LOOKING AWAY: THE EVASIVE ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS
OF AMERICAN LITERATURE, 1823–1966

By
LLOYD ELLIOTT WILLIS

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2006
To Windy and Hailey
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my committee members for everything they have contributed to this project. I am deeply indebted to Jack Davis and Phil Wegner for changing the ways I think about literature, critical theory, and politics. Sid Dobrin has been a constant source of reassurance and guidance throughout this project and my entire graduate career, and Stephanie Smith, who has been a constant and patient source of support and encouragement, has been just what I believe every dissertation director should be.

I also wish to thank my parents, my siblings, and my whole family for supporting my academic work and enduring—with incredible understanding—the separation it has entailed. Most of all, I am indebted to Windy for taking every step of this journey with me, and to Hailey for making the year I spent writing Looking Away better than anything I could ever imagine.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS................................................................................................................iv

ABSTRACT.......................................................................................................................................vii

CHAPTER.........................................................................................................................................

1 THE ENVIRONMENTAL UNCONSCIOUS OF AMERICANIST CRITICISM FROM HENRY NASH SMITH TO LAWRENCE BUELL.................................................................1

- From Revisionist History to Ecocritical Recidivism .................................................................4
- Unearthing the Evasive Politics of American Literature .........................................................9
- Notes ...........................................................................................................................................14

2 JAMES FENIMORE COOPER, AMERICAN CANON FORMATION, AND THE ERASURE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ANXIETY.................................................................16

- Removing Cooper from History .............................................................................................17
- Rehistoricizing Cooper ............................................................................................................22
- Notes ........................................................................................................................................41

3 THE INSTITUTION OF EMERSONIAN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPERIALISM..............................................46

- Emerson, Gender, and Nature’s Gender ..............................................................................48
- The Nature of Emerson’s Imperialism ....................................................................................52
- The Consequences and Endurance of Emersonian Nature .................................................58
- Thoreau and the Continuation of Emerson’s Abstract Spatial Imperialism .........................64
- Notes ........................................................................................................................................71

4 HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW, UNITED STATES NATIONAL LITERATURE, AND THE AMERICAN CANON’S ERASURE OF MATERIAL NATURE ..............................................78

- Longfellow’s Literary Manifestoes .........................................................................................79
- Longfellow and the Nineteenth Century American Literature Debates ..............................82
- Longfellow’s Un-Emersonian Nature ....................................................................................88
Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

LOOKING AWAY: THE EVASIVE ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE, 1823–1966

By

Lloyd Elliott Willis

August 2006

Chair: Stephanie Smith
Major Department: Department of English

Looking Away: The Evasive Environmental Politics of American Literature combines the history of American environmentalism and the institutional history of American literature studies with theories of periodicity and spatiality to argue that American literature has always been invested in the condition of the North American environment. This environment has been, indeed, a site of political struggle in American letters since the mid-nineteenth century, and I show how the American critical tradition has worked to erase American literature’s environmental anxieties since the early twentieth century. Looking Away investigates the environmental commitments of James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; the roles that critics from Margaret Fuller to Van Wyck Brooks, F. O. Matthiessen, and Leslie Fiedler have played in the creation of an environmentally disengaged body of American literature; and the ways that early-twentieth-century authors like Willa Cather, Zora
Neale Hurston, and Ernest Hemingway brought the natural world into the new century as a serious site of literary and critical conflict.

Chapter 1 argues that Cooper’s Leatherstocking Series, which expresses radical doubt about the permanence and illimitability of North American “nature,” marks a significant break from the environmental rhetoric of the colonial and early republican periods. Chapter 2 argues that Cooper’s environmental anxieties were eclipsed by the abstract and imperialist vision of nature that Ralph Waldo Emerson defines in *Nature*, and Chapter 3 explains that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow promoted an environmentally determinist vision of American literature that could have produced a much different relationship between the nation’s nature and its literature than the one that in fact developed along more Emersonian lines. Chapter 4 argues that the environmentalist sympathies of both Willa Cather and John Steinbeck were held in check by literary and cultural resistances to any type of environmentalist radicalism. Chapter 5 presents Hurston as an author who steps outside of both cultural and literary expectations by theorizing Florida as a vibrant and organic space ideally suited for African American life, and Chapter 6 presents Hemingway as the author who takes U. S. literature’s paradoxical relationship with nature to more absurd lengths than any other.
CHAPTER 1
THE ENVIRONMENTAL UNCONSCIOUS OF AMERICANIST CRITICISM FROM
HENRY NASH SMITH TO LAWRENCE BUELL

