explains that “During slavery blacks depicted wilderness as a place of refuge beyond the restricted world of the plantation. [...] The woods or the swamps were regular sites for religious meetings and conversion experiences in which slaves attained important levels of spiritual mobility” (3). Du Bois’s reference to the swamp as “some vast cathedral” is of course a convention of wilderness writing that depicts wooded areas as God’s temple on earth—William Cullen Bryant’s “A Forest Hymn” provides a ready and developed example of the convention—and it may be a nod to Thoreau’s *sanctum sanctorum*. But the history of the spiritual importance of swamps for slaves and free black southerners is also connected to geographical mobility and a certain degree of self-possession. As part of his argument promoting closer examination of the environmental history of the South, Mart Stewart draws on this rich history of southern blacks’ relationships with the wild places. He explains that slaves possessed intimate knowledge of the “woods and swamps [...] the pathways and waterways along which they acquired opportunities for small measures of autonomy beyond the fields” (202). The knowledge of these areas helped slaves supplement their meager rations with small game and plants hunted and gathered in the

swamps, and provided for the possibility of *petit marronage*, whether to visit family on neighboring plantations, or simply to “lay out” for a few days. For runaway slaves, the swamps and woods “were quite literally havens” (204). Stewart reports that these short runaway excursions were “common on every plantation and [were] an important form of resistance” (204). The *petit marronage* was a powerful force providing some slaves with the sense of the freedom and self-possession that accompanies geographic mobility. The swampy wilderness areas around plantations that were dismissed, derided, or avoided by plantation owners when they were not draining them, provided some slaves with a sense of ownership and belonging to the southern landscape—a type of ownership that was not available to them on the plantation itself. Since the plantation owners and dominant culture surrendered these landscapes, the African slaves could claim and inhabit them as their own.

Indian slaves and temporary runaways were not the only black southerners to benefit from the wilderness areas. Although maroon communities are more associated with the Caribbean and South America, Michael Gomez writes that “There were also maroons in what would become the United States, scattered throughout the swamps, forests, and mountains of Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Virginia, and the Carolinas between 1672 and 1864” (11). These “otherwise repellant grounds where damp footing, snakes, and tangles of vegetation discouraged pursuit” for the most part “remained inaccessibly exotic to southern slaveholding interests” and hence were “hospitable to fugitive slaves and African-American revolutionaries” (Gatta 176-177). Some escaped slaves settled into “maroon societies” for the long term, clearing “plots

for farming,” constructing dwellings, and raising families, in all, claiming the land as their own (176). The maroon communities played an important role of resistance during the First and Second Seminole wars in Florida. This long history of southern blacks’ relationship with the swamps and wilderness areas provides Du Bois’s depiction of the Chickasawhatchee swamp with a view of human-nature relationships that resists the dominant culture’s conceptions of southern African Americans, human relationships with the wilderness, and specifically black Americans’ relationship with the land. Instead of viewing the wilderness as divorced from human history, human history is what provides the “wilderness” with its value. Furthermore, it offers a point of pride in a connection to the land that transcends the troubling heritage of slavery. It refutes the Washingtonian view that southern blacks should accept a doctrine of appeasement, forego mobility, and rely on good husbandry alone to help them progress socially and economically.

The system of slavery relied on restricting slaves’ mobility in order to prevent escape, or even more frightening for southerners, organization and rebellion. The denial of mobility serves psychological purposes as well, as a means for slaveholders to demonstrate complete possession of their human property. Faulkner plays with this principle in *Go Down, Moses*, where Buck and Buddy McCaslin herd their slaves into an unfinished mansion and carefully lock the front door, even though the building lacks “half its windows and had no hinged back door at all.” The brothers thereby attempt to maintain the semblance of denying mobility to their slaves, but since the McCaslins are reluctant participants in the peculiar institution, they tacitly agree to provide their slaves

with the opportunity for mobility. Isaac McCaslin recalls “a sort of folk-tale: of the countryside all night long full of skulking McCaslin slaves dodging the moonlit roads and the Patrol-riders to visit other plantations” (251). The sense of free will and self-determination experienced by the slaves is most demonstrably exhibited by one slave in particular, Tomey’s Turl, who routinely runs away to visit a neighboring plantation and a woman who lives there, eventually orchestrating his own marriage. When his owner Uncle Buck pursues him, he simply hides out in the woods, waiting for “the women folks” to get “working at” arranging his marriage (13-14). Faulkner’s treatment of the *petit marronage* reveals the power and importance of geographic mobility. By providing their slaves with the tacit opportunity for mobility, the McCaslin brothers acknowledge their slaves’ standing as autonomous subjects, and even participants, in their culture and society. The opposite clearly holds true as well; dictating when, where, why, and how an individual may move about the landscape helps remove any sense of free-will or belonging to the culture and by extension the American ideal.

Geographic mobility and what Killingsworth calls “bourgeois nomadism” (“What’s Wrong with Sustainability?: A Rhetorical Question”), along with the departmentalization of environments that may arise from them, is foundational to traditional pastoral and wilderness narratives, and the enjoyment and consumption of those forms. The poet or adventurer travels from the city to the countryside or wild places; they enjoy the means to leave civilization behind for a duration in the country, mountains, badlands, forests, or swamps of the interior, only to return and communicate their “idles” and adventures to the reading public. Tragically, poor Americans (black or

white) today still suffer from the restrictions and deprivations caused by a lack of leisured mobility. If they even have access to transportation, where can they find the time (or money) to travel and enjoy the “pristine” wilderness in the national parks when they are too busy living paycheck to paycheck and worried about mounting debt? One of the criticisms the environmental justice movement has leveled at more “mainstream” environmental movements in the past is their concentration on landscapes largely inaccessible to many Americans. In recent years, the environmental movement has attempted to make strides toward improving environmental justice, and ecocriticism has begun to follow suit as well. If the movements are to be relevant and continue to grow, more attempts to link environmental justice with the preservation of the world must be made. One important issue that can help move the debate in that direction is to examine the role mobility plays in an appreciation (not to mention destruction) of the natural world. For as long as they have existed, the pastoral and wilderness narratives have relied on mobility. Du Bois clearly operates within these American, pastoral, and wilderness traditions and benefits from his freedom of mobility.

Geographical mobility is a foundational virtue for America and persists as an important value to this day. The Census Bureau estimates that the average American can expect to move 11.7 times over the course of their life (“Calculating Migration Expectancy Using ACS Data” n.p.). In 2010 alone, the Bureau reports that 12.5 percent of Americans age one year and older changed residences. It is perhaps not entirely surprising that “people with incomes below the poverty line were more likely to move than those just above the poverty line” (“Census Bureau Reports” n.p.). Residential

moves in this category were overwhelmingly within the same county (68%), suggesting a lateral rather than an upward mobility (“Geographical Mobility: 2009 to 2010”), which may result from an inability to pay rent, and household consolidation. In any case, the causes of residential mobility for those who live below the poverty line are certainly not the same causes of mobility for the middle- and upper-classes who value it for its association with upward social mobility and particularly the leisure of vacationing. Killingsworth argues that this “bourgeois nomadism has kept the pastoral dream of a better place alive with vacations every summer as a balm for overwork in a less-than-sublime environment” (“What’s Wrong with Sustainability?: A Rhetorical Question”). The interstate highway system serves as much to facilitate family vacations to places like the National Parks, as it does for the transportation of goods across the continent. A commitment to “bourgeois nomadism” also helps maintain a safe distance from the complexities of environmental protection. By visiting the national parks, and perhaps going as far as writing a check for an environmental organization, an individual can feel he or she cares about and supports the environment. It is much easier than thinking and acting locally, where all too often a desire for convenience and economic growth trumps attitudes and investments in conservation. The abstract distancing of bourgeois nomadism even allows for nimbyism—the National Parks are located over there, the new housing development with its suburban lawns and miles of road is over here, the big box store is opened just on the outside of town—typically near a major artery, and the polluting factory is situated on the other side of the tracks where property values are already low and disenfranchised households have few resources to fight against polluting

development. Each landscape and environment is conveniently separated and departmentalized, disingenuously distanced from one another, making it easier to ignore the complicated concatenation in local, regional, national, and global policies and economics and their impacts on local, as well as distant, environments.

Du Bois's social and economic mobility coincided with his geographical mobility. He worked his way up (and out) from his beginnings in western Massachusetts as the only child of a single mother who had few economic resources other than her middle-class friends and family. Encouraged by his mother, and after her death supported by a scholarship from his community, Du Bois managed to leave the small town to pursue higher education. It was while attending Fisk University in Tennessee that Du Bois spent summers traveling the countryside—which later provided the material for “Of the Meaning of Progress.” After graduating from Fisk, he returned to Massachusetts to attend Harvard. His geographic mobility, however, was not unrestricted nor without obstacles and struggles; he often had to contend with racism and segregation. It wasn't until he traveled to Europe, after completing a master's degree at Harvard, that Du Bois “experienced for the first time a world unbounded by color restrictions” (Gayle n.p.). His education and experience in Europe had a profound impact on the rest of his life and career, a career that would have been unimaginable if he had not had the opportunities provided to him by his geographic mobility. His traveling continued when he returned to the United States, providing him with succeeding opportunities to increase his ability to travel, engage in academic activities, and write. Throughout his life, Du Bois understood the importance, and benefitted from the

privilege, of geographic mobility. It surfaces in both “Of the Meaning of Progress” and “Of the Black Belt,” structured as they are around journeys through the southern countryside, where he finds a black peasantry that is denied mobility on all levels—social, economic, and geographical—in an effort to segregate and control the black populace. Du Bois’s access to geographical mobility helped expose him to diverse relationships with the land and aspects of the natural world not available to him in Massachusetts. It also provided him with the education and experience to foster his early appreciation of the natural world expressed in his autobiography *Dusk of Dawn*. Witnessing the lack of mobility in the South must have affected him greatly, and helped persuade him of its importance. It helps explain why he would celebrate the Chickasawhatchee Swamp in the uncharacteristic vein of Thoreau.

Although the alternative history of the swamps and African American relationships with the wilderness provides a model and rhetoric of resistance, it certainly does not provide a sustainable model for the millions of black southerners struggling with the reality of life at the turn of the century. The rhetoric of resistance is, however, a powerful strategy employed by Du Bois. It allows him to identify with Native Americans and slaves who were forced into marginal positions but did not surrender easily. The story of the battle of the Chickasawhatchee Swamp, along with all its associations, supplies a counterweight to the African Americans he meets along his travels who seem either meek or powerless in the face of the unjust social system that tries to prevent social, economic, and geographic mobility. Scott Hicks writes that “through the image of the swamp, Du Bois fashions a viable alternative, an alternative

that values sullenness, brackishness, and anger” (210). Du Bois’s portrayal of the Chickasawhatchee Swamp enacts a sense of racial injustice that is intimately tied to a sense of environmental injustice. Just as the Jacksonian policy of removal forced Indians from their land, slavery forced Africans from their land. The southern policy during the Jim Crow era attempted to bind them to the land through racial injustice and poverty, orchestrated in no small amount on tenant farming and share cropping along with its concomitant reliance on debt—again similar to the attempts to force Native Americans to be stationary farmers on proscribed reservations. In a system of sharecropping and tenant farming, the owners of the land are distanced from the hazards of working it (too much rain, too little rain, hail, boll weevils, etc.), while those in the closest proximity receive the least benefit (if a good crop comes in, they are lucky to have enough left over to pay their bills; if a crop fails, they still need to find a way to pay).

Du Bois’s travels through this largely forgotten corner of rural Georgia¹¹ end, appropriately enough, on the porch of a preacher’s house. He catalogs the poverty and injustice around him:

Nearly all the lands belong to Russian Jews; the overseers are white, and the cabins are bare board-houses scattered here and there. The rents are high and day-laborers and “contract” hands abound. It is a keen, hard struggle for living there, and few have time to talk. (91)

Distant owners, overseers culturally removed from the workers, cabins that resemble slave quarters, a populace kept down and preoccupied with high rents and hard work: in

¹¹ Janisse Ray details the persistent poverty and rural lifestyle of the other (east) end of Southern Georgia in her 1999 book *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*.

Du Bois's eyes, not much has changed in the Black Belt since emancipation. Technically these descendants of slaves can own land, but that dream remains a distant one. When he inquires of the Preacher's wife if they own land, she echoes his question in surprise and adds that they once owned land but were cheated out of it by a person appropriately named "Sells." Another man present remarks that Sells cheated him out of wages. Afterwards the man had the indignity of a visit from the local sheriff who confiscated his furniture, even though "furniture is exempt from seizure by law" (92). The chapter closes with no hope for recourse in this ironically blighted "black belt." There remains no justice, no pastoral, only irony and tragedy: "The righteous and reasonable ambition to become a landholder, which the nation had all but categorically promised the freedmen—was destined in most cases to bitter disappointment" (27). Du Bois provides the examples of injustice in Dougherty County to support his caustic accusations made early in *The Souls of Black Folk* that those, specifically Booker T. Washington, who attempt to "preach the Negro back to the present peonage of the soil" should know that dream was lost long ago (27). Despite his celebrations of pastoral and wilderness, Du Bois's use of irony, and his sense of history, argues that in the end the southern land cannot be reclaimed by African Americans as long they are barred from the opportunities for social and economic mobility. For Du Bois, at the time he was writing, those opportunities could not be found by staying put in the rural South, but only through mobility and migration to the urban centers where higher education was a possibility.

Hurston's Wilderness and Pastoral

Like Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* pursues the subject of "a peasant community with an organic connection to the land" (Smith 98), and invokes pastoral and wilderness conventions, along with irony and tragedy. Although there are many parallels to Du Bois in Hurston's novel, Hurston focuses largely on personal relationships with the environment, rather than communal relationships and social justice. Her pastoral tends to be softer, more giving; her wild nature is more savage, more dangerous, and yet the two cannot be kept at a safe distance from each other. In this section, I argue that Hurston exposes some of the failures of the middle landscape, namely that pastoral, be it simple or complex, is often employed or engaged as a dissembling barrier between wilderness and civilization, with sometimes disastrous results. Hurston nevertheless values proximity to nature, as long as it is chosen and not forced on the individual, that is to say as long as mobility remains a possibility for the subject. But mobility too can provide a hollow sense of security—and it does not allow for escape from either the environment or from social hierarchies. Irony arises in the novel when the self-possessed main characters, who exist comfortably in a pastoral and reciprocal relationship with the land, ignore nature's warning signs and figuratively and literally become possessed by an overpowering nature. Geographic mobility, and the opportunities it provides, is a key factor for Hurston's characters, but as Christopher Reiger argues, the "social and political critiques" become "subsidiary concerns" for Hurston (95). This raises particularly troubling issues for environmental criticism and the environmental justice movement, especially since Hurston all but

ignores the dominant (white) culture's attempts to control both nature and the black population that works on the land and is forced into positions more vulnerable to natural disasters. As much as has been written about Hurston's novel, the work still provides ample opportunity to freshly examine differing attitudes of ownership, particularly as they pertain to impressions of nature in the pastoral and wilderness modes. With Hurston, issues of environmental justice are inextricably bound up with how she presents her characters' distance and/or proximity to the natural world, their motivations for owning and belonging to the land, as well as their capacity for mobility.

Just like Du Bois's work, Hurston's novel offers a number of permutations of pastoral: a simple, or what Leo Marx calls, a "popular and sentimental" pastoral; an anti-pastoral; and finally an "imaginative and complex" pastoral (5). Simple pastoral tends to obscure the mobility of the shepherd/poet—who dallies just long enough to enjoy the scenery and compose a few poems. The more pessimistic anti-pastoral concentrates on false nostalgia—a home sickness for a place that never really was home, or a sickness *of* home that arises from hardship, a lack of choices, and little if any access to mobility—geographic, social, and economic. Complex pastoral may share many of the traits of simple pastoral, but it significantly introduces some "counterforce" and brings "irony to bear against the illusion of peace and harmony" (Marx 25). Overall, Hurston's novel follows the maturation and development of Janie through a neat progression. First, she leaves the innocence and simple pastoral of her grandmother Nanny's fenced garden to live a more rugged life of anti-pastoral with her first husband Logan Killicks on his farm in the country. She then leaves Killicks and moves toward a more "civilized" life with

her second husband, Jodie Starks, in the growing village Eatonville that is based on a merchant economy. After the death of Starks, she takes up with her final mate, Tea Cake, and travels with him to the fully corrupting influences of urban life, before they retreat to the complex pastoral on the fertile farms on the banks of Lake Okeechobee, known affectionately as “de muck.” Finally, after Janie kills the rabies-infected Tea Cake who is attacking her, she returns to Eatonville to tell her story. While pastoral remains more or less the central trope in Janie’s story, the opposite poles of wilderness and civilization are continuously threatening from the margins.

Janie’s story begins with two starkly diverging depictions of nature based on expressions of simple pastoral and wilderness that introduce and prefigure the complications of Janie’s engagement with her society and landscape throughout the novel. In *Race and Nature* Paul Outka examines the contrast between the famous pear tree passage and Nanny’s subsequent metaphor of black women as the mules of the human race and argues that the “gendered oppression and slavery’s agricultural metaphors for subjectivity supplant Janie’s romantic visions” (191). While this provides material for Outka’s analysis of the sublime and trauma, he does not address Nanny’s experience with the natural world, which would perhaps better serve to develop an argument for the tensions Outka examines and that I will return to below.

Outka connects the naturalization of blackness with the violence of slavery and argues that trauma is the inverse of the sublime, both of which are convincing arguments. A problem arises when he equates the African American experience of slavery with his definition of trauma. The development of his argument that connects

trauma and the sublime relies on a momentary experience—a dramatic, violent experience—and how the subject perceives, reflects, and adapts that experience to his or her psyche. An important distinction between trauma and the sublime is the relative safety, or lack of it, of the position of the subject who is exposed to the ephemeral moment of awe. The problem is, as suggested by his example of Nanny’s metaphor of the African American woman as the mule of the world, that the experience of slavery, despite its eruptions of sudden violence, was by and large no momentary, violent occurrence. Outka explains that “For African Americans, moments of instability between self-identity and the natural world have historically often been violently reductive, producing the traumatic inverse of white sublimity, rendering both subject and nature abject, commodified, subaltern. Indeed, the conflation of blackness and nature served as the principle ‘justification’ for chattel slavery in antebellum America” (25). As he rightly points out, the naturalization of blackness was a process that lasted for centuries. The resulting effect may not be as dramatic as PTSD (which he uses to help describe trauma as the inverse of the sublime), but rather a more pernicious, enduring malaise and depression, and in Nanny’s case, suspicion, of nature. His analysis of trauma and its reverberating effects would be more fitted to the epigraphs for this chapter, which associate rural, natural environments with images of lynching. Nanny’s mule metaphor is more akin to “slow violence” as identified by Rob Nixon, than the trauma outlined by Outka. It yokes black women to the natural world while also rendering them as something completely unnatural. The mule is neither wholly natural (since it is sterile and only exists as an intervention of culture), nor wholly cultural (although it is a

product of culture, it always remains an animal, a dumb, stubborn brute). As Nanny confesses, her position as the mule of the world affords her no dignity and little respect.

Nanny's metaphor parallels a folk tale Hurston collected and recorded in her book *Mules and Men*. The story of "Why the Sister in Black Works Hardest" appears within the framework of a group of laborers employed by the "Everglades Cypress Lumber Company" who expect a day off when the foreman explains there won't be any logging that day. The foreman, however, sends them to the mill to see if they are needed there, where they are again dismissed. Susan Meisenhelder notes that "Like mules, the men are moved from one work location to the next, never informed of the white boss's plans. Frustrated by this dehumanizing situation, the men often use traditional tales in this section to critique white power figures and to reassert their own humanity" (271). The story is told by "the most psychologically oppressed Black man in the group" (Meisenhelder 278), Jim Allen. His narrative explains that God placed a large package in the road that laid there until "Ole Missus" told "Ole Massa" to pick it up. Ole Massa orders the black man to pick it up, who in turn tells his wife to pick it up. Motivated by her curiosity and a desire for the goods that might be inside the package, the woman opens it and finds that it is "full of hard work" (Hurston, *Mules and Men* 76). Jim provides the moral of the story: "De white man tells the nigger to work and he takes and tells his wife" (77). Meisenhelder notes that although for Jim and the other black men, the story legitimates the social hierarchy and casts blame on the black woman, Hurston is attempting to place black "sexual inequality in a larger context of racial oppression" (277-78). This type of trickle down oppression arises throughout *Their Eyes Were*

Watching God, particularly with Janie's first two husbands, and suggests the pernicious legacy of slavery and how slow violence can seep into the very fabric of a culture. The folk tales that are passed around the community operate across generations to assist the men in sustaining their positions in the social hierarchy.

The trauma that Outka describes relies on an individual's momentary violent experience, and thus is not likely to operate systemically across generations. In Hurston's essay "How it Feels to Be Colored Me" she insists that she refuses to feel shame that she is "the grand-daughter of slaves." She declines to "look behind and weep" or to be negatively affected in any way by the history of slavery (827). Hurston illustrates this lack of a cross-generational influence in the novel when Janie refuses her grandmother's ontology by rejecting her first husband's attempts to make a mule out of her, although Hurston demonstrates that Nanny's ontology is more persistent than Janie imagines. Her second husband, Jody Starks, who represents her means for escape and mobility, likewise attempts to make a mule out of Janie. But Janie eventually rejects Starks' oppression, which suggests that the former slave Nanny's experience is not accessible to a new generation. Much more can, and has been, written about the mule motif, but for the present purpose it is more instructive to examine the contrast between Janie's initial experience of the natural world as a sensual pastoral dream, and her Grandmother's and mother's experience of it as a location of a violent trauma with lasting effects. When compared to Janie's initial, pastoral experience of nature, Nanny's opposing view of nature as a terrifying and indifferent wilderness (more apropos of the sublime/trauma dichotomy) provides a better contrast than Nanny's depiction of black

women as mules. Nanny's traumatic experience in the wilderness allows for further interpretations of the enduring effects of natural experiences and how the subject imagines her distance and/or proximity to the natural world.

In the famous pear tree passage Hurston presents a young, uneducated girl's initiation into the archetypal pastoral. The scene is clearly evocative of Janie's budding sexuality, but as Outka argues, "something significant is lost if we read this scene as simply encoding Janie's sexual awakening." Outka explains that the landscape does not just reflect Janie, but that she reflects it and that her communion with nature here is a "moment of alliance rather than simply projection" (190). It is not simply nature that Janie is allied with in this passage; Hurston situates Janie in alliance with the pastoral form. The scene is full of pastoral motifs: "visiting bees, [...] gold of the sun [...] breath of the breeze [...] glossy leaves [...] bursting buds" (11). She moves through the "little garden field" seeking "confirmation of the voice and vision" and sees it dancing all about her. It is as if during her orgasmic experience under the pear tree she is impregnated with the accumulated history of pastoral. Unlike Du Bois who constructs simple pastorals for an ironic effect, or Outka's arguments that depict pastoral as a mark of whiteness, Hurston suggests here that the pastoral is more than a damaging cultural construction available only to privileged whites.

Hurston explains that Janie seems to hear the "flute song" of those Acadian shepherds "forgotten in another existence and remembered again," as the "inaudible voice of it all" comes to her (10-11). Hurston presents Janie's experiences as partaking of a vision of nature that is persistent in Western civilization, if not human culture in

general, and she yearns to participate in and belong to this experience of nature. The narrative voice, moving between degrees of proximity and distance to the character, as well as the distanced reader, may view the scene as emblematic of some naïveté, but the scene lacks the pessimism that a truly ironic distancing would provide. Hurston employs the “blossoming pear tree” as a core image and metaphor in the novel. Grant and Ruzich call it the “controlling rural metaphor” in their interpretation of the novel as a pastoral (25). It represents Janie’s lust for life and desire for wider horizons, and indicates that Nanny’s vision is limiting and backward looking.

Like Nanny’s mule metaphor, the pear tree metaphor yokes Janie to nature. With both metaphors, Hurston suggests that the individual’s subjectivity is possessed and overwhelmed by the proximity to nature. Outka’s reading of the pear tree scene as an alliance between Janie and nature, might better be viewed as an annexation—one that Janie readily accommodates. Janie’s experience establishes one of the traditional poles from which an individual can participate in her natural surroundings—that is nature as innocent and beneficial rather than harsh and hostile—but Janie has yet to gain the required distance to prevent losing her subjectivity. She only sees nature as representative of love, beauty, and fertility, a representation that she attempts to develop and refine throughout the novel in several permutations, while a darker view of nature as fearful, savage, and destructive of human culture, intrudes on her idyllic ontology.

During the pear tree scene Janie feels she “had been summoned to behold a revelation” of sensuous reciprocity where tree, flower, and a “dust-bearing bee” participate in a union of mutual desire, love, and fulfillment. Janie’s quest to join this

world loses its innocence when her grandmother catches her being “lacerated” with a kiss from a “shiftless” local (11-12). Nanny’s visage inverts Janie’s view of the blissful natural world, presaging the violence of the hurricane to come later in the novel:

“Nanny’s head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm. Foundations of ancient power that no longer mattered” (12).

Hurston’s simile here is more literal than it first appears. While Janie is imagining Nanny’s disapproval as the violent deracination of her communion with the pastoral (the “ancient power”), she is also seeing the literal effect of time on the natural world.

Hurston delays this realization for the reader. She clarifies the image when she draws back and relates that Janie is actually seeing that the palma christi leaves she had applied to Nanny’s head to soothe her have wilted and “become part and parcel of the woman” (12). The folk remedy derived from nature is transformed from a soothing balm to wilted age. On a more figurative level, as seen through Janie’s eyes, Nanny has been possessed by the fearful aspect of nature where it manifests in decay and destruction. Hurston forms a sort of chiasmus between each character’s view of nature and their desire for proximity to, or distance from, the opposing view. Janie strives for proximity, or a sense of belonging, to her sensual pastoral world but recoils to distance herself from the wilted nature that has possessed (“become part and parcel”) of the old woman. Nanny, on the other hand, attempts to distance Janie from the sensuous experience that seems to have possessed her, and strives for a dignified belonging to her mature world where, as she sees it, “de white man is de ruler of everything” (14). By the end of the novel when wild nature—in the form of a hurricane and the rabies virus—intrudes on her pastoral life,

Janie finally learns that there really is no wall of separation between wilderness, the middle landscape of pastoral, and civilization, but that they overlap and blend together even as the culture attempts to departmentalize and distance them from each other.

Nanny's response to Janie's budding sexuality is indicative of her own trauma that she suffered in the wilderness as an escaped slave. After explaining to Janie her mule theory, she describes how her defeated and pessimistic view arose. Her formative experience with nature, similar to Janie's, is connected to her gender and sexuality, although the tone and the ramifications of the experience are quite the opposite. Just after Nanny gives birth to her owner's baby, her owner visits before he departs to fight the approaching Union troops. The tenderness of the scene, as told from Nanny's perspective (he caresses her and playfully pulls on her big toe "lak he always done" (17)), may be somewhat representative of a Stockholm Syndrome, but it also provides a contrast with the mistress' attack on Nanny and Nanny's subsequent trauma during her escape. Furthermore, it sets up a parallel to Janie's sensualized nature since Nanny is forced to flee the plantation for the wilderness because of her sexuality. For Nanny, nature reflects the fear and horror associated with her desirability and pregnancy, rather than reflecting the pleasant sensuality it does for Janie.

Nanny's escape to the swamp offers her some protection, but overall the experience proves traumatic. She tells Janie:

Ah knowed de place was full of moccasins and other bitin' snakes, but I was more skeered uh what was behind me. Ah hide in dere day and night and suckled de baby every time she start to cry, for fear somebody might

hear her and Ah'd git found. Ah ain't sayin' uh friend or two didn't feel mah care. And den de Good Lawd seen to it dat Ah wasn't taken. Ah don't see how come mah milk didn't kill mah chile, wid me so skeered and worried all de time. De noise uh de owls skeered me; de limbs of dem cypress trees took to crawlin' and movin' round after dark, and two three times Ah heered panthers prowlin' round. But nothin' never hurt me 'cause de Lawd knowed how it was. (18)

For Nanny, fertility and her status as a black woman is marked by a harrowing encounter with the natural world. This is not the same swamp Du Bois observes from his cultural and temporal distance, but rather a swamp as seen from dangerous proximity. Her safety, and hence her subjectivity, is overwhelmed by the frightful, and mysterious, powers of the natural world. As Outka explains, drawing on the work of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, “the sublime is, famously, the experience of something we are frightened of *seen from a position of relative safety*” (23). The position of safety, and the reflective attitude taken after the moment of fear, allow for elation of the sublime moment. Since Nanny lacks the power to distance herself from the dangers of the wilderness, and the opportunity to reflect on her experience after it is over, she garners nothing positive from this moment of extreme proximity. Unlike Du Bois, who can view the swamp from the distant aspect of historical perspective and creatively re-imagine the struggle that took place there, Hurston depicts the terrifying aspect of the escaped slaves’ forced and powerless proximity. Like the rabies virus that infects Tea Cake at the end of the novel, nature here threatens to possess Nanny of body and mind, and harm her child

in the process. Any subsequent contact with nature is fraught by this traumatic experience and her powerlessness in the situation, an experience that she relives in the shock of a PTSD-like moment when she sees Janie respond with joy to nature and fertility.

In what may amount to a dose of brutal irony, while Nanny quakes in the wilderness she uses nature to protect her baby, and gives her the delicate name Leafy. She wraps her “up in moss and fixed her good in a tree” (18), before leaving to investigate sounds of gunfire. The baby’s name and the near-mythological protection afforded to her by nature imply she might fare better than her mother did. Leafy’s initial experience of nature is one of nurturing delicacy and security. Hurston suggests that Nanny’s traumatic experience need not damage Leafy’s connection with the natural world, even though the circumstances of Leafy’s birth and her subsequent association with nature are a direct result of slavery and Nanny’s harrowing escape to the swamp. Ideally, with the end of slavery, African Americans in the South could begin to repair their relationship with nature after being forced into a subservient and inferior proximity with the natural world, by turning the knowledge and experience of forced proximity to their advantage. Booker T. Washington and the Black Agrarians made this one of their primary missions. But as Nanny’s mule metaphor insists, black women had a long struggle ahead of them, one that included the failure of reconstruction and the Freedmen’s Bureau.

Any hope that Leafy’s initial association with the natural world would upset the pattern of traumatic proximity to nature is brutally overturned shortly after she reaches

sexual maturity. At seventeen she is kidnapped by her teacher and taken to the woods where she is beaten, raped, and left for dead. Again, the counter-civilized world of nature (the woods) is marked with violence linked to sexuality. The cultural environment is also unsafe; Nanny supposed that the educational system would provide some security and a way out for Leafy; instead it confirmed there is no escape. Once Janie's sexuality arises, with the metaphor yoking it to nature, Nanny tries another tactic to guide Janie's feet "from harm and danger" (13). This time Nanny's "highway through the wilderness" attempts to capitalize on Janie's attraction to the pastoral but rather leads, appropriately enough, to an anti-pastoral (16).

Nanny commits Janie to a marriage with Logan Killicks in an effort to provide her with the security and power that comes with access to land ownership. Nanny's vision of success is achievable only through the domination of the environment. She may not be able to secure a position of power for Janie near the top of the hierarchy, but she may at least lessen the burden of being a black woman in the South by improving her granddaughter's position in the hierarchy. Killicks represents a Booker T. Washington-like figure, a hard worker who owns the only organ in town as well as his house "and sixty acres uh land right on de big road" (23). He seems to be in full possession of himself and his location in the natural and cultural landscape. His land is not debt ridden, and his farm's position on the "big road" provides access to the benefits of civilization—where he can sell his crops that are "bringin' big prices" and buy into the dominant, consumer culture. He appeals to Nanny as a husband for Janie because his success parallels the only successes Nanny has had in her life. She explains that she "raked and

scraped and bought” a little piece of land so Janie “wouldn’t have to stay in de white folks’ yard and tuck [her] head befo’ other chillun at school” (19). Nanny sees ownership of land as a key factor in helping Janie mature with dignity and avoid the fate of her grandmother and mother. Land ownership allows her to exert some control over her environment, control she lacked as a fugitive slave and as a mother attempting to protect her child. It provides an opportunity to develop what she views as the proper distance from the land in a way that is valued, recognized, and most importantly, practiced, by the dominant culture. As an extension of her identity, the land is yoked to her subjectivity, but it is also held at a safe distance since her position of ownership lacks reciprocity and is based on power and control.

Hurston suggests that Nanny’s vision of ownership is limiting. The land becomes a sort of social commodity, something that is not valuable in its own right, but that is valuable only as far as it can be turned to an advantage. Janie finds this ontology not only limiting, but a perversion of her communion with nature. She tries to explain this to Nanny, who brushes her aside and accuses her of wanting “some dressed up dude” who is all show and no substance. Nanny remarks that Janie “can buy and sell such as dem” with what she has—i.e. marginal access to Logan’s sixty acres. “In fact [Janie] can buy ‘em and give ‘em away” (23), her grandmother announces; employing a particularly disturbing locution for a former slave that provides further evidence that she suffers from a type of Stockholm Syndrome. Her comments demonstrate the extent to which she has bought into the ontology of the dominant culture—particularly the patrician attitude of a privileged elite. Janie retorts that she “ain’t takin’ dat ole land tuh heart” and that she

“could throw ten acres of it over de fence every day and never look back to see where it fell” (23-24). The metaphor is, of course, absurd and overblown, as Hurston points out in a later chapter when a resident of Eatonville is mocked for thanking Jody Starks for bringing 200 acres to the small town. But in each case the metaphor suggests something about how the land, and one’s power over it, is conceptualized.

Hurston points to a literal interpretation of the metaphor—Starks cannot carry two hundred acres and Janie cannot throw land over her shoulder—to defamiliarize the ideas of land ownership that lie beneath the surface of the language used to discuss it. The language of possession yokes land ownership with other forms of ownership—the prosaic ownership of common, movable material (pencils, clothes, books, etc). Thoreau plays with the same conception early in *Walden*, when he observes his fellow townsmen who are burdened by their “misfortune” of inheriting “farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools.” He objectifies and equates the land and its buildings with movable goods, and extends the equation to an absurd image: “How many a poor immortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing pasture, and wood-lot!” (4-5). Thoreau and Hurston demonstrate the absurdity of conceiving of land like any other object to be possessed by imaging the conception. Although the vocabulary of possession is regularly used to describe land ownership, the difference is not one of degree, but of kind. The yoking of land and common movable goods paradoxically abstracts the idea of owning and distances the owner from responsibility to the land; it

negates all the particularity of place and renders it just another commodity—something that can be turned to an advantage. Like anything else in the capitalist system, it can be bought and sold and discussed in relation to its most basic value and measurements, in this case acreage. Hurston links the capitalist system with the ownership of people when she has the inarticulate resident of Eatonville not only thank Starks for his 200 acres, but also for his other valuable “possessions”: his “belov-ed wife” and his “store” (42). Subscribing to the commodification of land and the power structures land ownership entails, opens an avenue to injustice and welcomes a debasing of life.

Janie recognizes that the commodification of land is at odds with her understanding of nature and a fulfilling life. When she first arrives at Logan Killicks’s “lonesome place,” she sees her pear tree become “a stump in the middle of the woods” (21). Among other chores, Logan commands her to move a “manure pile” (31). Janie is in need of this hard dose of realism in order to recognize the distortions of simple pastoral and to attain the distance from the environment necessary for full self-possession. As much as the pear tree metaphor becomes a core image of the novel, Hurston is no propagator of the simple pastoral. The initial pear tree experience prepares Janie to fall for the first passionate shepherd who comes along; the wizened Nanny lets her have Raleigh’s reply. While the anti-pastoral of Logan’s farm disillusiones Janie of her pastoral innocence, it does not completely sever her sensitivity and intimate connection to the natural world. She still understands “the words of the trees and the wind” and speaks to the falling seeds (25).

Her disillusionment with pastoral is just as necessary as her journey to civilization, represented by her marriage to her second husband, Jody Starks. Starks is about as distant as one could be from the pastoral. When Janie first meets him, he is described as “a citified, stylish dressed man with his hat set at an angle that didn’t belong” (27). He is presented as a complete outsider to her pastoral life—both her imaginative, simple pastoral where she converses with nature, and the more rugged pastoral of her husband Logan where her future promises a life as “de mule uh de world” (14). Although Starks vows not to make a mule out of Janie, he still possesses and objectifies her as a trophy and a symbol of his success. Janie knows that he does not represent her dream, “sun-up and pollen and blooming trees,” but he does represent a “far horizon” (29). She seeks distance from her life on Logan’s farm, and Jody Starks assures that distance. More importantly for Hurston’s purposes, he provides Janie with the means for mobility.