In “National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives,”
Donald Pease offers a compelling description of the mainstream American culture and
the critical tradition that he and other “New Americanists” had already been working to
subvert for nearly a decade by the time he included the essay in National Identities and
Post-Americanist Narratives (1994).¹ Deliberately describing the “national narrative” of
the United States in the terms of R. W. B. Lewis, Henry Nash Smith, and Perry Miller, he
writes that the nation’s unconscious sense of itself combines “an exceptional national
subject (American Adam) with a representative national scene (Virgin Land) and an
exemplary national motive (errand into the wilderness)” (3). Together, Pease writes, this
triangulation of the national subject, scene, and motive produces a “mythological entity—
Nature’s Nation—” that believes itself to be governed by “natural law” and a set of ruling
principles “(Liberty Equality, Social Justice) [that] could be understood as
indistinguishable from the sovereign power creative of nature” (3–4).

The brilliance of this passage lies in the way it simultaneously describes
“American culture,” defines the foundational texts and concerns of American Studies,
and asserts (by remaining always in the present tense) that both the cultural and critical
situations that he describes are and ongoing. When “National Identities, Postmodern
Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives” was first published in boundary 2 in 1993, Pease
felt that the narratives of exceptional Americans, virgin land, and ordained voyages into
wilderness had not been entirely displaced from either the nation’s sense of itself or the critical institution’s operating assumptions despite the fact that significant revisionist work had already been done. He was writing, after all, in response to Frederick Crews’s famous 1988 “Whose American Renaissance?” which granted the “New Americanists” their name and condemned their work while defending the claims of the old guard.

Today, 17 years since it was published and 15 years since Pease first rebuked it in “New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon,” “Whose American Renaissance?” still stands as the last major challenge to American Studies’s transformation into the historically (rather than mythically) oriented, politically engaged, and “postnational” field that it is today. Even as Pease was responding to Crews—and embracing the “New Americanist” label that Crews had used pejoratively—the field was changing quickly and the old critical narratives, which Pease in “National Identities” believed to still retain some currency, were rapidly losing whatever capital they still had within the culture of Americanist criticism.

Despite the drastic changes in Americanist criticism over the past decade and a half, however, and despite the fact that the old national narratives have been largely dismissed, at least one significant portion of Pease’s broad “disciplinary unconscious” remains largely unchallenged. The American critical institution has generally failed to explore the environmental politics that it has practiced along with the American authors it has canonized since the mid-nineteenth century. Even despite the revisionist work of those like Annette Kolodny and Richard Slotkin, the critical community still, largely unconsciously, draws a false boundary between environmental politics, literary production, and critical practices. To put it a bit differently, the critical community has
still not recognized that the formation of an American canon entailed an unconscious (and evasive) environmental politics; it has not recognized that the apolitical, ahistorical, and monolithic “Nature” that operates in the narratives of Smith and Marx is an extension of this canonically endorsed politics of environmental evasion; and it has not recognized that ongoing debates about American culture’s relationship with nature—most frequently carried out under the banner of ecocriticism—continue to misread environmental politics as a contemporary development that can therefore have no bearing upon the history of American literature and criticism.

It is the purpose of Looking Away to suggest that the particular vision of nature that lies within American literature’s “field-imaginary” is the product of a long tradition of evasive environmental politics that involves authors ranging from James Fenimore Cooper, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Ralph Waldo Emerson to Willa Cather and John Steinbeck, and critics from Cornelius Mathews, Margaret Fuller and Mark Twain to George Santayana, Van Wyck Brooks, and Leslie Fiedler. In this archaeology of “American Literature’s” evasive environmental politics, I will argue that James Fenimore Cooper resisted federalist narratives of illimitable virgin land and that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow envisioned a U. S. national literature that was invested in the condition of the North American environment. I will argue that Emerson, who has been canonized as the American nature philosopher of the nineteenth century, replaced the environmental visions of Cooper and Longfellow with an abstract vision of “Nature” that would serve as the field’s standard idea of nature well into the twentieth century. Finally, I will explain how Willa Cather, John Steinbeck, and Zora Neale Hurston resisted the Emersonian idea
of nature throughout the early twentieth century and how Ernest Hemingway granted it its fullest expression.

**From Revisionist History to Ecocritical Recidivism**

Annette Kolodny’s 1975 *The Lay of the Land* opens with this description of the book’s central motive: “The original impetus for the following investigation was my growing distress at what we have done to our continent” (ix). Ten years later, Richard Slotkin’s *The Fatal Environment*, which makes no specific claims about an environmentalist motivation, still advanced a portion of Kolodny’s project by insisting on a more historically and politically engaged vision of American history than is offered in *Virgin Land* and *Machine in the Garden*. After the passage of yet another decade and after the narratives of Smith, Marx, and the other “Old Americanists” had been effectively displaced, scholars like Lawrence Buell and Cheryl Glotfelty, operating under the newly organized aegis of “ecocriticism” would restate Kolodny’s original environmentalist motivations but, unwittingly perhaps, promote an ecological aesthetic and a critical mission that would once again remove the question of nature—within the critical field—from the realms of history and politics.

For Pease in “New Americanists,” *The Lay of the Land* and *The Fatal Environment* effectively subvert the *Virgin Land* narrative. Kolodny, of course, argues that North American environmental destruction is the unfortunate result of the way that nature has been gendered since the beginning of European colonization, that by turning the “new” land into a female virgin land Europeans placed North American nature into the category of the exploited and exploitable. To this, Slotkin adds that the vision of the frontier that operates in the work of both Frederick Jackson Turner and Henry Nash Smith (Smith, for his part, was trying to correct Turner by arguing that the myth, or
public perception, of the frontier was just as important to American culture as the actual frontier itself) absolutely neglects the history of bloody conflict—even genocide—, which is the true history of the westward expansion of the United States.

Kolodny and Slotkin did effectively shift the disciplinary unconscious of Americanist criticism—it is now impossible to think of virgin land or of a triumphant westward march of American civilization—but, as if they exhausted a whole line of inquiry as they subverted the Smith-Marx paradigm, their work has not been significantly advanced by subsequent critics. They demonstrate how the mainstream (white, male) culture of (primarily) the United States extended patterns of gendered violence on a female nature and replace optimistic if wrongheaded narratives of American expansion with a new but still mythical and archetypal narrative of violent imperialism, but they say very little or nothing about the roles that literature and canon formation played in the creation of these national myths.

With the problem of revising national narratives effectively solved, Americanists of any stripe (New, Old, etc.) spent very little time considering any issue relating to nature until it became the special subject of “ecocriticism” in the mid-1990s. Just like Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land*, this ecologically oriented mode of criticism developed, as Cheryl Glotfelty states the case in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, in response to “the most pressing contemporary issue of all, namely, the global environmental crisis” (xv). Despite the fact that “most ecocritical work shares a common [environmentalist] motivation,” however, as a body it neglects the types of political and historical critique that Kolodny and Slotkin had used so effectively. In some cases ecocriticism reinstitutes the focus on pastoralism and the nature/culture or
nature/technology binaries that Kolodny and Slotkin had resisted in Smith and Marx; it often acts as if environmentalism itself is an illegitimate critical concern that lacks a substantive history; and in the place of the environmentalist concerns that it seems so invested in, ecocriticism tends to turn ecology and its philosophical implications (holistic worldviews, metaphors of connectivity) into a new interpretive matrix that its critics can then deploy in what is essentially a retooled New Critical method that dives beneath the surface of texts in search of ecological truths. In fact, Glotfelty captures the degree to which ecocriticism neglects environmental politics and limits environmentalism to the contemporary moment when she offers this summation of what ecocritics “do”:

Ecocritics and theorists ask questions like the following: How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind’s relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? What view of nature informs U.S. Government reports, corporate advertising, and televised nature documentaries, and to what rhetorical effect? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis? What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art, history, and ethics? (xix, emphasis added)

Ecocriticism as Glotfelty defines it here, then, identifies the “ecological wisdom” that texts may contain, it strives to identify a relationship between ecology and literature, it privileges a “concept of wilderness,” and it thinks of “environmental crisis” as a phenomenon that seeps only into “contemporary literature and popular culture.” Lawrence Buell, the most prominent scholar of American literature to venture into ecocriticism, shares the environmentalist motivations expressed by Kolodny and
Glotfelty, and his 1995 *The Environmental Imagination* performs precisely the type of work that Glotfelty describes. Buell is clearly interested in what he describes as “the full-fledged emergence of environmentalism as a topic of public concern in America” in the “three decades have passed since the publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring,”*—he even spends a paragraph in the second page of the book’s introduction meditating upon “Senator Albert Gore’s pronouncement” that “‘we must make the rescue of the environment the central organizing principle for civilization’” (2). The quickening environmental crisis of the late twentieth century, he explains, is what caused him to rethink the environmental awareness of much earlier writers. As he puts it, “the more environment looms as a self-evidently fundamental problem, the more problematic it seems to minimize its importance for our precursors. If our present concern may tempt us to overstate their concern, our past unconcern may have tempted us to ignore theirs” (14).

Characteristically, however, and as the title of his book suggests, Buell moves steadily away from environmental politics and into an explication of American literature’s “environmental imagination,” an analysis of “literary ecocentrism,” and a celebration of Henry David Thoreau, whom Buell considers the greatest American nature writer of the nineteenth century because he anticipates the ecocentric worldviews that gained a degree of prominence (particularly through the work of “deep ecologists” like Arne Naess, George Devall, Bill Sessions) through the last decades of the twentieth century. Considered within the tradition of Americanist revisions of the virgin land myth since the 1970s, the unconscious project of *The Environmental Unconscious* is to construct a new and triumphant “primal scene” (to again turn to Pease’s language) for
American literature that for the first time is entirely confined to the mind, contained
within the literary archive, and, by virtue of its immateriality, thoroughly protected from
another wave of revisionist critique that illuminates the disparity between a cultural
mythology and reality. Buell’s “primal scene,” after all, is neither the idea of virgin land
that fueled European and American expansionism nor the narrative of *Virgin Land* that
grounded American Studies for thirty years, but the “environmental imagination” of
American literature itself. And the “environmental imagination” of American literature,
Buell argues over the course of his critical narrative, is best embodied in the visionary
work of Thoreau, which is ecocentric enough to suggest that American literature and
culture, in its heart of hearts, has resisted an environmentally destructive “‘self-indulgent
anthropocentrism’” since the mid-nineteenth century.

Buell arrives at his idea of an “environmental imagination” while attempting to
redirect the focus of “a metropolitan-based enterprise of academic criticism,” which
“reads literature about nature for its structural or ideological properties,” toward nature
writing’s “experiential or referential aspects” (36). In abandoning such a “metropolitan”
criticism, though, Buell disclaims the subversive politics, the forceful and revisionist
historical focus, and the disciplinary self-reflexivity that had become fundamental to
American Studies when he migrated into ecocriticism (where he has largely remained
since the mid-1990s).\(^2\) In accordance with these critical decisions, *The Environmental
Imagination* pursues its exploration of literary ecocentrism while admitting but not
engaging the long history of environmental politics or the relationship between it and the
U. S. literary-critical tradition. For Buell, the “American natural environment . . . during
the last five centuries has been constructed thrice over in a tangled ideological
palimpsest. . . . it was constructed in the image of old world desire, then reconstructed in the image of American cultural nationalism, then reconstructed again in a latter-day scholarly discourse of American exceptionalism,” but real environmental politics always and only takes place, as I have already mentioned, after “the publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and the passage [in 1970] of the Wilderness Act” (5–6, 10).