Life with Starks, however, promises nothing but sterile social mobility, a stasis really, based solely on economic power. He buys his way into the hearts and minds of the locals with his 200 acres, his store, and finally his grand house. At times the residents of Eatonville chafe under Starks’s rule, especially when Starks expels a resident for taking some of his cane. The other residents argue that Starks has plenty and should be willing to share. But there is no room in Starks’s capitalist system for such generosity. He needs to assert his rights to exclude others from his property if he is to retain his position of power. In her article “‘Dis ain’t Gimme, Florida’: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” Judie Newman draws on a number of Hurston critics, in

particular Houston Baker, to demonstrate that “Starks is intent on imitating the economics of Anglo-America. He clearly represents an aggressive, white-identified capitalism” (821). The residents voice their frustration with Starks’s improvements by murmuring “hotly about slavery being over” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 47). The ostensibly objective narrative voice lends credence to the residents’ view, when she describes their houses compared to the new house Starks built: “the rest of the town looked like servants’ quarters surrounding the ‘big house’” (47). Starks has no desire to put an end to oppression, but to join in it. Instead of fighting against the cultural norms, he legitimizes them and attempts to profit from them through money grabbing and land speculation.

When Starks passes away, Janie’s horizons finally open up. Janie is reacquainted with the alternative lifestyle of pastoral when Tea Cake arrives and courts her with presents of fresh-caught trout and freshly picked strawberries. He conveys the gifts of nature and reintroduces Janie to a pastoral vision of life: “He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring” (106). Tea Cake closes the distance that remains in their early relationship by entering Janie’s domain and yoking himself to her in a number of ways. He participates in the domestic sphere by planting “flower beds in Janie’s yard”; he secures a position for himself in the near future by “seeding the garden for her,” anticipating the harvest; he proves his strength and masculinity by chopping down a tree that Janie “never did like” (110). Newman discusses the implications of such gift giving by drawing on work of Franz Boas, Hurston’s mentor. Newman explains that in a study of the Kwakiutl Indian culture, Boas observed “a form of gift exchange which

became famous as the exemplification of the theory of conspicuous consumption advanced by Thorstein Veblen” (818). She writes that, “While in theory the gift was spontaneous, in practice it was based on political or economic self-interest: the gift of property implies an obligation on the recipient” (818). She argues that Tea Cake is a subtle “manipulator of gift exchange” (822). While I agree that Tea Cake attempts to gain from the “gifts” he provides Janie, his motivation does not seem quite as calculating as Newman implies, and I would give more credit to Janie’s recognition of Tea Cake’s “manipulations.” Newman does not examine the implications of ownership and property in regards to environmental concerns in the novel, which expose Tea Cake’s manipulations not as pernicious attempts at possession so much as an attempt to provide Janie with access to an alternative lifestyle free of the oppression inherent in the capitalist system.

Tea Cake is clearly a troubling character, despite his role as Janie’s “bee to a blossom” and her subsequent flowering as an independent woman. Although Hurston identifies Tea Cake’s activities as “signs of possession” (110), his manipulations do not fall under the same rubric as Starks’s “aggressive, white-identified capitalism” that are meant to consume Janie (Newman 821). Overall, his approach is more reciprocal and less antagonistic than anything Janie has yet been exposed to. Planting flowers and a garden demonstrates his hope and commitment to the future, not just a desire for immediate gains and profit. Unlike Starks and Nanny, he is not investing in the future for economic and social profit, but rather for simple pleasure and subsistence. Hurston highlights the attractions of the pastoral and demonstrates that Tea Cake, for all his

flaws, is made of completely different mettle than anyone else Janie has encountered, in an effort to portray an alternative way of being in the world—one that celebrates proximity to nature. Hurston has Janie articulate this quite clearly when she explains to a friend her decision to move away with Tea Cake: “Dis ain’t no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma’s way, now Ah means tuh live mine” (114). Instead of assimilating into the hierarchal commodified culture represented by the store in Eatonville, Janie employs the newfound mobility Starks’s fortune provides her to return to the pastoral, except this time without the naïveté of her initial sojourn into the simple pastoral.

Mobility, Pastoral, and Wild Nature

Hurston has been criticized for sentimentalizing the life of poor blacks in the South, most famously perhaps by both Alain Locke and Richard Wright in their respective reviews of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This criticism is in line with the criticisms of simple pastoral, that it tends to sentimentality and nostalgia for a golden age, which as Raymond Williams has shown, has persistently existed in the past. The golden age is always just tantalizingly out of reach of the each generation as it pines for the simpler days of a generation or two previous. This criticism, however, does not really apply to Hurston’s novel since she is not sentimentalizing some so-called golden age in Florida, but writing about her present day. She draws attention to the problems of looking backward in her portrayal of Nanny’s embrace of the white-dominated system. Hurston’s characters do not feel nostalgia for a bygone era because they are too busy

living in their own era. Hurston's complex pastoral focuses on Janie's struggle for mobility, and at least implicitly acknowledges the access to mobility that Janie receives from the profit of the store. The trajectory toward an increasingly "civilized" life, followed by the sojourn in the muck, and ending with the return to a small town, implies the necessity of free access to mobility for a fulfilling life. The need and desire for mobility uncovers the false vision of simple pastoral where the peasant is happily bound to the soil, and replaces that vision with a complex understanding where the subject chooses to embrace a place-based life over the availability of other options.

The complex pastoral does not allow for sentimentalizing. Janie and Tea Cake suffer hardships, jealousy, and arguments flare up. They work hard and they play hard: "Dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing love every hour. Work all day for money, fight all night for love. The rich black earth clinging to bodies and biting the skin like ants" (131). Dawood Sultan and Deanna Wathington argue that "the collision of poverty and racial segregation [...] banished the black people in the narrative to a hazardous work and living place which they defined pejoratively as 'the *muck*'" (154), and that the name reflects "a keen collective sense of a harsh existence" (155).

While their analysis addresses important connections between racism, poverty, and so called "natural" disasters, particularly by pointing out the parallels between those who suffered most in Hurston's novel and those who suffered most during hurricane Katrina, Sultan and Wathington tend to impose arguments on the novel that misrepresent the tone of the narrative and detract from the complexities of Janie and Tea Cake's life on the muck. Segregation and social injustice are present during the hurricane at the

climax of the novel, but the focal characters are not “banished” to the muck, poverty is not an issue for them, and they do not refer to the muck “pejoratively”; Janie and Tea Cake choose to go to the muck and find salvation from the hazards (theft, gambling, knife fights) of urban life, Janie has plenty of money in the bank to support them, and the appellation of the area as “de muck” is one of affection. The muck provides them with an answer to the hazards of the urban environment—an arena manufactured by the dominant culture that provides no solace or hope; the muck presents a pastoral life which seems feasible. Sultan and Wathington’s interpretation of the muck represents the kind social criticism that forces pre-established arguments onto narratives and hence misses some of the more subtle arguments being made in the text. Uncovering the social aspects of the novel and its connections to present day injustices is crucial, but it should not be done to the point of obscuring some of the other environmental concerns of the novel, which include modeling an alternative ontology and lifestyle to that of the dominant culture that values power and profit over an intimate and reciprocal relationship with the environment. Hurston is not just trying to expose racial and environmental injustice, she is also attempting to celebrate a particular bioregion and provide a model of reciprocity between subjects and their environment.

It is important to note the character’s relationship with the muck in order to get a better sense of the tragedy—and comedy—of the novel. The tragedy includes social misunderstandings of proximity to nature, and the social and environmental injustice that arises with a short-sighted sense of distance. The comedy of the novel functions on an ironic level that suggests proximity to the environment can be just as damaging as

distance, and that although Janie lost her lover, and may be doomed to suffer the same death,¹² her life with Tea Cake on the muck was worth it all. The story of Janie's life represents a quest to find personal fulfillment while maintaining a reciprocal relationship with her environment, both natural and social. She seems to find that fulfillment on the muck with Tea Cake, but the pernicious tragedy of the modern world, as well as the tragedies of nature, intrude, particularly because the true "nature" of the muck, and its dangers—including an unjust social system and the commodification of land—are hidden from her. The tragedy that Hurston presents is that perhaps even complex pastoral is not possible in the modern age because the dominant society is so bent on commodification and material gain. Hurston's novel implies that the kind of work and play the migrant workers engage should be more valued, not as an example of an authentic primitive culture that is vanishing and hence needs to be preserved, but as an example of a vibrant contemporary alternative to commodification that contributes more than grunt work to the larger society.

Hurston does not suggest we do away with the capitalist system; she depicts a certain degree of commodification in the migrant model (their labor is valued in cash), but it does not pervade or corrupt the entire culture. For example, Hurston explains that their entertainment, in the form of Blues music, is "made and used right on the spot" (131). In juxtaposition to the organ in Logan Killicks's parlor, the music created on "the muck" is not commodified, nor present only to be turned to a social advantage. Music is

¹² Drawing on contemporary medical knowledge available to Hurston, Robert Haas makes a persuasive argument that "clearly and in Hurston's deliberate intent" Janie likely contracted rabies when Tea Cake bit her just after she shot him (206). The novel ends well within the incubation period (the average is 3-7 weeks, but it can incubate for up to 7 years), and approximately the same amount of time passes between Tea Cake's infection and his symptoms, as between when he bites Janie and the end of the novel.

not performed for a paying audience, or recorded for wide dispersal in order to turn a profit; there is no passive consumption or cultural appropriation of it—it is enjoyed as they simultaneously create it and, in Faulkner’s words, “use it well” (*Go Down, Moses* 337). Overall, there is a sense of a symbiosis between the individuals, the culture, and the land. If the novel would have ended with Janie and Tea Cake living their lives happily ever after, either remaining in the muck, or traveling around as migrant workers, the novel would certainly have been sentimental, and would not offer much to her primarily white audience except passive entertainment. But Hurston introduces a number of counterforces, including a history of short-sightedness in land usage, injustice that makes the least fortunate pay the greatest price, and finally the intrusion of a wild nature that throttles the pastoral to obliterate any sentimentalizing that might have lingered around her narrative.

To Janie’s eyes, as part of a migrant community, the muck appears to be a paradisiacal realization of her pear tree fantasies:

Big Lake Okechobee [sic], big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything. Weeds that did well to grow waist high up the state were eight and often ten feet tall down there. Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field. Wild cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too. (129)

The land and people are seemingly possessed by a natural exuberance that contrasts greatly with Eatonville, where Starks excommunicated the resident who made off with some of his cane. In the muck, the benefits of the natural world appear to belong to all. But the land where Tea Cake and Janie settle is not only controlled by a distant “boss-man,” who only appears in the narrative second-hand, it has also been constructed by powerful, distanced interests that possess the land and alter its very nature, shadowy interests who are in fact completely absent in the novel.

For all its natural beauty and fecundity, the muck is not really a product of nature. Environmental historian Ted Steinberg explains:

Early in the twentieth century, Napoleon Bonaparte Broward sought to reclaim the Everglades; under his leadership, the state embarked on a decades-long drainage project. By 1929, close to \$18 million had been spent to build 40 miles of canals and levees with but one purpose in mind: to transform the rich muck lands of the Everglades into valuable farmland. By the late 1910s and early 1920s, as railroads forged their way to the south shore of the lake, small frontier towns—Pahokee, Belle Glade, Clewiston, and Moore Haven—began to sprout. (409-10)

Steinberg’s choice of words here is instructive. It is not clear if he is being ironic, or if he is just using the basic terminology employed when leaders such as Broward speak of “improving” land—but his statement that Broward “sought to *reclaim* the Everglades” demonstrates how language can reinforce possessive attitudes toward the land and nature. It is as if a wild, unruly nature has stolen the land from its rightful owners, and it

is up to the state of Florida, with the help of developers, to get it back, *re-claim* it. Governor Broward was not actually reclaiming the Everglades so much as he was destroying a habitat, or rather perhaps creating, or inventing, or superimposing a landscape onto the existing natural environment that was more conducive to profit than what was regarded as a swampy wilderness. After enough of the land was reclaimed from the wilderness, Jay Barnes explains, “A land boom ensued in which hundreds of acres of what was once wet saw grass were sold as black-soil farmland. Soon huge fields of beans, celery, carrots, and sugarcane stretched for miles around the lake” (130). This is the land which Janie and Tea Cake know and come to inhabit. The historical creation of this pastoral landscape is unknown to the couple and absent from the novel. The invisibility of those who constructed the land, the dike, and even those who own the farms, suggest the distance between the workers and those who reap the most benefit from the work. It also shows how proximity to a pastoral landscape can blind subjects to how much the landscape has been altered and is actively controlled.

If the muck is hardly a natural environment, the deaths that resulted from the hurricane can hardly be understood simply as a natural disaster. The storm in the novel is based on the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane that has an official death toll of 1,836, but as Eliot Kleinberg reports, “few historians believe” the official count (213). Estimates that are more realistic put the death toll at 2,500-3,000. The hurricane made landfall on the east coast of Florida, where “the once prosperous resorts and palatial homes of the Palm Beach area were reduced to rubble” (Barnes 129). Barnes reports that within thirty-six hours of landfall “headlines around the nation summarized the calamity: ‘Florida

Destroyed! Florida Destroyed!’” (129). The headlines were referring to the damage on the coast, where approximately twenty-six lives were lost, compared to the thousands of mostly black lives lost around the lake; it was not until a few days later that the full extent of the catastrophe on the shores of Lake Okeechobee was known. Stewart G. Thompson, the director of the state’s Bureau of Vital Statistics in 1928 wrote that “Most of the deaths were among the negro laborers who entered the Everglades for the planting season which had opened a short time previously” (qtd. in Kleinberg 213). Kleinberg explains that “The hurricane may also have accounted for the most deaths of black people in a single day in U.S. history” (xiv). The disparity in the death toll for affluent, mostly white, coastal residents and the poor, mostly black residents of the muck demonstrates that the hurricane was much more than a natural disaster. It was a disaster of human short-sightedness, greed, ignorance, and not a little inequality.

Just two years before the Okeechobee hurricane hit, another hurricane swept through Florida which “almost completely annihilated” the town of Moore Haven on the Southwestern shore of Okeechobee (Steinberg 409). Official death tolls proved sketchy and estimates range up toward 300. Steinberg explains that “State officials [...] blamed nonhuman forces” but the “fact that the state had subsidized and encouraged settlement around Lake Okeechobee seemed not to cross the mind” of the officials (410). This kind of possession and commodification of the land is marked by an abstracting distance—distance of geography, time, and effect—that causes shortsightedness and allows the officials and developers to ignore the consequences of their actions. In an act of hubris, they claim the technological ability to control the environment, believing for the time

being that they have altered its very nature. In what amounts to what Rob Nixon calls the “plasticity of ownership” (“Neoliberalism” 454), when disaster strikes, the officials and developers in charge reverse themselves and claim that nature is beyond their control. The authorities can claim the environment as their own as long as it benefits them, and then cast aside their responsibility of ownership to avoid the “long-term consequences to environmental and human health” (Nixon 454).

The drainage of the swamp and the promotion of settlement were not the only human factors that led to the tragedies of 1926 and 1928. Heavy rains before each of the hurricanes raised the lake level—which seems a natural enough process, until one considers that the lake level was managed by dikes and canals. Steinberg reports that “Commercial fisherman and those who used the lake for irrigation or transportation purposes wanted the water level high; farmers, especially those near the lake shore, wanted it low to guard against flooding” (411). Those advocating high water levels prevailed, at the cost, in the case of the 1928 hurricane, of thousands of lives. Again, distance triumphed over proximity—the interests who advocated for high water levels were much less affected than the thousands of migrant workers who lived in close proximity to the lake and the dikes. Noting the lack of attention the hurricane has received in the years since it happened, Kleinberg poses the question of whether the storm would have received more attention if the death toll had been primarily white, rather than poor and black. Over the past few years (Kleinberg’s book was published in 2003), more attention has been paid to the tragedy of the Okeechobee hurricane, due in no small part to the expanding scholarship of the environmental justice movement and

the tragedy of hurricane Katrina where many of the same issues were brought to the forefront.

The policies and practices that led up to the tragic events of the 1928 hurricane are mainly invisible to Janie and Tea Cake. Hurston makes no mention of the previous storm or the dangerously high water levels before the hurricane. The couple do receive warnings to evacuate that they choose to ignore: as rumors of the approaching hurricane build, Janie sees a “large party” of Seminoles leaving the area for higher ground, followed shortly thereafter by rabbits, possums, snakes, “big animals like deer” and even panthers (154-5). When offered a ride out of the muck by a friend, Tea Cake declines, stating that “de money’s too good on the muck” to leave it. The friend tries to persuade Tea Cake by appealing to the authority of the Seminoles, who with their long history and knowledge of the local environment would ostensibly know better than anyone when danger was near. Tea Cake responds with an appeal to the authority of ownership and the power it entails, albeit not his own authority, but the authority of those who conquered, drained, and possess the land. He argues that the Seminoles “don’t know much uh nothin’, tuh tell de truth. Else dey’d own this country still. De white folks ain’t gone nowhere. Dey oughta know if it’s dangerous” (156). In a moment of tragic irony, and a reprise of the Stockholm Syndrome, Tea Cake has succumbed to the power structure of the dominant culture and has ignored the warnings of those who have the deepest and most sensitive knowledge of the local environment and ecosystem.

Tea Cake associates the power of ownership and the authority of the ruling class with knowledge of the environment, indicating that although he and Janie are attempting

to live an alternative lifestyle, they are still subjects of the dominant culture. Hurston makes it clear that Tea Cake shares some complicity in the tragedy because he refuses to realize the injustice of the system to which he is subject and he refuses to think and act for himself—contrasting with Nanny’s swift action in her escape to the wilderness and Janie’s continual quest for the horizon. The narrator reflects that “the [white] people in the big houses” felt “uncomfortable but safe because there were seawalls to chain the senseless monster.” This gives Tea Cake confidence and serves to rationalize his passivity: “the [black] folks let the people do the thinking.” Here Hurston uses the monikers of “people” and “folks” to demonstrate the migrant workers’ resignation to their status below the white society. Shortly thereafter Tea Cake realizes that “The time was past for asking *white folks* what to look for” (159, emphasis added); the hurricane has shown that the white “people” have no more power over the natural world than the black “folks,” yet they maintain their social power. The overt racism and social injustice becomes evident during and just after the hurricane—first when the fleeing couple reach a bridge for safety but find that the “white people had preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room” (164), and later when Tea Cake is pressed into service burying the victims of the storm and is forced to distinguish the white dead for coffin burial, and the black dead for burial in segregated, mass graves.

Although Hurston acknowledges the racism during and in the aftermath of the storm, that is not the focal point of the tragedy. She may have elided the social issues so as not to offend the sensibilities of her primary (white) audience. But the novel is more concerned with personal environmental relationships than social relationships between

whites and blacks. There is a marked critique of those who attempt to distance themselves from their natural environment by commodifying and attempting to establish control over it and there is a celebration of personal connections to the environment based on proximity and a fluid reciprocity. The terrible irony at the end—as predicted by Nanny’s experience in the wilderness—is that proximity can be dangerous and possess the individual. Hurston seems to suggest that while a complex pastoral is desirable and should be valued, it may in fact be an impossible dream, not because it is a false cultural construction of a bygone golden age, nor because it represents a method by which a dominant culture can oppress the disenfranchised, but because the very idea of a pastoral middle landscape serves as a false buffer between civilization and the wilderness. In a fascinating interlayering and interpenetration of pastoralism, domestication, and wilderness, Hurston presents the image of Janie struggling to survive in the floodwaters by hanging on to a cow upon which rides a rabid dog. A man and his wife, a dog, and a cow, all represent the pastoral and domestication, while the flood, the struggle for survival of the fittest, and the rabies that possess the dog and later Tea Cake, represent the wilderness. The pastoral is a false dream because the same nature that generates the pear tree also generates rabies. The rabies virus is a perfect symbol of how much humans actually belong to the natural world and can’t hope to control it—there is no clearer sign of possession than a virus that can take control over the very material of subjectivity (the brain) in order to propagate itself by causing the subject to violently attack other subjects. Despite Hurston’s use and celebration of the pastoral, the novel

suggests there is no such thing as a middle landscape and that mobility, although valued, does not allow for escape.

Conclusion

The parallels between the Okeechobee Hurricane and Hurricane Katrina are abundant. Oddly enough, the official death toll for both hurricanes is exactly the same: 1,836. In the aftermath of each of the hurricanes, officials attempted to elide complicity for the tragedy by referring to the disasters as “natural”; they ignored or outright dismissed the social factors that contributed to the death and destruction. In their article “Premonition: Peering through Time and into Hurricane Katrina,” Sultan and Wathington draw out many of the parallels between Hurston’s novel and the 2005 disaster in New Orleans, including a sense of fatalism on the part of the residents, a lack of mobility, and the “concentration of black people [...] in landscape long known to be susceptible to massive flooding” (158-59). They argue that “The same socioeconomic, political, and historical factors which determined individual and collective health status, safety, and a general well-being of New Orleans’ poor blacks before the arrival of Hurricane Katrina in the city were the ones which afflicted the black folks in Hurston’s *muck*. Poverty, powerlessness, and Jim Crow laws segregated Hurston’s black community into dilapidated quarters located too close to a massive lake that was reined in only by artificial barriers” (159). The environmental justice movement works to expose this kind of distribution of environmental hazards and benefits, and attempts to act as a corrective to such environmental racism.

Dangerous proximity to environmental hazards in both the novel and the actual hurricanes are also connected with the distancing attitudes taken by the powerful elite. Michael Dyson remarks that President George W. Bush was “oblivious to the callous symbolism of his distance-keeping gesture” of holding a press conference in the Rose Garden after his “self-described ‘flyover’” of New Orleans (71). As in Dyson’s book, much of the criticism that addresses Hurricane Katrina centers on detailing the failures of the Bush administration, and expands on the historical socio-economic factors that contributed to the scale of the disaster. The social critic Edward Rothstein argues that this kind of criticism represents a new kind of theodicy, and “an important change in our views of the natural world” (n.p.). This new theodicy “inflates human knowledge” and it “confidently extends scientific and political power into the realm of nature.” Observing how “the reaction to natural catastrophe so readily becomes political” leads him to suggest that “Nature becomes something to be managed or mismanaged; it lies within the political order, not outside it.” (Rothstein n.p.). The idea that human institutions have managed and mismanaged nature, and viewed the management of nature as part of their prerogative, is nothing new. As Rothstein points out, and as I argued in the previous chapter, an explicit ontology that assumes human society can and should control nature was articulated during the Enlightenment.

Hurston’s novel can clearly function as a forerunner to the environmental justice movement, albeit one that takes a markedly alternative track than the present day environmental justice and criticism. Despite the relative similarity between the populations affected by Katrina and the disaster in Hurston’s novel, there is a crucial

distinction: the population in Hurston's novel were living an agrarian lifestyle, and Janie and Tea Cake choose to live there, while the neighborhoods in New Orleans were urban, inner city landscapes filled with residents who had few options dictating where they could live. Notwithstanding Sultan and Wathington's insistence on the similarities of the status of the residents in Hurston's novel and New Orleans, the quality of life on the muck, as portrayed by Hurston, hardly bears any resemblance to the quality of life in the poor urban areas of New Orleans. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* offers a critique of the impulses that propelled the Great Migration and sent millions of African-Americans from one bad situation to another. The drive for urbanization seen in Du Bois did not hold up to its promises, as demonstrated amply in Jean Toomer's book *Cane*, where participants in the Great Migration met with racism, overcrowding, and poor wages once they settled in the North; hardly an improvement over the conditions in the South. Toomer, Du Bois, and Hurston all, in one way or another, celebrate the vital rhythms accessible to those who live in close proximity to the natural world, while they also object to the racism and social injustice which forced that proximity as a method to control and dominate African-American society. In the decades that have passed since these writers were active, the nexus of African-American culture has grown ever further distant and disenfranchised from natural environments.

There are, however, some individuals and organizations that attempt to promote relationships between African-American culture and the natural world. The National Park Ranger, Shelton Johnson, encourages greater diversity in national parks—significantly by drawing on history and culture, as well as a sense of ownership. In the

extensive interviews Johnson participated in for Ken Burns's documentary *The National Parks*, he departs from the myth of wilderness exposed by critics such as William Cronon and claims ownership of the parks and natural landscapes by detailing the historical relationships between African-Americans and natural landscapes. Small organizations such as Big City Mountaineers (BCM) also attempt to expose underserved and disenfranchised urban teens to nature by raising money and organizing free weeklong excursions into a number of backcountry sites across the U.S. Although they have been operating for twenty-five years, BCM tellingly still does not have a program serving youths in the southeast—although a member of their board of directors informed me that they are attempting to establish one there. While the tendency and drive to expose inner-city residents to natural habitats away from their homes is an important and worthy cause, it still does not answer many of the problems and issues raised by the environmental justice movement. Johnson and organizations such as BCM may attempt to bring underserved and disenfranchised urban Americans to nature, but the question remains, how can the movement be reversed, that is, how can nature be brought to the people in inner-city, urban communities.

One answer to this question can be found in the same landscape that was destroyed by the flooding during Hurricane Katrina. In the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans the educator Nat Turner recently began a program called Our School at Blair Grocery (OSBG) which combines GED education with an urban farm and fresh produce market. Inspired in part by Frances Moore Lappé's ideas, the program attempts to emulate "the practical innovations the city of Belo Horizonte [Brazil] successfully

implemented to assure everyone the right to food” (“About OSBG” n.p.). An article in the *New York Times* reported that one student who had dropped out of a local high school but was then attending OSBG said that “growing and selling food had given him an improved sense of self-dependence” (Wilson n.p.). The school may not be minting any urban Thoreaus, and it is certainly too small to have a wide influence, but it does represent a move in a direction where the issues of social justice, health, access to fresh food, and establishing a connection to the land are all at play. Literary works such as Hurston’s novel and Du Bois’s essays can help reestablish a precedent for African-American relationships with the environment, and help create value in these relationships while small, localized programs such as OSBG can help establish a sense of owning and belonging to an environment that is worthwhile, even in the midst of a neighborhood that most Americans try to keep at a safe distance.

CHAPTER IV
 ECOPOETICS AND THE ENVIRONMENTALISM OF THE POOR
 IN ELIZABETH MADOX ROBERTS'S *THE TIME OF MAN*

In 1963 the *Saturday Review* published a cover article by Robert Penn Warren concerning the works of Elizabeth Madox Roberts, primarily her 1926 novel *The Time of Man*. In it, Warren praises Roberts's sense of time and place, provides a brief biography, offers a short analysis of Roberts's novel, and laments the lack of critical and popular attention to her work. While detailing Roberts's early life in the "quiet country of mixed farming and cattle-breeding, in sight of the Knobs," he remarks that "She knew the poetry of this pastoral quietness, but she knew, too, the violence and the suffering beneath the quietness" ("Elizabeth Madox Roberts" 20). He describes how Roberts's sensitivity to her place and the people who live there influenced her fiction, specifically *The Time of Man*, a novel whose main character, Ellen Chesser, is presented "not in active protest against the deprivation and alienation of the life of a sharecropper, but in the process of coming to terms, in a personal sense, with the tragic aspect of life" (38). Warren explains that Roberts was aiming "at a fusion of the inner and the outer, at what she called 'poetic realism.'" He then offers the following excerpt from her journal:

Somewhere there is a connection between the world of the mind and the outer order—it is the secret of the contact that we are after, the point, the moment of union. We faintly sense the one and we know as faintly the

other, but there is a point where they come together, and we can never know the whole of reality until we have these two completely. (38)

Although Roberts employs dualistic language that sounds like philosophical idealism in this journal entry, she indicates a desire, indeed a necessity for, and realization of, coexistence, the type of coexistence that many nature writers strive for and ecocritics praise. Although her work is finding a resurgence in some quarters, due in no small part to the considerable efforts of H.R. Stoneback and the Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society, it is still neglected, and relatively unknown.

When Warren wrote his review, he attributed the neglect of Roberts's work partially to a political agenda on the part of critics: "Any literary work that was concerned with an inward victory was, in certain influential quarters, taken as subtle propaganda against any effort directed toward outward victory" (38). Although he introduces a dualistic rhetoric of inward and outward victory, along with an implied dualism of art and politics, his final analysis presents a more subtle understanding that attempts to close the distance created by such dualism, while offering a critique of nostalgic pastoral. He closes his review with the following remarks which anticipate an ecocritical and environmental justice reading of the book:

The novel is, in a sense, a pastoral, but only a false reading would attribute to it the condescension, the ambiguous humility on the part of writer and reader, and the sentimentally melancholy acceptance of the *status quo*, which often characterize the pastoral. No, it is the inner reality

of Ellen and of her people in the contact with the world that, in the end, makes social protest significant, makes social justice “just.” (38)

A dialectic of inner and outer, self and other, individual and society, remains, but there is an opening made at the point of contact. The term “contact” can be construed in the sense of violence and opposition, which in fact does occur in the novel, albeit not often with the dramatic scale that the terms “violence” and “opposition” suggest. The scale is typically subtler, and more delicate. “Contact” can also be construed as two entities coming together, as the *OED* has it: “the mutual relation of two bodies whose external surfaces touch each other.” But still, there is something lacking in the term “contact” to describe the protagonist Ellen Chesser’s involvement with her environment, communion or coexistence seems more accurate. Roberts is not so much concerned with the relation of mere “external surfaces;” she is more concerned with visceral connections.

However, visceral connections, communion, and coexistence with the environment are often disrupted by the intrusion of social concerns. Granted, the novel traces the development of a young girl into womanhood, and the center of focus is an individual who, as Roberts puts it, “grows into the land” (qtd in Warren, “Elizabeth Madox Roberts” 21). But that character does not live in isolation. When the novel opens, Ellen and her family have just parted ways with a group of travelers, including a character named Tessie, a dear friend of Ellen. The Chessers are forced to stop at a blacksmith to repair their wagon with full intentions to catch up to Tessie and the others. But while they wait, Ellen’s father is offered a job setting a crop of tobacco while the season is upon them. Ellen loses the familiarity of life on the road with Tessie, and must

adjust to a new place, and new people. She hopes to catch up to Tessie, but that dream fades as Ellen and her family temporarily get caught up in the life of Hep Bodine's farm and Ellen begins her exploration of the place. She searches out the point of contact between herself and her new environment, while also adjusting to the ways of the farm and the other people who live and work there.

Roberts details Ellen's growing maturity, her struggle with a sense of idealism and Cartesian dualism, although Ellen is of course unaware of the philosophical terms attached to those ways of experiencing the world. As Ellen explores her new, unfamiliar place, she slowly gains proximity to the environment, until some distraction or obtrusion ruptures her proximity and demonstrates a remaining distance. But this is followed with still deeper explorations of her place and stronger bonds between herself and the land. She develops and fine-tunes her sense of owning and belonging to the land in this way. This pattern of Ellen's experience continues throughout the novel in what may be described as a sort of expanding spiral. She explores and slowly gains greater intimacy with the objects she comes in contact with; then she is somehow disillusioned into understanding that no matter how close, how visceral that contact is, some distance always remains. Finally, she comes into a more profound understanding of distance and proximity, of coexistence and interpenetration, owning and belonging, before the process begins over again, although subsequently with a richer understanding of herself and her environment.

Another, more social pattern interlocks with this phenomenological pattern. She cannot live in nature alone, but also exists in the realm of society and culture. The

intrusions of society vary, but include what might be expected for a growing woman at that time and place. A potential lover attempts to lure her into having sex with him in the bushes and then throws her over for the farmer's daughter. Her father argues with the landowner Hep Bodine, and Ellen fears the farmer will kick them off the land and hire a younger man to help run the place. The father uproots the family to move to another farm where he believes they will gain some advantage by sharecropping rather than just working for wages. A lover deserts Ellen, this time after he has promised to marry her. A local landowner closes the road going through his property to the ire of the other locals, but then he runs away with a mistress after his wife hangs herself. Ellen's father moves the family again, this time to rent twenty-five acres in "poor and stony" land (239). Ellen falls in love once more, but is separated from her lover, Jasper Kent, after he is accused of burning a barn. Jasper returns and they marry and begin a family of their own. More affairs and tribulations ensue, until Jasper is beaten by nightriders for the barn-burning incident, of which he was innocent. The novel ends as Ellen, Jasper, and their brood of children journey down the road to an uncertain future, although they retain hope to find "Some better country. Our own place maybe. Our trees in the orchard. Our own land sometime. Our place to keep..." (394).

Within this framework, there is one particular, extended scene early in the novel that I will concentrate on throughout this chapter. It begins with Ellen confronting her mortality which leads her into a realization of her distance and separation from her environment. What follows the confrontation is an eco-poetic experience of her environment and a sensitive coexistence with the objects around her. While Roberts

unfolds the steps toward such an appreciation of belonging and reciprocity, she does not ignore the ramifications of legal ownership, or the lack of it. The eco-poetic moment is suddenly interrupted with what can be called environmental injustice, where Ellen is discriminated against as a dispensable individual representative of the poor-white class of laborers. From eco-poetics, the scene devolves into a representation of the “disparities in the allocation of the benefits and burdens of economic development” (Steady 1). The dominant culture’s marginalization of the kind of reciprocal relationship with the environment demonstrated by Ellen’s character provides one of the foundations for the environmental and social crimes that escalated through the twentieth century and beyond. *The Time of Man* shows that sacred bonds with the environment are one of the first things to be sacrificed on the altar of progress, and with it an entire people and their ways of living with the earth, particularly when the principle of environmental ownership is enacted through exclusion and distance. In Roberts’s novel, the concerns of eco-poetics and environmental justice come together and offer a way for her readers to navigate through a variety of approaches to environmental relationships.

Eco-poetics

During the first few days of her life on Hep Bodine’s farm, Ellen slips away whenever she gets the chance to explore “the ravine to its head in the tree-grown hills lying beyond Bodine land” (32). While these explorations are the beginning of Ellen’s growth into the land, they also attest to her longing for her previous life on the road. She misses her friend Tessie, and the strangers she sees passing in front of her cabin kindle

her desire for community. Over a few days she witnesses the same people come and go and recognizes by their “faded limp clothes, long and drab and weary with many washings” that they are her “kind of people” (33). In her curiosity and desire to “fix” one particular traveler “into a thought,” Ellen speaks to the woman one day as she passes in front of the family’s new cabin. At this point in Ellen’s immature development, Roberts emphasizes Ellen’s view of the world as something like philosophical idealism, where the people and objects of the external world need to be categorized so Ellen can give them being in her mind.

Through the course of their conversation, Ellen recounts the deaths of her six siblings from various causes. Infant mortality being so high and death such a regular part of her life growing up, Ellen cannot “recollect” what caused the death of two of her siblings. Interestingly enough though, the remembrance of the death of an older brother she never knew affects her the most, presumably because of his age of three months when he died, and her regret of losing an older brother who may have served as a playmate and mentor. After the woman leaves, Ellen continues to think about her dead brother, and in her grief of what can only be an abstract loss, she turns to the most substantial object around her, the earth itself, in the expectation of receiving solace. Roberts is keenly aware of the self-centered nature and instrumental attitude of this attempt to extract comfort from the earth and quickly demonstrates its futility. Ellen lies on the ground “under a thorn tree,” but finds “no coolness in the grass, which was hot like her own tingling skin, and the heat rolled down in waves from the sun” (34). The ground is not so much reflecting her grief, as it is presenting its autonomy as an object

that contains its own properties despite the subject's longing for something else. In her moment of sorrow, Ellen desires to take comfort from her environment without giving anything in return, and is quickly rebuffed by the earth that is indifferent, if not hostile, to her longing for comfort.

Roberts situates Ellen's recognition of her environment as beyond her control within a Judeo-Christian context. Unlike Hurston's Janie, whose significant initial experience of nature is depicted as an Edenic bliss under a pear tree, Roberts depicts Ellen's experience under a thorn tree with the penetrating heat of the sun to suggest a post-lapsarian state. The heat of the earth parallels Ellen's own heat that functions to register her mourning for her lost brother. In the earth's function as a parallel to Ellen, it is fitting for Roberts to portray it in a fallen state considering the context of turn-of-the-century Kentucky and the various other religious allusions throughout the text. The immediate context also supports a Judeo-Christian reading, with Ellen mourning the death of her brother and her building realization of her own mortality, or fallen-ness. If the heat, along with the thorns, indicates a post-lapsarian state, then Roberts can lead Ellen, quite naturally, to a contemplation of her own mortality, which she does.

However, similar to Hurston's Janie, the thorn tree and the heat of the sun are not mere projections of the protagonist's psyche, or an anthropocentric appropriation of nature. Instead, I view it as a technique to present nature, specifically in this case the ground and the grass, in Stanley Cavell's terms via Timothy Morton, as "standoffish" (n.p.).

Robert's depiction of the earth's denial of Ellen's quest for comfort demonstrates the earth's essence as a separate entity, ungovernable by Ellen's emotions or desires, and not

by necessity viewed through a Judeo-Christian context. In this way, the objects of Ellen's environment can be viewed as standoffish—an "object" that cannot be grasped and manipulated to her own ends.