**Unearthing the Evasive Politics of American Literature**

The “ideological palimpsest” of nature that Buell identifies is undeniably the product of a very real environmental politics that does indeed stretch back five centuries to the beginning of European involvement in North America.³ My objective in *Looking Away* is to describe the ways that authors and critics, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have created and remained faithful to a vision (or palimpsest) of nature that silences and forgets those who question the nation’s faith in perpetual environmental illimitability and virginity, critique the course of American empire, or even imagine an American Literature that depends upon the continued existence of an exceptional natural world. Because of its disciplinary politics and its reliance upon revisionist histories that grant environmentalism a history beyond the late twentieth century, this is a project that in many ways shares more with the early New Americanist studies than more recent work in ecocriticism. It strives to recapture the vibrancy of the New Americanist work of the 1980s and 1990s and it picks up the lines of self-reflexive questioning about American literature’s relationship to nature that have largely lain dormant, despite the burgeoning of ecocriticism, since Kolodny and Slotkin initiated them more than twenty years ago.
Now that the narratives like those of Virgin Land and The Machine in the Garden have been thoroughly displaced, the question that drives me is how the myth of virgin land still held cultural capital within American literature and criticism as late as the mid-twentieth century. In the end, my answer to this question is that the American literary institution maintained a vision of virgin land through centuries of evasive environmental politics that it practiced with particular strength from the early republic throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

My investigation of American literature’s environmental politics begins with a re-examination of James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking Series. Despite the fact that he has been devalued in a critical tradition that stretches from Mark Twain to Leslie Fiedler, I argue that Cooper’s novels constitute a significant intervention into American culture’s vision of the natural world by breaking from a federalist rhetoric of environmental inexhaustibility that was pervasive in the early republic. Rather than continuing a tradition of federalist optimism practiced by those like William Cooper (his father), and Timothy Dwight, James Fenimore Cooper argues that the United States is expanding into a limited environment, that the dominant capitalist culture of the United States is environmentally ruinous and unsustainable, that the continent has always already been a contested space rather than a virgin void, and that language and science are transparent mechanisms of a Euro-American imperialism that was much more complex than the squatters, squires, and outcasts that populate Cooper’s romances.

As I argue in Chapter 2, however, Cooper’s vision of the natural world is not the one that critics like George Santayana and Van Wyck Brooks canonized in the early twentieth century. For these critics, it was Ralph Waldo Emerson who offered American
literature’s quintessential theory of nature, and the theory that they recognize in his work replaces Cooper’s emphasis on environmental scarcity and destructibility with an abstract idea of nature that was complicit in American expansionism, imperialism, and environmental destruction. In *Nature*, Emerson disposes of nature’s physical, female, and destructible qualities in a process of redefinition that imagines nature as an abstract and masculine intellectual field that contains the female. In the end, Emerson’s abstraction of nature, which Thoreau carries forward in *Walden* and “Walking,” constitutes a logic of imperial environmental domination that denies any sense of environmental limitation or destructibility and evades the moral and representational crises that attend the destruction of environments that would otherwise amount to virgins, mothers, and/or virgin mothers.

In Chapter 3, I return to the question of what was lost in the process of constructing a U. S. national literature around the figure of Ralph Waldo Emerson, this time focusing on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the nineteenth century’s most famous American poet, and his involvement in an early nineteenth century debate about the future of American literature. Longfellow’s poetic project, as he defines it in three manifestoes that he published between 1823 and 1839, was to create an internationalist American literature that based its exceptionality upon the uniqueness of the North American continent. Longfellow promoted his plan for an environmentally determined national literature through the 1850s, with the help of other powerful critics like James Russell Lowell, against Young Americans like Cornelius Mathews who were vehemently promoting a drastically different American literature rooted in nativist patriotism, and he attempted to fulfill his vision of an environmentally determined national literature in
Evangeline and The Song of Hiawatha. Longfellow’s plan for the development of a legitimate American literature depended upon the continued existence of a pristine and culturally significant North American environment. By the time that Santayana and Brooks formulated their vision of “American Literature” in the early twentieth century, any lingering notion of an environmentally determined national literature had largely vanished, and American Literature had become the product of an inclusive Whitmanian personality that was clothed in naturalistic rhetoric but freed from any dependence upon material nature itself.

Chapter 4 argues that Willa Cather and John Steinbeck, who recognized American culture as an environmentally destructive force, reacted to environmental crisis with an Emersonian environmental vision that suited the literary expectations of a national audience that they believed would not tolerate any declaration of an unequivocally environmentalist position. As Emerson does in the nineteenth century, the fictional characters of Cather and Steinbeck—and in some instances the authors themselves—fix their environmental gazes upon metonyms of environmental health and viability. Cather’s characters maintain their faith in the permanence and permanent virginity of nature by fixing her environmental gazes upon horizons and vast environmental cycles, while Steinbeck and his characters contemplate whether scientifically preserving small bits of the natural world from beneath the eaves of industry can provide a satisfactory hedge against widespread environmental destruction. Although Cather’s refusal of environmental activism may be excused as a function of her general belief that literature should abstain from politics, there were plenty of reasons to stay within the Emersonian paradigm of abstract nature during the early twentieth century. Steinbeck seems to speak
for both of them, and for the historical moment in general, in fact, when he suggests that launching a pointed environmentalist attack on American culture would subject anyone—authors included—to the social ostracism and group violence that befalls outcasts and monstrous figures throughout his body of work.

Drawing upon the spatial theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and Michel de Certeau, Chapter 5 pursues two goals: it offers a revisionist account of Zora Neale Hurston’s relationship with the Harlem Renaissance and it suggests that her work, read in the context of her letters and biographies, offers one way out of the Emersonian tradition of environmental abstraction. Although she is often portrayed as a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance—as the fun-loving, brash, life-of-the-party Zora—I argue that Hurston resented the system of patronage that she experienced in Harlem and that she viewed the South, and Florida in particular, as a place where the abjection of patronage could be avoided, where an alternative black art community could be formed and sustained, and where a vibrant black life could be practiced without impediment. From Richard Wright to Hazel Carby, Hurston’s critics have claimed that she refused to engage the Great Migration and the desperate situation that the South offered to African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. Against this line of critique, though, I suggest that Hurston’s work is a bold act of spatial reterritorialization that uses fiction to reclaim a highly organic and immanently physical natural space within which a rich and vibrant African-American life can be practiced without fear, humiliation, or apology.

I close Looking Away with an afterword that presents Ernest Hemingway as the fulfillment of American literature’s politics of environmental evasion. Particularly in texts like In Our Time and Green Hills of Africa, Hemingway admits the reality of
widespread environmental destruction but simultaneously proclaims that there will always be a “last good country” somewhere for those who have the knowledge, desire, and means to pursue it. He projects unpenetrated environments into indeterminate futures and retreats into imperialist quests for wild nature in Africa—in all cases maintaining an ahistorical, illimitable, and indestructible simulacrum of nature that comes to him from Emerson and promoting a Thoreauvean program of environmental imperialism that lack’s Thoreau’s claim that the self is the wilderness most worthy of pursuit.