Cavell's sense of the standoffishness of objects intersects with some of the ideas generated by Bill Brown, whom Killingsworth calls "the leading exponent of 'thing theory'" (*Walt Whitman and the Earth* 23). The intersection leads quite nicely to a sense of ecopoetics. Brown suggests that "We don't apprehend things except partially or obliquely (as what's beyond our apprehension)" (4, n. 11). Killingsworth argues:

If we think of the verb 'apprehend' in the connotation of 'to capture' and 'things' as beings that resist capture, then whole worlds of possibility open for ecopoetics, in the 'story of objects asserting themselves as things,' which becomes, as Brown says, 'the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation' (4). And that's precisely what we're looking for in ecopoetics: a new way of confronting the linguistic limits and courting the possibilities involved in thinking about the human relation to the things of the earth. (23-4)

Killingsworth's arguments come during a discussion of Whitman's poem "This Compost," a poem where the speaker meditates on "the limits of human language and being" and comes to an understanding of the earth "not only from the perspective of identity but primarily as a thing unto itself" (19). Roberts is enacting just such a moment in Ellen's experience of mourning and the earth's rejection of her desire for comfort. Roberts portrays the earth's resistance to Ellen's efforts at capturing it. At first this

causes Ellen to reject the earth, which has just rejected her, much as the speaker in Whitman's poem initially turns away from the earth when he contemplates the "distemper'd corpses" it feeds upon. Ellen, in her grief over death and the earth's rejection, turns inward to seek security in a cocoon of self in her own denial of the object in this subject-object dichotomous state. This is clearly not an eco poetic moment just yet, but Roberts is suggesting that Ellen must first realize and acknowledge the earth's distance and her own limits to bridge that distance before she can truly appreciate the earth in eco poetic terms. Subjectivity could be a trap that leads to solipsism, but it can also function as a gateway for a subject to realize its state as an object among other objects, thereby breaking the barriers of idealism and becoming enmeshed in the environment. Roberts suggests that there can be no dwelling on the earth without first developing an understanding of the friction between our simultaneous distance and proximity to the objects of nature. Paradoxically, the more Ellen realizes the standoffishness of her environment, the more she becomes entangled in it. Roberts employs a Judeo-Christian context, or the less loaded parallel referent of heat, to suggest proximity—that is, both Ellen and her environment are equally affected by other entities, in this case the heat of the sun, while the thingness or standoffishness of the earth demonstrates the distance between Ellen's idea of the environment as something she can extract comfort from, and the actual environment that denies her attempt to subjugate it.

When Ellen turns away from the earth, she has no place left to go but inward, and she retreats into a moment of reverie. She imagines "people walking quickly up stone steps" (34), envisaging comfort in a sense of community, civilization, and perhaps the

institution of the church. But this attempt to find solace fails as well, based as it is on Ellen's attempt to appropriate, or claim possession of some idea outside herself that she is not currently participating in. In Ellen's mind, the image "wavered and grew dim [...] before it went into nothingness" (34-35). The reverie cannot stand in the face of Ellen's realization of death and the substantial earth beneath her that is indifferent to her desires for comfort. Out of her vision of "nothingness" she comes "into a quick and complete knowledge of the end":

You breathe and breathe, on and on, and then you do not breathe any more. For you forever. Forever. It goes out, everything goes, and you are nothing. The world is all there, on and on, but you are not there, you Ellen. The world goes on, goes on without you. Ellen Chesser. Ellen. Not somebody heard about and said with your mouth, but you yourself, dead. It will be. You cannot help it. (35)

Roberts's presentation of the earth as a thing unto itself leads to Ellen's confrontation with "the limits of human language and being." In a nearly solipsistic state, Ellen has no recourse but to language and being, yet she realizes that is insufficient. The words "Ellen Chesser" cannot stand up to the realization that she will cease to be.

Finding no solace anywhere she turns, Ellen falls into a state of melancholy. Morton explains that melancholy can act as "an object-like presence that our psyche finds hard to digest." He describes it as "the footprint of another entity of whatever kind whose proximity was experienced as a trauma (the Freudian logic of the death drive)" (n.p). Morton argues for a "traumatic coexistence," a conception that presents some

problems, mainly that such a state may only be accessible to an individual in a privileged position who is able to distance herself from some of the adverse effects of the “object-like presence.” For the individual who cannot in any way withdraw from the proximity, a traumatic coexistence seems unlikely—the trauma would overwhelm any sense of *co*-existence, and it would become more of a traumatic possession of the individual by the environment. I’ll return to the topic of trauma and its relation to the sublime below, but for now, suffice to say that the earth’s rebuttal of Ellen’s attempts to appropriate it for solace *approaches* a sense of trauma, which then quickly converts into the knowledge of her own mortality. She comes to a realization of the distinctiveness of objects, particularly her own material being in connection to the world around her. The realization is centered on the most intimate point of contact, the point of greatest proximity that can be attained between Ellen and her environment, that is her breath. That point of contact, from the position of the subject, will be obliterated into “nothingness” (35), while the contact point, the world, will continue to exist. The previous connections she had made with her environment, which had seemed to her to suggest some permanence, have been severed, and at the moment seem irreparably damaged.

Roberts presents Ellen’s awareness of her subjectivity during this experience (“you are not there, you Ellen”) as the result of what Morton calls “an abnegation of the melancholic object” (n.p). The melancholic object is Ellen’s realization of the earth’s permanence in contrast to her own mortality. During her meditation of the loss of proximity, intimacy, and reciprocity between herself and the earth, she continually

reverts to language, grasping at it in an attempt to assert her subjectivity by restating her name. She is discovering that subjectivity provides no recourse or comfort when faced with the rift between her own being and the being of the earth upon which she lives. Her attempts to deny the melancholic abject by restating her name leads to her confrontation with the difference between language and actual being. The abstract grief for her lost brother (someone “heard about”) is made concrete by the melancholic moment when she discovers her own mortality. This realization of the limits of language and subjectivity are crucial steps toward a more mature sensitivity and relationship with her environment—steps toward an ecopoetics.

It is well documented that Roberts long struggled with the philosophy of George Berkeley,¹³ and in the opening pages of the novel, the young Ellen often demonstrates a proclivity toward philosophical idealism: at one point she states that “the world’s little and you just set still in it and that’s all there is. [...] There’s just a little edge of wheat field and a little edge of blacksmith shop with nails on the ground, and there’s a road a-goen off a little piece” (11). The only things that exist for Ellen are the objects immediately discernible to her senses and her mind. It is telling that in this example the things that Roberts registers as imprinting themselves on Ellen’s mind vis-à-vis idealism are the elemental processes and objects of modern, civilized life. The wheat field, the blacksmith shop, and the road represent agriculture, technology, and transportation; they prefigure monoculture factory farming, industrialization, and rootlessness, three aspects of modern society that were being firmly established by the time Roberts was writing her

¹³ For example, see Lewis P. Simpson “The Sexuality of History” (786), or for that matter, Roberts’s novel *The Great Meadow*.

novel. In their own ways, they each exploit the earth for society's ends, just as Ellen attempted to exploit the earth for her own end of psychological comfort.

As Roberts presents these things through Ellen's subjectivity, they are not things in themselves, nor are they standoffish; they are portrayed as elements of Ellen's perception, and more specifically, they are reflections she rehearses for the story she would tell her departed friend. Viewing the objects from the slightly detached perspective of the distanced narrator and reader, Roberts is presenting them as standing ready for the utility of human society, what Heidegger calls *bestand*, or "standing reserve," in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology." Heidegger uses the term in regards to a river that has been dammed and has thus lost its essence of being a river. It becomes simple raw material to turn the turbines in a power plant, to create power to be ready to be used for any other purpose, with little if any reference to the (lost) river. Heidegger also employs the example of a wheat field, that at first he contrasts to land that is being mined for coal, but then he also demonstrates how the field can become standing reserve when it is viewed as a simple commodity and is "set upon" by the "mechanized food industry" that mines it for nutrients (320-22). In Heidegger's formulation, the field and the soil itself become just more objects to be technologized as standing reserve for profit. Roberts portrays the objects of Ellen's perception as standing reserve, there only for the subject to view and to use when they are needed, either to repair a broken wagon, provide work, provide a means for escape, or to provide material for language and storytelling.

Roberts is writing just at the beginning of the development of factory farming, which evolved from the older practice of cash-cropping, and she is writing about a time and place before mechanization really developed at all. But she is writing about models of environmental relationships that prefigured factory farming. She presents the wheat field as standing reserve for the farmer who owns the land. Although the family may make use of some of the wheat for flour, its real value for the farmer in the burgeoning New South is that it can be brought to market and turned to liquid capital to purchase material possessions, such as Sunday clothes, a horse, a new buggy, “long gloves” for his daughter that she can wear to church, Bibles for the whole family, a screen door, and some bright new yellow paint for the house (17-24). Ellen and her father and the other hired hands “set upon” the land to “challenge the soil of the field” for a few dollars a day furnished by the farmer (Heidegger 320). Their hard work and meager pay does little to help them advance, and offers them few choices except to continue to work hard and scrimp and save with the hope of one day owning their own piece of land where they can dictate how the land is treated and turn its products into cash. Since they are already implicated in an economic system that views the land as a commodity, chances are they too will “challenge the soil of the field” to increase their profit and comfort.

Heidegger’s sense of *Bestand* can be extended to the other objects of Ellen’s story, the blacksmith shop and the road, although in this case they function as a sort of psychic standing reserve derived from a Cartesian dualism. Ellen’s observation of the wheat field, blacksmith, and road may seem to suggest an indulgence, on Roberts’s behalf, for a nostalgic idealization of a pre-modern Kentucky countryside. But as I

suggested above, Roberts occasionally opens a narrative distance from Ellen's thoughts. Ellen's observations of the objects in her environment are doubly removed from the narrative voice: they appear within single quotation marks inside of double quotation marks; they come as comments she makes to herself that are part of the longer story she is rehearsing. The reader is invited to stand back, question Ellen's imaginative story, and see it as the fantastical musings of an immature young girl. In her story, the wheat field, the blacksmith shop, and the road are transformed from their material reality into imagined objects within an imagined narrative. In passages such as this one that seem to evoke a sense of nostalgia, Roberts is actually evoking the Cartesian split between the *res cogitas* and the *res extensa* through a form of philosophical idealism. The Cartesian split continues to arise, albeit with less frequency as the novel progresses, suggesting that the split is so ingrained in the modern psyche, or at least in Roberts's conception, that it is not easy to overcome. During the first few months Ellen spends on the farm before her realization of mortality, she mostly attempts to gain an idealistic possession of the place where she is staying through an accumulation of knowledge gained through her thought and senses. The objects she observes in her immediate environment become objects of her mind—they matter not for their own reality, but only so far as they comprise her thoughts, increase her subjectivity over and above the objects, and provide material for the story she will tell. They are mere imaginative "standing reserve" that Ellen psychologically "sets upon" to incorporate into her story. The objects lose their meaning and independent reality, and Ellen stands outside her environment. Roberts demonstrates quite clearly how language, and even the drive to tell stories, can stand in

the way of proximity and de-value the objects in the environment, even when the storyteller may think she is in tune with her surroundings.

This creates an interesting paradox for the author telling the story. Roberts employs some irony at Ellen's expense, but Roberts also clearly loves her character, loves the countryside, values a proximate and reciprocal relationship with the environment, and believes in the capacity of narrative to communicate these values and affect her readers. Yet she also understands that language is perhaps the fundamental barrier between humans and the environment. Jonathan Bate argues in *The Song of the Earth* that "writing is the archetypal place of severance – of alienation – from immediate situatedness" and asks how then "can it speak to the condition of ecological belonging?" (251). His initial, cryptic answer is that "Poetry is the song of the earth," and he attempts to clear up this mystification with a long discussion of Heidegger's philosophy that closes his book. He explains that the "distinctive feature of the human mode of being is that we are language-animals. For Heidegger, language is the house of being; it is through language that unconcealment takes place for human beings. By disclosing the being of entities in language, the poet lets them be" (258), rather than employing them in a simply instrumental capacity. When the reader allows poetry to act upon him or her "it seems able to conjure up conditions such as dwelling and alienation *in their very essence*, not just in their linguistic particulars" (260). The objects of Ellen's world are slowly revealed to her, and by extension to the reader, through her exploration, observation, and identification of their particularity. At first they are revealed through Ellen's sense of a growing identity at the expense of idealizing the surrounding

landscape, but by degrees, the ecopoetics of the author are transferred to the character, and hence as the objects of the world become unconcealed for Ellen, they are likewise made unconcealed to the reader. The reader may come to understand a sense of dwelling by following along as Roberts unfolds Ellen's development of her own sense of dwelling.

But at this point in Ellen's immature development, her observation of the objects around her mostly function to increase her subjectivity, drawing her back toward a Cartesian dualism. It is a slippery slope between Heidegger's phenomenology and Cartesian dualism or subjective idealism. For example, Ellen finds a little nook in the chimney of her cabin, and declares that such a "cubbyhole is good to put away in" (12), suggesting again a sense of a standing reserve, something that is not significant in its own essence, but significant only as far as its possible utility. As Ellen remarks at another point in the narrative, she has neither "Things to put in drawers" nor "drawers to put things in" (47), rendering her perception of the essence of the "cubby-hole" a moot point, but more importantly demonstrating that Ellen feels she needs to possess things in order to be fully human. The longer she stays on the new farm, the more the objects of the environment are imprinted onto her mind and identity. Her identity slowly grows as she discovers, names, and psychologically masters the objects she encounters in widening radii with her small bedroom and cabin (Heidegger's cabin?) at the center. There are occasional exceptions, where the objects she perceives lie frustratingly beyond her power to master them, such as the landowner's house, a place well beyond her domain as the daughter of the poor hired-hand, suggesting the impending environmental

justice aspects of the novel that I will return to below. But early in the novel, before Roberts forces Ellen into a confrontation with her social standing, even these objects' inaccessibility fades when she distances herself and miniaturizes them through perspective and perception, rendering the farmer's house as just another idealized part of the greater landscape, not the locus of power on the farm. Those inaccessible parts of the environment are translated into aspects of the picturesque scene Ellen views from a distance.

The miniaturization of her environment allows Ellen to grasp and seemingly master the objects around her. In his analysis of John Clare's poetry, Bate quotes the philosopher Gaston Bachelard: "The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I possess it." Before Ellen can come into a full understanding and appreciation of what Heidegger calls an object's "self-concealment," or what Morton calls an object's "withdrawn strangeness," she must master the particularity and specificity of the objects in her environment, even if at first they are discovered and mastered in such a way as to suggest a Cartesian ontology or some form of idealism, or at the very least an anthropocentrism. Bate is troubled by Bachelard's use of the words "clever" and "possess" for their implication of a Cartesian perspective, and he rephrases the statement as "the more attuned I am as I miniaturize the world, the better I dwell upon the earth" (161). Bate's hesitancy is well warranted. At this point in Ellen's development, the objects around her have little reality outside her subjective perception and use of them. They are parts of a story she will tell, they provide her with comfort and nourishment, or they are rendered into small aspects of a larger picturesque scene, which Bate rightly

criticizes as “just as utilitarian” as the “Enlightenment man, who regards nature as something that must be tamed, ordered and made serviceable to the community” (132, 131). Yet Bachelard argues that by possessing the world through such miniaturization, the value of it is “condensed and enriched” (Bachelard 150). The identification of the particular objects, as well as Ellen’s efforts to incorporate them in her subjectivity, help move her toward an understanding of her own being among beings and eventually to a comprehension of the withdrawn strangeness of the objects of her environment. There is a big difference between walking through a forest of trees, and walking in a cove of Tuliptree, White Basswood, Yellow Buckeye, Eastern Redbud, and Flowering Dogwood, not to mention the Azaleas, Rhododendron, Ginseng, Hooded warblers, Worm-eating Warblers, etc, that make up a functioning Appalachian Cove forest (Kricher 24-25). Being able to distinguish between and name particular objects can open a door into a better understanding of each objects’ particularity, its withdrawn strangeness, both in regard to other families of objects—distinguishing a Redbud from a Dogwood—and more importantly, in regard to the particularity of each individual object within the same family—distinguishing the unique particularity of each and every Redbud and Dogwood.

Bate’s rephrasing of Bachelard’s concept still admits some troubling aspects, though. The subject remains the center of his ontology, capable of manipulating the world around him, and reliant on the ability to control the environment, or at the very least enjoy some sense of permanence in the locality—an impossibility in the ever-changing world of nature and culture. Even if the miniaturized world remains an ever-

fixed mark, the idea—or the *ideal*—does not necessarily bend with the remover to the removed, as Bate so amply demonstrates with John Clare's fall into depression when he was forced to move "some three miles away" from his home turf. Bate remarks that "to us the distance seems small, but for Clare – the miniaturist, the inhabiter of locality – removal to Northborough meant exile from all that he knew and all in which he felt secure" (162). While Clare's attunement and commitment to his native place is admirable for its sensitivity and devotion to the environment, Bate's arguments concerning him suggest the tenacity of a Cartesian dialectic: "I'm here, the world is over there." Bate's analysis suggests that the twain shall never meet, except perhaps in the mind of the observer, particularly if the place attachment is so rigid that it allows for no flexibility and is bound to the minutiae of a single locale. The distance between subject and object is impossible to overcome if the principle of place attachment is governed by a Cartesian split or some form of idealism.

While Roberts demonstrates Ellen's growing subjectivity through her physical and psychological mastery of the objects in her environment, she also carefully reveals how Ellen begins to move beyond a Cartesian dualism and toward a sense of her coexistence with her environment. Roberts depicts Ellen lying on the ground in a number of scenes in the novel to demonstrate her yearning for proximity to the earth and her environment. In one particular scene that occurs before Ellen's failure to extract solace from the earth, she is pictured lying on the grass resting after a nine-hour day of helping the hired hands plant tobacco. She looks "at the clover narrowly, minutely, trying to see it as ants see, as birds" (25). The value of miniaturization is apparent as

Ellen enacts a self-miniaturization, literally increasing her proximity to her environment while attempting to see it as closely as ants and birds see it. There is a compounded miniaturization here: Ellen miniaturizes the clover by attempting to imagine it through the miniaturized perspective of ants and birds. She miniaturizes her perspective as a method to miniaturize her environment, and enters into a greater intimacy with the objects of her environment, with the ants, the birds, and the clover, while slowly gaining an understanding of each object's particularity—the marching ant and the flitting bird see the clover in vastly different ways.

Through the development of Ellen's character, Roberts insists that as humans we have no choice but to approach the world through our own subjectivity, but how we use our imaginative capacities makes all the difference in how we respond to our environment. While miniaturizing the world around her, Ellen enacts and increases her sense of wonder and curiosity, which leads her to contemplate various perspectives and positions in regards to environmental relationships. In a sense, this too is ecopoetics, an ecopoetics that attempts to reach beyond the confines of language to make an experience of the world that is not limited by individual subjectivity. Roberts suggests that Ellen is not merely trying to master this minute aspect of her environment in order to increase her subjectivity, but to experience it through subjectivity other than her own. She imagines ways of being in the world beyond her own limits of language and subjectivity, and hence begins to open to the possibility of coexistence.