Notes

1 Several points warrant clarification from the beginning. First, “New Americanists” has become something of an empty term because the type of criticism to which it refers has come to dominate the field of Americanist criticism. I am using the name, however, to refer to a group of critics who were among the first to break from the myth/symbol school of criticism that dominated American Studies during the mid-twentieth century, and I generally accept the boundaries of the field as Pease describes it in “New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon.” Here, Pease offers this list of the field’s “master-texts”: F. O. Matthiessen’s American Renaissance (1941); Henry Nash Smith’s Virgin Land (1950); R. W. B. Lewis’s The American Adam (1955); Richard Chase’s The American Novel and Its Tradition (1957); Harry Levin’s The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville (1958); Leslie Fiedler’s Love and Death in the American Novel (1960); Marcus Bewley’s The Eccentric Design (1963); Leo Marx’s The Machine in the Garden (1965); Richard Poirier’s A World Elsewhere (1966); Quentin Anderson’s The Imperial Self (1971); Sacvan Bercovitch’s American Jeremaid (1973)” (12). As Pease’s argument develops he makes it quite clear who the “New Americanists” are and exactly how they are working to change the field of American Studies: Smith’s Virgin Land gives way to Annette Kolodny’s Lay of the Land and Slotkin’s Fatal Environment; R. W. B. Lewis’s American Adam becomes Myra Jehlen’s American Incarnation, Carolyn Porter’s Seeing and Being, or Henry Louis Gates’s Figures in Black; Chase’s American Novel and Its Tradition ends up Russel Resing’s Unusable Past; Roy Harvey Pearce’s Continuity of American Poetry translates to Paul Bove’s Deconstructive Poetics, while Bercovitch’s American Jeremaid finishes as Frank Lentricchia’s Criticism and Social Change” (32)

Secondly, the essay that I am discussing in the first paragraph of my introduction, “National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives,” is one of several pieces by Donald Pease that I will engage here. Because they have complex publication histories, I believe a brief explanation from the outset may eliminate any confusion. “National Identititites” is included in the second of two essay collections,
edited by Pease, that were published in 1994. The first of these volumes, *Revisionist Interventions into the Americanist Canon*, was originally published as *boundary 2* 17.1 (1990), and the second, *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives*, was originally published as *boundary 2* 19.1 (1993). As I will mention later, Pease opens the first volume with his own “New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon,” which critiques Frederick Crews’s “Whose American Renaissance?” and he begins the second volume with “National Identities,” which continues his critique of Crews while also revising the position that he stakes out in his earlier “New Americanists.” The publication histories of these volumes are important, I believe, because it reveals two critical moments in the late twentieth-century transformation of American Studies. When Pease first wrote “New Americanists,” the state of the discipline was still very much in conflict, the course of the future was uncertain, and he was attempting to shape that uncertain future. By 1994, however, Pease and the other “New Americanists” had all but completed their revision of the field and the re-printed issues of *boundary 2* are two of what Kramer recognizes as several “taking-stock volumes” that New Americanists produced as their particular methods—which had seemed radical to those like Crews—became mainstream (109).

2 Since he published *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell has continued to publish explicitly ecocritical work—*Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (2001) and *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2005)—and he has become something of a figurehead for ecocriticism. He served as the plenary speaker for the 2003 meeting of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, and in a short review of *Writing for an Endangered World*, Ulrich Baer offers this quick description of Buell’s status within the field, which is particularly effective for the way that it straddles accuracy and overstatement: “Buell . . . is godfather to the academic field of ecocriticism” (emphasis added).

3 As I will discuss throughout *Looking Away*, Recent histories of environmentalism, such as Robert Gottlieb’s *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* insist upon a similarly long view of environmental politics.
CHAPTER 2
JAMES FENIMORE COOPER, AMERICAN CANON FORMATION,
AND THE ERASURE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ANXIETY

In his most enduring body of work, the five novels of the Leatherstocking Series, published between 1823 and 1841, James Fenimore Cooper argues that the United States is expanding into a limited environment, that its dominant capitalist culture is environmentally ruinous and unsustainable, that the continent has always already been a contested space rather than a virgin void, and that language and science are transparent mechanisms of a Euro-American imperialism that was much more complex than the squatters, squires, and outcasts that populate his romances. James Fenimore Cooper, his writings, and his environmental awareness, however, have all been written out of the field of American literature by generations of critics whose aesthetic projects and political interests differ drastically from his own.