Roberts is aware that such moments of intense proximity are fleeting, which she demonstrates when Ellen is quickly distracted by the sound of her father singing as he

mowed a near-by field with a “clinking instrument” (25). The world of culture and technology intrudes, and the joy at the sound of her father’s improvised song leads her back into the realm of language. She returns to the composition of the imagined story she will tell her friend. Roberts presents Ellen as still in-tune with her environment, but now from a greater remove. After rehearsing more of the story, she lazily moves around the farm and then the cabin with an air of idle, romantic pleasure, “ready for something more and passive for the next happening” (26). Although the sexual undertones are missing, Roberts paints Ellen in a similar light as Hurston paints Janie during her pear tree experience. Ellen is absorbed in a dreamy, pleasurable proximity to her environment that Roberts indicates is easy to maintain when all is going well. The pleasing fragrance of freshly cut grass, the joyful sounds of a lark and her father singing, and the “chimney birds [...] darting about the cabin ridge” all betoken Ellen’s naive attunement with her surroundings that she is comfortable indulging because she still believes they will be moving on from this unfamiliar place. The hard work of commitment to the particular place is not an obstacle she has to overcome. Her disillusionment begins to take effect when her reverie is interrupted again, this time by the voices of the farmer and her father negotiating a longer stay on the farm, crushing Ellen’s hopes of ever catching up to her friend Tessie. But it is not until she experiences the traumatic proximity of the earth, the scene of mourning and the earth’s rejection of her with which I began this section, that she is forced to truly consider the limits of her subjectivity and move toward a more nuanced understanding of her being in relation to the world around her.

This brings me back to Morton and his conception of an “object oriented ontology” where he argues that melancholy can lead to a “traumatic coexistence [...] that respects the withdrawn strangeness of objects while simultaneously [...] not discriminating against them in any way [and] allowing for their uncompromising unicity” (“Melancholy Objects”). As I have argued above, Roberts suggests that an individual must go through a state of being similar to Morton’s conception of melancholy, where the imprint of another entity is experienced as a kind of trauma. But Morton’s arguments here present a couple of problems. For one, although Morton does not welcome global warming or the dispersal of uranium in the atmosphere, he does include them in his “uncompromising unicity” in an effort to move away from the traditional, nature-centered environmentalism that can be dismissed as romantic nostalgia for a past that never existed—for example the type of pastoral or nature writing that simply idealizes the natural world. Yet Morton’s insistence on “not discriminating” against any object is troubling, and I am puzzled as to how his stance can help improve our ecological condition. It seems it could lead to a kind of relativism, passivity, resignation, or defeatism in the face of catastrophic environmental changes. It seems good and proper to want to discriminate against global warming, plutonium, Styrofoam, and the singularity movement, among other “hyper objects,” as futile as that discrimination might be. Perhaps the lack of discrimination is what causes Morton’s “traumatic coexistence,” which leads to the second problem with Morton’s arguments here.

As much as Roberts may insist that for an individual to develop a truly sensitive and reciprocal relationship with her environment she must go through a state of melancholy brought about by a recognition of an object's withdrawn strangeness, she does not leave it there. As I discussed in the previous chapter, trauma arises from a particular moment, and leaves a lasting impression on an individual's psyche, but Roberts suggests that does not necessitate a perpetual state of damage, as Morton seems to argue. Trauma implies an enduring injury to the psyche, a wound that remains unhealed. It implies *dis*-order, *dis*-location, pain, shock, and anguish that is permanent. But that is not the case with Ellen. Immediately after Ellen confronts her mortality in the passage quoted above, Roberts depicts Ellen's response as one that welcomes her newly discovered relationship with her environment. It is a passage worth quoting at length:

She rose to a sitting position with a cry and sat looking out upon the thorn tree and the hot wilted weeds of the lane where insects clicked as they passed about. This was the world and she was in it, glad with a great rush of passion. Her hand reached out and touched a plantain leaf and her eyes recognized the dog-fennel and the wire fence beyond the dust of the road. She was still there and everything was secure, her body rising tall above the narrowdock and the dandelions. The sky came down behind the locust trees, in place, and everything was real, reaching up and outward, blue where it should be blue, gray haze, heat rising out of the dust, limp dock leaves falling away toward the dusty grass. She walked back to the cabin,

moving slowly to feel the security of the path, touching a tree with her fingers, trailing her hand along the stone of the doorstep.

The farm was beautiful and secure, running up over a hill and lapping into a ravine, spreading flat over the lower pasture. It was there, in place, reaching about into hollows and over uplands, theirs to live in and to know and to work. The locust tree beside the woodpile and the tall bushes along the creek, as they always were. (35)

A casual reading of this passage may suggest that Roberts is indulging in nostalgia and simple pastoral. However, the continued presence of the thorn tree, the wilted grass and leaves, and a landscape covered in dust, as well as the commitment to live in, to learn, and to work in this land of diverse troubles and joys suggests this is more than simple pastoral. A more generous reading of this passage might interpret it as a sublime coexistence rather than a “traumatic coexistence,” since, as Paul Outka argues, the sublime is in many ways the obverse of trauma. But this too falls short because the sublime, just as a “traumatic coexistence,” suggests a privileged position where the subject is able to dally and then withdraw at will from the moment of overwhelming proximity. Ellen may seem to be dallying here, but as I show below, she actually has little power over the degree of proximity and distance she has to her environment. The sublime also requires an individual’s reflection on the moment of awe after it has passed and she has moved to a relative position of safety. Ellen does not remove herself from the proximity and engage in such an idealistic reflection, but rather attempts to dwell in the proximity and accept the objects around her “as they always were.” Finally, the

sublime suggests a sense of the individual “standing above” the scene. Ellen does stand *above* the narrowdock and the dandelions (perhaps a moment of discrimination), but she is also standing *below* the sky and locust trees, and *within* an ever-expanding expanse of farm, hill, ravine, pasture, hollows, and uplands. Furthermore, she is not detached from the environment. It does not *surround* her, but rather she is very much *inside* of it, moving among the objects and touching them where they meet her, each on their own terms. If this is not simple pastoral, or “traumatic coexistence,” or even sublime coexistence, what then is it?

It may just be simple coexistence, without qualification. Trauma or sublime may induce such a moment, but it does not necessarily carry through the moment. Another German-speaking Martin—Martin Buber—may have expressed this kind of relationship most perceptively, although perhaps not as eloquently when translated into English, as an “I and Thou” coexistence. In an I-and-Thou relationship where “relation is reciprocity,” a participatory engagement between subjects ensues (Buber 58). Bate argues that “Where the subject/object relationship is one of power, the I/Thou is one of love. Bond and tie replace mastery and possession” (112). An “I-and-Thou” relationship is not Cartesian and it does not imply a form of idealism. Subjectivity and identity are a crucial part of Roberts’s formulation of a reciprocal relationship with the environment. But here subjectivity has come to acknowledge itself as an object on equal footing with other objects in their complete uniqueness, their withdrawn strangeness, and their concealment, and thus recognizes them not only as objects, but as other subjects as well. As Ellen sits up under the thorn tree and moves within her environment, she has come to

a sense of owning and belonging to it. She owns it in that that she knows it and feels secure within it—despite its less than pleasing qualities and its withdrawn strangeness. She belongs to it in the sense that she is a participant entity enmeshed between and among the dog-fennel below and the blue sky above. Roberts again recognizes that except for a tiny minority of humans who have ever lived, such a mystical experience is fleeting and impossible to maintain. Furthermore, it taxes language and renders communication unintelligible or irrelevant. I would argue that some awareness of a mystic vision of existence is vital to living a fulfilled and engaged life that treads softly on the earth,¹⁴ but the monk still has to come down off the mountain and enter the market place, or in this case work in the fields. This is especially true for the fourteen-year-old daughter of a hired hand who is living in a small cabin on the farmer's land.

Ecopoetics of the Poor

Environmentalism of the poor, or the environmental justice movement, tends to focus on the environmental inequities thrust upon racial or social groups, typically by governments and businesses that, along with a minority of humans located predominantly in the global North, reap all the benefits with little if any concern for the adverse effects inflicted on the disadvantaged groups. Roberts's novel *The Time of Man* presents a difficult case for examining the environmentalism of the poor because of its concentration on an individual (white female) rather than a racial minority or social

¹⁴ I would not say it necessarily has to be religious; it could even be a moral understanding of interconnectedness coupled with sense of humility in the face of the powers or principles that govern the universe—without subscribing to a particular religious dogma.

group, its lack of a organizational entity (such as a corporation or corrupt government) that is responsible for the adverse conditions to which the main character is subjected, and the fact that Roberts was “profoundly uninterested in cultural politics” (Gray, *Southern Aberrations* 175). Faceless, multinational corporations hardly existed when Roberts composed her narrative, and pollutants such as plutonium, mercury, the various dioxins, and carbon dioxide, among others, were hardly on anyone’s radar screen, if indeed they were known to exist or existed at all. The age of the super hydroelectric dam, factory farming, the chemical industry, and mountaintop removal mining was in its infancy, with some sectors having not even been conceived yet.

The same holds true for much of the traditional canon of environmental literature and nature writing. It is difficult to address the concerns of environmental justice when one is investigating environmental relationships through the work of a hermit living near a pond for two years in New England, or another quasi-ascetic traipsing across the high country out west and climbing trees in the midst of an alpine gale. This might help to explain why environmental justice was slow to emerge as a subset field of ecocriticism, and why environmental justice scholars tend to reexamine works that are more contemporary and geographically diverse. While some recent scholarship has attempted to use the lense of environmental justice to examine those canonical nature-writing texts, much more can and needs to be done. Roberts’s novel not only lies outside the typical domain of the environmental justice criticism, it also largely resides outside the typical domain of ecocriticism more broadly, for some of the same reasons—it focuses on the life of a poor young white girl growing into womanhood in a farming culture on the

border of the blue grass and knob country in Kentucky. Nevertheless, the novel can help bridge the divide between environmental justice criticism and the more traditional ecocriticism.

In the previous section, I demonstrated how Roberts conveys the development of an ontology that views nature, and more broadly the environment, as sacred, where an individual is not merely in-tune with, and surrounded by, an environment, but is thoroughly enmeshed in a participatory, reciprocal relationship that recognizes the value of each particular aspect of a given environment. In this section, I will show how class injustices, initiated and enacted during a brief encounter between two individuals, coupled with a general disregard for the sacred bonds with the environment (bonds that have no value in a material capitalist system), can damage relationships with the land so thoroughly as to render them obsolete. Roberts's novel demonstrates how all sense of the word "relationship"—a connection or a bond—can be shattered on both sides of the social equation when exclusionary practices based on ownership, or more accurately possession, come into the calculations of land, rights, and power. The exclusionary practices of possession destroy any sense of a relationship with the environment for both the enfranchised and disenfranchised leading to a cycle of oppression—of both land and people—that seems to have no end. Roberts demonstrates how forced proximity, distancing mechanisms, and distancing responses can feed off each other in a cycle that has helped lead to our current ecological catastrophe. I speak not only of the catastrophe of pollution, global warming, so-called "natural" disasters, and the like, but also the catastrophe of the foundational belief that leads to those disasters: the false view that

some humans can indeed reside at a safe distance from the environment—be it a geographical, temporal, social, chemical, or technological distance—especially if that distance rests on the necessity of other’s proximity to the less desirable aspects of the environment.

I return to the moment in the novel when Ellen is still very much enmeshed in an I-and-Thou relationship with her environment. Roberts employs tactile and auditory imagery to convey Ellen’s sense of her being in the world: “she was there, there yet, her body walking through the pasture with a tin bucket swinging and making a high thin brushing noise as it touched her moving skirt” (35- 36). The objective narrative point of view reinforces an ontology of a subject/object enmeshed in her/its surroundings. Roberts attempts to bridge a number of distances (between writer and character, character and setting, character and reader, and reader and writer), as well as to suggest the continuing and timeless nature of the experience, with her use of the present participle and the emphasis of “there yet.” In this state, Ellen wanders away from her cabin up a hill side and begins “to gather the hot blackberries from the briars of the wasted hill pasture” (36). The briars and the “wasted” pasture suggest Ellen’s sense of the area as estranged from the working farm—the arena of commerce and power structures where her heightened state and deep connection to the environment hold little if any value. The tangled brush at the edge of the hill pasture is certainly not “wasted” on Ellen, knowing, as she does, that she can find berries there. It is only “wasted” from the point of view of economic efficiency that considers land not in immediate use as a “waste.”

While picking berries, Ellen sees the farmer's colt walking toward her, only there is no possessive attached to the horse: Roberts describes it simply as "the brown colt," complete unto itself. They meet as two free, independent beings, and they play together for a while in the pasture. In a moment of free indirect discourse, a technique Roberts often employs to overcome narrative distance she presents elsewhere and to signal a moment of ecopoetics, Ellen observes that "the hillside was clear to see and to have, hers, and who cared if there was an end. Let it look out for itself" (36). The sense of ownership and belonging affirms Ellen's denial of the death drive and allows her to dwell, momentarily at least, in an eternal present. In *Southern Aberrations*, Richard Gray casts such moments in *The Time of Man* as a form of "escape and recovery"—escape from the drudgery and poverty Ellen faces, and recovery in the sense of a subjective victory over her circumstance through a continued hope for a better life (176). Gray notes all the "harsh details" of Ellen's existence that Roberts amply portrays in the novel: "The cabins she lives in are ramshackle; the land she cultivates is barren; and the work she has to do, every day, has little enough to do with [...] pastoral dreams" (178). However, the passages where Roberts details the ramshackle cabins and hard work often parallel passages such as the one under discussion. In both, Ellen interacts with her environment with great sensitivity, and Roberts infuses both with a tone of wonder and exploration; there is little sense of a desire to escape, but rather a movement toward a complete understanding of proximity. True, Ellen wants to escape the violence and injustice that surrounds her, but she has no desire to escape the environment writ large. Roberts may in fact err too much on the side of Morton's "uncompromising unicity"

without discrimination—such as when Ellen examines the detritus left by previous tenants that is imbedded into the dirt around her cabin (42-3). Quite understandably, there are instances when Ellen expresses a desire for a more comfortable material existence, but since they lack the implications of a desire to escape, there is no real “recovery” either. It is all just part and parcel of Ellen’s environmental entanglement. She cannot desire to recover what is not lost. In Ellen’s experience of a timeless moment, everything is “secure” and “in place;” she is a part of the world, and happy for it. The colt, the pasture, and the berries are hers, just as much as the ramshackle cabins, in that they all belong in the environment, along with her, as distinct entities. At the very least, they are “hers” in the sense of usufruct, in both a spiritual and material understanding of the term. Overall, a desire for escape is not associated with Ellen’s interactions with her environment; it only arises when Ellen is confronted with social exclusion and the powers of property rights.

Roberts introduces Ellen’s more active engagement with her environment—playing with the horse and picking berries—in order to build upon her more passive interaction earlier in the scene and to increase the affect of the subsequent denial of interaction. Ellen continues to pick berries until “a sharp voice cut through the heat, coming from the path that lay through the high bushes. It was the voice of the farmer’s wife” (36). The scolding voice, at first disembodied, cuts through the same heat that helped initiate Ellen into her existential crisis and subsequent enmeshment with her environment, thus beginning to sever the connection. The voice becomes embodied through Ellen’s recognition of its relationship to the power structure of the farm—that is,

it belongs to the farmer's wife. She demands of Ellen, "What you want in here?," and tells her "Nobody said you could have them berries. I need every one for myself." Roberts registers Ellen's response as a psycho-physical dissociation from her environment: "Ellen felt herself to be hanging in the air, cut off from the ground." The very structure of the sentence indicates how Ellen's previous passivity can be easily transformed into a feeling of complete powerlessness when she is threatened with the authority of legal ownership and exclusion. Roberts writes that a "fear of dogs and men came into her terror, and she felt as if her shoulders were tied to a post or a tree, lifted high." The presence and disapproval of the farmer's wife is so strong, that Ellen feels it pushing "against her body" and it fills "her mouth with a bitter taste. Little pricking needles stuck in and out of the skin of her face" (37). The verbal confrontation amounts to an act of violence against Ellen's psyche. The sensitivity to her environment which had provided her with a deeper understanding of reciprocity now tragically functions to alienate and terrify her.

The physical sensation of detachment draws attention to the material aspects of Ellen's connection to her environment. Where Ellen had previously experienced the world as an object among objects, she is now self-consciously drawn into a comparative mindset of power and class, where materiality acts as a repellent, not as a gateway, to a deeper understanding of the particularity of objects. Roberts expresses the recognition of the disparity in class structure through Ellen's perception and comparison of her own clothes ("greenish drab, faded and limp and old") and the clothes worn by the farmer's wife ("a crisp dress, the waist and skirt alike, both blue, both starched, both washed at

the same time”). This type of materialism was not a factor when Ellen was peacefully embedded in her environment. Later, after Ellen has slunk away from the farmer’s wife, and has time to reflect on the confrontation, she insists that she has “no lice on” her, even though lice had never been mentioned. Roberts writes that “the farmer’s wife had made her feel lice crawling.” Ellen thinks of the farmer’s wife “A-goen off in her buggy and a-comen back with big bundles” and begins to inspect the “inner seams of her garments” for lice. The confrontation distracts Ellen from her bond with the natural world and results in a shift of attention to comparisons of relative material and physical comfort. It affects her so deeply that she imagines the lice, a psychosomatic sign of her inward shame, and associates her proximity to nature with discomfort, and filth, something repellent, something to be shunned.

Young and timid as she is, Ellen does sense the injustice of the rebuke, and gathers enough courage to respond to the farmer’s wife and defend herself. Martinez-Alier argues in his book *Environmentalism of the Poor* that “Poor people have a better chance of defending their interests in a non-economic terrain” (viii). Ellen might defend her “claim” to the pasture and berries with appeals to her experience of the land as sacred and owned by all, human and non-human alike, but she understands, at least implicitly, what Martinez-Alier calls the “incommensurability of values” (3), and that appeals based on a sacred bond with nature will not suffice. Martinez-Alier’s book concentrates on offering new methods of taking “nature into account,” primarily through physical and social appeals, such as “livelihood interests” (vii-viii) and “the relation between ecological distribution conflicts, sustainability and valuation,” that make up

“ecological economics” (21-23). He also claims to take “the sacredness of Nature (or parts of Nature) [...] in earnest [...] because of its reality in some cultures and because it helps to clarify one central issue for ecological economics, namely *the incommensurability of values*” (2-3). But there remains a certain degree of condescension in Martinez-Alier’s formulation of nature as sacred, and in his book such claims are rarely mentioned and only as a less effective appendage to physical and social (non-religious) claims. His suggestion that “the sacredness of nature” is a reality in *some* cultures, implies not only a relativistic standpoint, but suggests a degree of distance from those cultures. His support for sacred bonds with the environment is further eroded when he blithely surmises that “there is always the possibility of inventing new religions,” to appeal to those in the global North who do not subscribe to the sacredness of nature, and/or to replace the perceived ineffectiveness of appealing to traditional Western (Northern?) religions to help combat environmental degradation and injustice. In Martinez-Alier’s formulation, religious sensibility is reduced to another form of instrumentality rather than an honest belief in an other-than-material existence.

Although Roberts injects an underlying Judeo-Christian context to Ellen’s relationship with nature, it is not the primary force in Ellen’s entanglement with her environment. Furthermore, Ellen and the farmer’s wife are not equipped to debate the theological arguments for or against a vision of human and other-than-human bonds that may transcend legal property rights. Ellen does understand that her sacred connection with the environment has no value and holds no authority in the world of “men and dogs.” She also has no claim to economic compensation—one avenue that Martinez-

Alier explores and finds, by-in-large, wanting—because she lives within an economic and social system that does not afford her with rights to the products of nature unless she legally owns the land where those products are generated. She finds her only recourse in an attempt to assimilate into the world of “men and dogs” and employs an appeal based on its hierarchy that places men at the top of the power structure. Ellen explains that “Mr. Bodine told Pappy we could...”, but Mrs. Bodine cuts her off: “Well maybe he did, but he’s got no call to be a-tellen any such. I need every berry I got to make my own jam. I need every last one for my own self. Don’t come up this way a-picken any more. You keep down along the branch nohow. I got no berries or anything else to spare” (36-37). Roberts presents an “ecological distribution conflict” when Mrs. Bodine invokes her own appeal to “livelihood interests.” Material values and future comfort trumps any sacred bonds that Ellen established. The fact that Mrs. Bodine refuses to provide Ellen with “anything” suggests it is not just the berry-picking which troubles her, but Ellen’s entire existence on her farm. With her expulsion from the pasture, Ellen’s intimate moment with the earth has marginalized. Time-bound, legal ownership, and the power it entails, has intruded on her mystic eternal, and geographic freedom is circumscribed to an area of the farm Mrs. Bodine views as truly wasteland, i.e. the small “wilderness” along the creek where nothing of much use to her grows.

This “ecological distribution conflict” is based on Mrs. Bodine’s disdain for the poor hired hands living on the farm; she has nothing to spare for them, and they must make do with their meager wages and the leftover rags they have accumulated along the

way.¹⁵ From Mrs. Bodine's standpoint, if the farm continues to prosper, and Ellen's father works hard and saves his money, the Chessers might someday realize a higher standard of living where they too can share in the economic benefits of property ownership. For the purposes of his book, Martinez-Alier reluctantly and theoretically assents to the doctrine that "*economic* distribution conflicts are eventually pacified by economic growth" but proposes the question "whether *ecological* distribution conflicts are likely to improve with economic growth or, on the contrary, whether economic growth leads to a deterioration in the environment" (17). Mrs. Bodine is hardly contributing to the deterioration of the environment by preventing Ellen from picking berries, although her husband's planting of tobacco as a cash crop does suggest a possibly damaging and instrumental possession of the land. But Roberts does not imply that the Bodines are destroying habitat, over-using the land, or directly harming the environment in any way, at least not by the contemporary standards—Mrs. Bodine is only harming a single individual's relationship with the environment. The scene is admittedly a far stretch from a multi-national corporation despoiling the land of an indigenous culture, or the siting of a toxic waste dump in a predominantly black neighborhood, but that does not diminish its significance as an example of environmental injustice. The scene depicts a moment of disenfranchisement, alienation, and disempowerment that is the subject of environmental justice criticism. The unequal distribution of the benefits of environmental ownership is clear. Ecological distribution

¹⁵ Later in the same scene Roberts explains that Ellen's clothes "had come out of a bundle of rags some people in Marion County had given her mother" (39).

conflicts have their root in personal aversions to others who are perceived to be lower in status.

The affect of the scene is heightened since it functions as an extension of the moment when Ellen became mystically enmeshed with her environment. While she is entangled with the land in this way, it seems only natural that she would operate under the logic of the commons, where the things that grow wild are available to all who work the land. Mrs. Bodine, however, is operating under a system where she can freely insist on her rights and powers to exclude. In legal terms, Mrs. Bodine has every right to kick Ellen off her land. And besides, who would want to prevent a mother and wife from harvesting berries for canning? But Roberts suggests there is an injustice operating within the system of labor and the products of that labor. Ellen's father Henry undertakes most of the work on Hep Bodine's farm, so it is no surprise that the farmer would, in a moment of neglectful beneficence, tell his employee that his daughter can pick some berries to make a pie for her father. Such generosity, however, does not factor into Mrs. Bodine's economy and concern for keeping the family fed through the lean winter months, even though their access to other resources and goods (evidenced by the daughter's nice gloves, the new paint, the big bundles, etc) suggests their plight is not so drastic. Furthermore, Mrs. Bodine wants to "put-by" the berries in what amounts to, if I may, standing *preserves*, whereas Ellen wishes to enjoy the benefit of their use immediately. Despite her father's hard work and Mr. Bodine's generosity, Ellen is relegated to a neglected corner of the farm, forced into a proximity with the "waste" and distanced from the greater environment.

Part of Mrs. Bodine's disdain for the hired hands arises from her view of them as part of a dispensable class of poor whites continuously moving across the landscape, looking for work. Although Henry performs most of the labor, and seems to have input into the way the farm is operated, his position as a hired hand renders him dispensable; there are dozens of other poor whites who could replace him. Ellen is acutely aware of this later when tension arises between her father and Hep Bodine who, as he drops off a basket of seedlings for planting, "spoke little to Henry and not at all to" Ellen before he rode "his large fine horse to the distant plant bed" (64). Roberts explains that Ellen knows "the thought that lay back of his mind. If Henry Chesser left him he could hire" another hand currently working under Henry's tutelage (64). The farmer's dispositions and actions help establish a social distance between himself and the people who live and work on his farm and help provide his livelihood. In this way, the Chessers and other similar poor white families in Kentucky represent a peasant class, perhaps even more so than the black population in Kentucky at the time. The historian James C. Klotter reports that between 1900 and 1920, a time period that overlaps the events in Robert's novel, the black population of Kentucky, unlike the other Southern states, decreased from 13.3 percent to 8.7 percent and continued to decrease thereafter. Moreover, he explains that the "those black Kentuckians who remained lived increasingly in urban areas. In 1900 some 40 percent of the state's black residents resided in cities" (37). This left the bulk of rural, agricultural work to white Kentuckians—primarily hired hands, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers—in other words, the Kentucky peasantry like Ellen and her family.

The poor whites of Kentucky in this era differ from the original definitions of peasants in that they were not legally bound to the land and they technically had the freedom of geographic and social mobility. Indeed, Roberts amply portrays the migrant, or perhaps shiftless, nature of Ellen's family, largely at the hands of the men—first her father, then her husband—who continuously uproot the family, often due to conflicts with landowners. But the economics of agricultural work in Kentucky at the turn of the century all but bound the poor whites to the land nevertheless. If a family was lucky enough to find an opportunity to share-crop or rent a piece of land, then debt peonage aggressively functioned to keep the family bound to the land in a system somewhat parallel to the Old World laws governing the peasantry. They could only buy their freedom by paying off their debt, but since debt was so often rolled over from season to season, it was nearly impossible to climb out of the hole. The dream of someday owning a piece of property—in all likelihood a small rugged patch of ground—is always tantalizing just on the horizon. Indeed, the novel ends with Ellen and her family moving on in the night still hoping to settle down someday on land that they own; but like so many other poor whites in that region, just like the poor blacks in other southern regions, the land continues to own them.

Today, what can be called the white peasantry of the South, the great-grandchildren of individuals like Ellen Chesser, has by and large moved away from agricultural work—replaced mostly by Hispanic migrant workers—and into insecure positions in the service industry, or perhaps even worse for its damage to health, the mining industry. At least two recent portrayals of the South, the television series

Justified and Daniel Woodrell's novel *Winter's Bone*, present the widespread damaging effects of yet another option: the methamphetamine business, a business that does promise some wealth and power to those who control it, but only disperses suffering and death across the landscape. For those who try to get by with menial jobs, long hours for meager pay without benefits or security, and mounting debt—due to rising health care costs, easy credit, over-consumption, and shady mortgage practices—still often obstruct socio-economic mobility, not to mention a close, reciprocal relationship with the environment. Therefore, it is puzzling that Martinez-Alier insists that “the USA lacks a peasantry,” a claim he reiterates at least three times in the space of two paragraphs (178-179). In a technical sense, he is correct; the southern, and American, peasantry is not bound to the soil as a serf was in medieval Europe. But in actually he couldn't be more wrong.

Martinez-Alier's definition of peasantry seems to rely on the existence of a “powerful movement of landless labourers” (178). In other words, since the US lacks a landless, organized group which acknowledges a shared identity and protests environmental injustices in unison, that must mean it lacks a peasantry. He obliquely accepts the Hispanic migrant population and American Indians as a quasi-peasantry, and in a move which works to further departmentalize and fragment disciplines, he consigns environmental justice with its American focus on “race relations” to environmental sociology rather than “environmental ethics or philosophy” (168). This compartmentalizing of social and racial groups, as well as disciplines, seems counter-productive to the work Martinez-Alier accomplishes elsewhere in his book and

reinforces the bifurcation of race that slavery, the Civil War, and the machinations of the planter class, established between poor whites and African Americans. If the poor-white peasantry lacks the standing of a “powerful movement,” it is all the more reason that environmentalists and ecocritics should address the causes of this lack, help expose the injustices, and promote environmentally and socially beneficial attitudes and actions, something that Martinez-Alier succeeds in doing by and large, despite his occasional missteps.

Roberts’s novel exposes an ontology foundational to many environmental conditions and conflicts that persist, that is a belief that individuals, and whole subsections of societies, can extract themselves from the environment. When Mrs. Bodine expels Ellen, and when Mr. Bodine moves away from the help working his fields, they are both establishing a distance not only from other humans, but also from the land on which those people work. With their actions, a manifold distancing mechanism irrupts. If we imagine the owners and the hired hands beginning at the same level, the scenes demonstrate that the distancing not only raises the status of the owners, it simultaneously lowers the status of the hired hands: one party thrusts itself up on the momentum of pushing the other party down. Roberts suggests as much spatially and symbolically when she writes that Mrs. Bodine “*stood crisp on the top of the pasture*” while Ellen “*dropped quickly to her knees and crawled quickly out of site of the woman on the hilltop*” once she was covered by some bushes and a rise between her and Mrs. Bodine (38, emphases added). The same is true with Mr. Bodine who is depicted elevated on his “large fine horse” (64). This double social distancing is further

compounded with a chiasmic distancing and proximating with the environment. Ellen is forced into proximity with the dirt and waste land “along the branch” (37) and her father is left in the lowly position of pushing seedlings into the ground and “squeezing the mud about it [...], bending along the rows, almost never straightening” (13). The forced proximity in turn renders the earth repellant to the poor who must work it for the gain of the landowner, adding yet another level of distance. Just as the workers and their children are forced into proximity with the earth and are subsequently repelled by it, the owners distance themselves from the same earth by avoiding interacting with it or the people who work it. Mrs. Bodine might pick all the berries for canning, but as her words and actions imply, they exist solely for her benefit; unlike Ellen, she does not recognize them as objects complete unto themselves.

By distancing themselves from the land and the people who make their living on that land, the Bodines imagine they have extracted themselves from the environment and they benefit from a feeling of relative security. Although the vicissitudes of weather and nature can still threaten the Bodines, when the Chessers finally move on to a new place, the narrative leaves the Bodines in comfort and security. But now, a century and more later, the attitude that distance and extraction from the environment at will is possible has compounded to the point that the entire globe is threatened with the ramifications of what Timothy Morton calls “hyperobjects,” largely man-made, persistent entities such as plutonium, Styrofoam, carbon dioxide, etc., that are so geographically and temporally distributed, and have such wide-ranging effects, as to usher in a new geological epoch—the anthropocene. The steady accretion of hyperobjects on the earth, in the atmosphere,

and in the bodies that live on the earth has led to what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence [...] a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (*Slow Violence* 2). Roberts’s novel anticipates such “slow violence.” In their experiences with the Bodines, the Chessers are not subjected to physical violence, nor are they exposed to toxins produced by the Bodines that will remain in their bodies and cause long-term damage and suffering. However, they are exposed to a type of social, psychological, and spiritual slow violence that will linger in their psyches and have reverberating affects on their relationship with the earth.

The slow violence that the Chessers suffer, such as persistent poverty and the stigma that will follow and class them, malnutrition, and the simultaneous alienation and forced proximity to the land, are caused primarily by the distancing methods employed by the Bodines. These same distancing methods have grown and compounded over time. Nixon describes the current distancing mechanisms practiced in the global North, and their ramifications that have led to widespread slow violence, as follows:

[T]he rhetorical gulf between development as a grand planetary dream premised on growth-driven consumption and its socio-environmental fallout; the geographical distance between market forces as, to an almost occult degree, production has become disaggregated from consumption; and the temporal distance between short-lived actions and long-lived consequences, as gradual casualties are spread across a protracted

aftermath, during which the memory and the body count of slow violence are diffused—and defused—by time. (41)

Roberts's portrayal of a microcosmic view of these same distancing techniques exposes the type of thinking that lies at the base of the macrocosmic distancing that Nixon details. The dream of development based on "growth-driven consumption" is closely aligned with the policy of trickle-down economics that Martinez-Alier shows may increase the standard of living for the poor, but also only maintains "hierarchical positions" (16). In Roberts's novel, the Chessers's living arrangements improve slightly when Henry is hired by Hep Bodine, but they are never set on a course toward greater equality with the Bodines, and never have the opportunity to acquire their own land. The distance between production and consumption is amply demonstrated by the disparity between the work performed by Ellen and her father and benefits of that work that are primarily enjoyed by the Bodines and their daughter. Production is the work of the hired hands, consumption the pleasure of the landowners. The moments of distancing enacted by the Bodines have long lasting impacts on the family, primarily in that they reinforce the bifurcation of society into separate classes with separate realms of existence and differing relationships with the environment.

Nixon asks: "how can we imaginatively and strategically render visible vast force fields of interconnectedness against the attenuating effects of temporal and geographical distance?" (38). He laments the public's and the news media's short attention span and proclivity to jump from one dramatic story to the next while quickly forgetting about long-term impacts and all but ignoring the slowly accumulating travesties of

environmental despoliation. While he acknowledges the possible neural changes that the human species is currently undergoing at the hands of new media, such as the impeding of “our capacity for undivided attention” analyzed by David Carr, Nixon draws on new media as part of his answer to the question he poses. He argues that through the use of new media, “writer-activists” can help “bring an attention-grabbing urgency to issues that might otherwise be marginalized by technological, neurobiological, and political forces of inattention” (279). Although this approach is necessary in our hyper-saturated age of media, I find it troubling that Nixon devalues bio-regionalism in favor of a “transnational ethics of place” (245). Analyzing, discussing, and teaching bioregional authors, such as Roberts, can help link up microcosmic actions and macrocosmic ramifications, while also “advocating personal environmental responsibility” (Nixon 39). Nixon argues that shrinking “solutions to the level of the private and the small is evasive” and advocates for greater institutional action (39). But placing the onus on institutional actions (or inactions) can also be evasive and function as a distancing mechanism. A globalizing and transnational ethics coupled with a critique of powerful supra-national corporations invites abstraction and feelings of distance, powerlessness, and resignation on the part of individuals. Nixon’s formulation of the old dictum “think globally act locally” might go something like this: “think globally, act globally.” While this may be a crucial step toward rectifying the injustices enacted by the global North and alleviating the environmental crisis, it need not come at the cost of local, particularized, and individualized responsibility and action. We might reverse the original dictum to read “think locally and act globally.”

Nixon treats bioregionalism kindly compared to how thoughtlessly he dismisses deep ecology. He displays his derision for it by relegating even his dismissal to a footnote where he scorns its “hokiness” and accuses it of misanthropy and hostility to “environmentalism of the poor” (288, n.47). Contrary to Nixon’s criticism, deep ecology is deeply concerned for what he calls “ecosystem people” and looks to them for models of environmental relationships (22). His critique also seems to conflict with some of his ideas concerning “vernacular landscapes” (17), which actually align quite comfortably with some of the foundational principles of deep ecology. His criticism does have some validity, but the way he approaches it seems counterproductive to ecocriticism and the environmental movement in general. Deep ecology is not *the* answer to our environmental catastrophe, nor is the similar approach of ecopoetics, and neither is the environmentalism of the poor, but rather some kind of amalgamation of all of these is necessary if we are to solve the problems we will face in the coming decades and beyond.

Nixon does provide an entry into what such an amalgamation might look like. He proposes a “radical notion of displacement, one that, instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their place of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and the resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable” (19). The scenes in Roberts’s novel under discussion in this chapter depict such “displacement without moving” (49). Although Ellen and her family do move from farm to farm, their movements are strictly confined within a specific bioregion and they are circumscribed

to the type of work they know how to do that is specific to that bioregion. Their mobility functions more as a treadmill that powers the landowner's engine with a class of dispensable people who are displaced within their own bioregion. Their frequent movements, in fact, highlight how the land is made uninhabitable for them. They are never welcomed in a place long enough to develop any real sense of inhabitation, of dwelling. They are forced into proximity with the earth while simultaneously being repelled from it by a lack of ownership.

Roberts's ecopoetics draws attention to Ellen's deep ecology, which is disrupted by environmental injustice. The primary injustice is complete dissociation from the land, for both Ellen and the landowners. When Mrs. Bodine expels Ellen from the pasture and the berry bush, she is constructing a psychological barrier that prefigures the physical (as well as psychological) barriers of gated communities and walled compounds that are constructed in an attempt to distance or shield the residents not only from the expendable people, but also from the expendable environmental. Manicured lawns and landscaped gardens admit no hint of wilderness, let alone something that might honestly be recognized as "natural." The farmer's wife obviously has no recourse to ten-foot walls to keep out the poor white trash, but instead relies on her power and authority as the "owner" of the berries and the farm to shield herself from the undesirables, an ownership that is unjust not only because it is predicated on the existence of expendable people, but also because it denies Ellen her sense of belonging.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

One of the recent trends in ecocriticism, as well as Southern literary studies, is to engage in a more global perspective. In Southern studies, two recent anthologies, *Look Away: The U.S. South in New World Studies* (2004) edited by John Smith and Deborah Cohn, and *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture* (2002) edited by Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith, attest to this movement toward the global. In ecocriticism, Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence* and Ursula K. Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* demonstrate this movement as well. In Southern literature studies the turn indicates a desire to move beyond an insular conception of the South. In ecocriticism, it indicates an attempt to bring the ravages of globalization closer to home. Both are necessary and worthwhile movements. But as Lynch, Glottfelty, and Armbruster argue, "the shift from place-based bioregionalism to eco-cosmopolitanism is not an either/or proposition, but a matter of emphasis" (9). Place-based ecocriticism needs to remain within the scope of ecocriticism; it can help prevent the abstract distancing that can occur when globalization becomes the topic of discussion.

Lawrence Buell writes that what "counts as a place can be as small as a corner of your kitchen or as big as the planet, now that we have the capacity to image earth holistically and modernization has shrunk the planet to the point that it is starting to seem possible to think of 'global culture' or 'global citizenship'" (Buell, *Future* 67-8). Part of this statement seems problematic. It is often claimed that technological progress

and globalization make the world smaller, when the more appropriate metaphor would state that we have made the world move faster; we have not made the world smaller, we have only compressed the time it takes to travel and communicate at a great expense to our natural environment. A false sense of a shrunken planet can only lead to a false sense of a “global culture” and “global citizenship” based on either homogenization or abstraction. It provides a false sense of proximity between disparate cultures and over great expanses of space, while creating distance between individuals and their immediate environment. For an example, I turn to a recent commercial for the computer company Cisco Systems (Cisco).

The commercial stars Ellen Page, who visits an elementary class at the Lunenburg Academy in Nova Scotia (just over an hour from her home town of Halifax). It opens with quick shot of a quaint fishing village and then cuts to a shot of the equally quaint school. The scene moves inside the building and a teacher introduces Page to the class, after which one of the students enthusiastically announces that they are “Going on a field trip to China!” Page is impressed and explains that when she was a kid “we would just go to the farm.” Her tone demonstrates her disappointment at the less exciting trips students used to take “way back” when Ellen was still a child. The commercial cuts to a memory of Page’s trip—the viewer sees a young girl in a barn reaching to pet a cow, with horns intact, that stands in a stall. The cow’s head is about half as big as the young girl is. It moos and turns toward her and the little Page recoils in fright. The commercial cuts back to the classroom as the students laugh uproariously at the memory. It is a traumatic experience for Page and laughably quaint for the class.

Page asks, “No seriously, where are you guys going?” The girl who announced the “field” trip points toward the front of the room, where a boy presses a button on the teacher’s desk. The screen behind the desk lights up with a live shot of a classroom in China. The students on both ends of the screen shout “Ni hao” at each other while frantically waving. The commercial cuts to a white screen printed with colorful words that are spoken by a voice-over: “The new classroom. See it. Live it. Share it. On the human network.” It is scenes such as this that come to mind when I read about a “global culture” and “global citizenship” and making the world small. It seems that globalization does not shrink the world, but rather increases its size. It deems it more important to scream hello to someone across the globe rather than greet a local farmer and learn about local culture, environment, economy, and where food comes from. The students in the commercial are displaced from any place at all and set to live in an etherzone of globalized, homogenized, and branded telecommunication.

I do not mean to suggest that learning about distant cultures is not valuable, or that a fictitious isolationism should be embraced, and I am duly impressed by the technology that allows for such far-reaching and instant communication. But I would argue that an emphasis on a global perspective can be damaging to an understanding of actual proximity when it supplants learning about one’s own immediate culture and environment. There is enough to learn about the bioregions we inhabit, our small, particularized worlds, to keep us busy for a lifetime, as authors such as Faulkner, Warren, Wendell Berry, Zora Neale Hurston, and Elizabeth Madox Roberts amply demonstrate. Only with such a base of knowledge can individuals and societies begin to

truly understand the unique characteristics of other places and appreciate their similarities and differences. Technological pseudo-proximity can only distract and obfuscate an understanding of what it might mean to be a citizen of any place. A sense of place can be just as damaging if it is developed with an exclusive attitude, but if it remains open as a method for understanding relationships with a local environment, it can easily be transferred to other places and other ways of being and dwelling on the earth. Ecocritics need to guard against falling into the approaches and rhetoric promulgated by multinational corporations and the marketing industry.

Greg Garrard argues that ecocriticism's sustained "attention to the idea of place as locale has provided us with no sense of the place of the whole Earth in contemporary culture" (178). It may simply be because it is impossible to imagine a sense of the place of the whole earth without falling into abstraction, homogenization, and/or colonization—think of the factories in China where multinational corporations such as Cisco have set up shop for its low wages and lax environmental policies, factories and places that are invisible, distant, and abstract to the intended audience of the commercial, and hence easily sacrificed. In order to recognize the entanglement of places from an environmental perspective, it is necessary to first understand the particularities of individual places, before one can begin to grasp how those places are interpenetrated. As Lynch et al. argue, "a sense of place of the global is [...] incomplete without an awareness that the globe is an amalgamation of infinitely complex connections among variously scaled and nested places" (9).

An Alley in Louisiana

The Oak Alley Plantation house and museum is located on River Road between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Originally called *Bon Séjour*, it was built by Jacques Téléphore Roman III in 1837-1839. When Roman constructed the house, the famous *allée* of twenty-eight Live Oak trees was already over 100 years old, having been planted by an unknown French pioneer whose cabin was demolished to make room for the grander Greek revival structure that stands today. Like most of the other plantation houses lining the river, Oak Alley fell into neglect and disrepair during Reconstruction until early in the twentieth century when it was restored (Malone 67). Today it is open to the public where young women in period dress provide tours of the big house.

The surrealist photographer Clarence John Laughlin includes four plates, along with page-long commentary-captions, of the plantation and its grounds in his book *Ghosts Along the Mississippi: An Essay in the Poetic Interpretation of Louisiana's Plantation Architecture*. Many of the images collected in the work suggest something of the Southern Gothic; in particular, three of the four pictures of Oak Alley foreground lush and overgrown vegetation that partially obscures the white colonnaded mansion. He also pays due tribute to a romanticized Southern past. In the caption accompanying the final plate, which presents “an extreme diagonal view of the front of Oak Alley,” Laughlin writes:

It is as though the pillars grew by a process analogous to that of the mighty trees: so that here—and in all other of the best Louisiana plantation houses as well—the natural landscape re-appeared in the

psychological landscape and this, in turn, influenced the nature of the architecture. In a very real sense this complex transposition is one of the secrets of the indigenous quality of the finest Louisiana plantation architecture. The giants of the forest were repeated in the colonnades; the lightness and spaciousness of the great encircling galleries were, in a certain sense, fashioned by the very air, and as though they invited the elements; in the vast linear area of the houses in proportion to their height, and in the never entirely absent feeling of powerful horizontals—the wide flat terrain of Louisiana was echoed. All these things gave the houses a feeling of being direct outgrowths of their environment.

(Laughlin 53)

Over-wrought as the passage is, it suggests one of the main ideas that is under investigation in this dissertation, that is imbrication of place and culture. But the passage is just as telling for what it leaves out: the sweat of the slaves that went into the financing and actual construction of the building. As much as Oak Alley can be made to stand as a tribute to a romantic Southern past, it also may stand as monument of the injustices of slavery. The Oak Alley Foundation has plans to reconstruct the slave quarters that were situated behind the mansion to acknowledge the injustices of the past, and on a tour in 2009, the guides addressed the history of slavery attached to the plantation (*Oak Alley Plantation*). But there is yet another aspect of the plantation that will never make it into a glossy, tourist brochure or websites promoting the museum: Oak Alley is located in the middle of Cancer Alley.

Besides being famous for its plantation houses, the area along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans is also known, at least to environmental justice advocates, as Cancer Alley. Beverly H. Wright, Pat Bryant, and Robert D. Bullard explain that the corridor between the cities “accounts for nearly one-fourth of the nation’s petrochemical production” and that approximately 125 companies in the area “manufacture a range of products including fertilizers, gasoline, paints, and plastics” (114). Most visitors to Oak Alley pass by two towns, Mt. Airy and Wallace, which are singled out among the fifteen towns in this chemical corridor that are contending with polluting industries. Wright et al. contend that many of the industries “are located next to African American communities that were settled by former slaves—areas that were unincorporated and where the land was cheap” and that the “corridor has been dubbed ‘Cancer Alley’ because the air, ground, and water are full of carcinogens, mutagens, and embryotoxins” (113-114). In Hahnville, just down river from Oak Alley, the grassroots organization Gulf Coast Tenants Organization “found that the incidence of cancer was eighteen times the national average.” Despite this startling statistic, “university and corporate scientists could not document causation between the petrochemical industry and cancer deaths” (124). This brings to mind Rob Nixon’s idea of slow violence, and how scientific discourse can be abused by industry to elide responsibility for the damage it inflicts on the environment and the disenfranchised people who have little choice—due to a lack of economic and geographical mobility—but to live in the shadow of these chemical plants.

The website for Oak Alley encourages visitors to “Come enjoy her beauty and dream of her rich past,” but the plantation itself is surrounded by a nightmare, where the sons and daughters of former slaves are still subjected to the injustices perpetuated by the dominant culture. The narratives swirling around Oak Alley—in its promotional websites and coffee table books—are all about the moonlight and magnolias, or in this case, mint juleps and live oaks. The narratives of Cancer Alley are quite different. A resident of Geismer, upriver from Oak Alley, remarked that “You ought to see this place at night....When these companies burn off their waste the air lights up like a battlefield. I’m telling you, it’s scary. Nighttime around here is like an evil dream” (qtd. in Wright et al. 116). Although these competing narratives offer sharply divergent perspectives, they need not necessarily cancel each other out for they are both a part of the Southern environment. The type of commitment to place and foresight exhibited by the unknown French settler who so carefully planted those twenty-eight oak trees some 300 years ago indicate an attitude of owning and belonging that would recoil at the growth of the chemical industry along the banks of the Mississippi. And yet paradoxically, the plantation owners who cared for those trees over the decades and profited off the land and slaves anticipate the possessive attitudes that allow social, racial, and environmental injustice to continue along the banks of the Mississippi. The tourist industry would have visitors dream of proximity to the grace and grandeur of the live oaks, while the chemical industry would have the dominant culture feel secure in its distance from the polluting factories that, according to their research may or may not, affect a small minority of communities in an area most Americans simply pass through. And yet most

of the modern conveniences the culture enjoys connect directly to the chemical industries in Louisiana that supply the oil, gas, plastics, and fertilizers for our cars, apartments and houses, lawns, golf courses and sports stadiums, and the food we eat.

As Donald Schueler wrote, the South has long been a “sacrifice zone” (“Southern Exposure”). One need only think of the history of the Smoky Mountains and how that history is analogous to the displacement of Native Americans in the Nation’s western “wilderness” parks. In fact, the history of the Smoky Mountains multiplies the sacrifices inflicted on people who dwelled on the land. First, the Cherokees were displaced to make room for European settlers. After developing a subsistence mountain culture there, poor whites began to be displaced, first by the logging industry, and subsequently by the US government that removed the remaining inhabitants to make room for the National Park. The cultures that lived at the margins of American society have often found themselves displaced and dispossessed, sacrificed, on the altar of progress.

The South continues to be a sacrifice zone. For the first time since just before the Three Mile Island meltdown in 1978, the US government has granted permission, and the Obama administration has committed funds, to construct nuclear power plants. These first reactors to be built in more than a generation are being constructed in Waynesboro, Georgia, a community with a majority black population. Two other reactors are expected to receive approval soon—they are to be located in South Carolina (Daly). The relative environmental merits of nuclear power are debatable to say the least. As promoters often point out, nuclear energy does not emit carbon dioxide. But promoters rarely mention the looming specter of the storage and transportation of nuclear waste that takes thousands

of years to break down, while officials and engineers promise that disasters such as the Church Rock, New Mexico Uranium spill, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and the Fukushima meltdown will be avoided with new, better technology. The relative merits and dangers of nuclear power are somewhat beside the point; the main issue here is that for the first time in a generation a much-maligned and feared industry is undergoing what may perhaps be a renaissance, and the location of that re-birth is taking place in one of the premier sacrifice zones in the US—the rural, southeastern United States.

This dissertation has primarily been concerned with rural areas in the South—mostly forgotten corners that are rarely attended to by most ecocritics, let alone the American population at large. But as the example of the confluence of Oak Alley and Cancer Alley shows, much can be learned from these rural areas. The former offers a perspective on the culture's continued fascination with the romance of the antebellum South, the latter demonstrates how the actions, or inactions, of the wider culture contribute to environmental despoliation and injustice, and the confluence of the two indicates how proximity and distance may overlap. In a single location, a microcosmic bioregion, our society may embrace the proximity between nature and culture, and the past and the present, in the symmetrical lines of 300-year-old oak trees, while also retaining some distance between the splendor of the plantation and the horror of slavery. Likewise, the society may retain distance—geographical, social, economic, and temporal—from polluting industries, which allows it to ignore the concatenated proximity of our modern conveniences and the environmental injustice being enacted in Cancer Alley. The stories told in and about these places, and the degree of attention they

receive, can speak volumes about what the culture is willing to own, and where it is willing to acknowledge belonging. As environmental problems increase across the globe and compete for attention, it is important not to lose sight of the damaged and sacrificed land and people in the South.

What Lies Ahead?

This dissertation attempted to demonstrate some of the global implications of personal and cultural conceptions of environmental ownership and belonging to distinct postage-stamped sized pieces of soil. Robert Penn Warren's narrative poem helped establish a connection between a single act of brutality in the Kentucky frontier and a Jeffersonian dream for humankind's redemption of nature that continues to effect society and nature on a global scale. Through their reimaginings of pastoral and wilderness motifs, W.E.B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston demonstrated that an eco-poetic sense of owning and belonging is hollow and even dangerous if legal ownership, freedom of mobility, and environmental justice are not factored into a sense of dwelling on the land. Elizabeth Madox Roberts's novel attests to a foundational environmental injustice when an individual is denied an eco-poetic relationship with the land and is forced into substandard proximity with what the dominant culture views as an object nature. None of these views of environmental ownership and belonging, however, are unique to literature with rural settings; they can, and need to be, expanded to more urban and cosmopolitan settings.

Cormac McCarthy's novel *Suttree* includes many of the themes under investigation, and touches on many of the issues examined, in this dissertation. His novel also suggests some of the directions that have been opened up. McCarthy demonstrates a strong sense of ecopoetics in his depictions of the titular character's relationship with his environment—particularly how *Suttree* exemplifies a sense of dwelling when he works the fishing lines he “inherited” on the Tennessee River from a previous fisherman (240). The novel displays a deep sense of place and bioregionalism with its attention to the specificity of flora and fauna, and the occasional attempts of the protagonist and other characters to live closely to their environment. McCarthy also calls into question and problematizes traditional approaches and narratives of environmental relationships. He literalizes the rape of nature through a picaresque character; he presents a failed attempt at an escape into a wilderness romance that leaves the protagonist near starvation; he mocks the conventions of a *carpe diem* pastoral as *Suttree* allows himself to be fooled into following a scheme to harvest “Tennessee pearls” (334); and he reimagines the figure of what Greg Garrard calls the “Ecological Indian” —a term Garrard borrows from Shepherd Kretch III that exposes a cliché of the shallow environmental movement (Garrard 120-127; see also Kretch)—and situates him comfortably and peacefully living in a cave along the Tennessee River in the middle of Knoxville. *Suttree* also demands that when we think about the environment we do not neglect the urban environments where a sense of place still functions and natural processes continue, despite their apparent marginalization.

McCarthy conceives of the environment in *Suttree* as inclusive and all encompassing. He presents an interpenetration of natural, cultural, and urban environments, from the fossils embedded in the foundations of the buildings, to the weeds and unruly nature that is ever-present at the margins of the city, to the palatial homes of the southern aristocracy, to the past which haunts Suttree despite his efforts to escape it. It is, in fact, Suttree's refusal to acknowledge all aspects of his environment that causes him to seek his own dissolution through self-destructive behavior. A type of environmental injustice occurs with the destruction of a sense of place when a new highway bridge is constructed and the neighborhood where Suttree dwells is leveled in a waterfront revitalization project. With this last event, McCarthy seems to suggest that there is little hope for the dominant society to ever figure out a way to embrace proximity to the natural world and the places where marginal societies dwell. The novel ends with Suttree leaving the city. He stands on the side of the road and watches as a construction crew tears up the earth for a highway improvement project, before a boy on the road crew gives him a dipperful of water and he picks up a ride.

In many ways, McCarthy only offers a bleak and tragic vision of humanity's place on the earth. The final words of the novel introduce a tireless huntsman whose hounds are "crazed with ravening for souls in this world" (471). Perhaps McCarthy is right; our civilization may ultimately be doomed. The real tragedy is that it may be doomed at our own hands. If some climate scientists are to be believed, it is only a matter of decades before climate change fundamentally alters human society and our tenuous existence on this planet. Even if the effects of climate change do not occur as

drastically and quickly as some predict, the growing pressures on global resources will continue, perhaps leading to resource wars of unimaginable magnitude. In any case, it is hard to imagine how our global societies can mitigate the utter despoliation of the earth that has been increasing exponentially since the birth of industrialization, let alone reverse the damage that has been done while also protecting the least fortunate on earth.

Early in McCarthy's novel, after Suttree is detained by a police officer, he claims that "No one cares. It's not important." The county sheriff responds: "That's where you're wrong my friend. Everything's important. A man lives his life, he has to make it important" (157). Another sheriff in another McCarthy novel offers a suggestion. At the end of *No Country for Old Men* Sheriff Bell recalls a stone water trough that he came across at a small house in Europe while he was serving in World War II. The place has particular significance for Bell because it is the same location where he was injured and then abandoned his dying fellow soldiers. Bell meditates on the person who made the trough a hundred or two hundred years earlier. He remarks that the area "had no time of peace much of any length at all" and yet "this man had set down with a hammer and chisel and carved out a stone water trough to last ten thousand years." Bell questions what "was it that he had faith in?" (307). McCarthy suggests that actions based on a commitment to faith and hope alone may be enough to redeem humanity: "the only thing I can think is that there was some kind of promise in his heart" (308). The example set by the anonymous stone mason, like the anonymous French settler who planted the oak trees, suggests how one can approach his or her dwelling on

the earth that is instrumental only in providing a receptacle for the dwellings of future generations—a receptacle that can outlast the ravages of time and war.

Each of the authors discussed in this dissertation provides visions of a world where ecopoetics, bioregionalism, and environmental justice cross paths in an arid landscape of despoliation. The most recent work is more than three decades old, and since its time, the environmental situation has hardly improved. But the receptacles for analysis that they have provided remain. Ecocritics must continue to search out these receptacles, especially in under-examined areas, be it in rural sacrifice zones, protected wilderness areas, or developed urban places. Only by examining and critiquing varying representations of environmental proximity and distance, and how those representations may be communicated, can we begin to understand what it means to own and belong to a fragile and enduring earth.

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