During his own lifetime, Cooper was tremendously successful in commercial terms, but he had his difficulties. He was born into a federalist family and held federalist sympathies as the nation turned toward Jeffersonian, and later Jacksonian, democratic politics. He was a voice of cultural reflexivity that maintained an internationalist perspective in the face of growing American nationalism and artistic nativism. During his lifetime, however, he never faced the type of sustained critical dismantling that really begins with Mark Twain’s famous 1895 “Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offences,” which Jonathan Arac accurately describes in “Nationalism, Hypercanonization, and Huckleberry Finn” as an attempt to remove literature from history and politics. Beginning shortly
after the publication of Twain’s essay and throughout most of the twentieth century, major critics of American literature and culture including George Santayana, Van Wyck Brooks, D. H. Lawrence, F. O. Matthiessen, Henry Nash Smith, Richard Chase, Leslie Fiedler, even Leo Marx, have fulfilled Twain’s vision an ahistorical and apolitical literature through the institution of a literary aesthetic that is based upon what Jane Tompkins calls the “modernist demands” of “psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, epistemological sophistication, stylistic density, formal economy” (xvii). The critics who have endorsed this modernist aesthetic have devalued “works whose stated purpose is to influence the course of history, and which therefore employ a language that is not only not unique but common and accessible to everyone,” and in the process they have drastically devalued Cooper and almost entirely silenced the environmental anxieties that are a part of his vision of a historically and politically embedded natural world (125).

Removing Cooper from History

When Twain issued his 1895 mockery of James Fenimore Cooper, George Santayana had already earned his B. A. at Harvard in 1882 and was working toward the Ph.D. and faculty appointment that he would earn from the same institution in 1889. Five years later, in 1904, Van Wyck Brooks enrolled at Harvard. T. S. Eliot followed in 1906. Before Santayana emigrated to Great Britain in 1912, he had made lasting impressions on Brooks, who graduated in 1907, and Eliot, who, after earning his B.A. in 1910 and his M.A. in 1911, had begun working toward the Ph.D. in philosophy that he would never complete. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Santayana and Brooks offered critiques of American literature and culture that would clear the historical stage of all but a few figures around whom later critics, like Lawrence, Matthiessen, Chase, and Fiedler
would construct a coherent and relatively compact American canon that culminated in the aesthetic systems of modernists like Eliot.¹

In “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,” an address that he delivered and published in 1911, Santayana makes a series of claims that resonate throughout the Americanist criticism of the twentieth century. He argues that from a time shortly after its beginning the American cultural scene has been hamstrung by a dominance an intellectual system, derived from bastardized forms of Calvinism and Transcendentalism, that is outdated, weak, passive, and feminine. This “genteel tradition,” he argues, is the product of a Calvinism that has lost its convictions and its sense of rigor and a Transcendentalism that has lost its focus on systematic thought (61). It is a lazy, decadent, and “doubly artificial” intellectual foundation that precluded the development of any legitimate national literature with the exception of a few rare masters whose genius could not be squelched by the meager culture that produced them (61). American literary history, for Santayana, is limited to “Poe, Hawthorne, and Emerson,” authors who “would not retail the genteel tradition” but who were “starved” by a national culture that could not–or would not–support them, and Walt Whitman, “the one American writer who has left the genteel tradition entirely behind” (43, 52).

Cooper, of course, was not starved by the nineteenth-century reading public, he did not disdain the femininity of his audience, and he was not ashamed of writing to satisfy it, none of which is lost on Leslie Fiedler, who repeats Santayana’s gender bias in *Love and Death in the American Novel* when he states, in a scandalized tone, that “Cooper began his career imitating an English gentlewoman . . . . It is disconcerting to find him impersonating a female” (186).² After Santayana’s “The Genteel Tradition in
American Philosophy” and before Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel*, however, it was Van Wyck Brooks who was the most committed to undoing Cooper’s critical reputation. Brooks’s foundational critique of Cooper appears in his 1915 *America’s Coming of Age*, a text that F. O. Matthiessen describes in *American Renaissance* as Brooks’s most rigorous, most intellectually engaged, and most critically discriminating volume of criticism (Matthiessen xvii).

In his analysis of American culture, Brooks recapitulates Santayana’s emphasis on a divided American mind using two of the historical figures that are central to Santayana’s analysis. For Brooks, American national culture is composed of an original puritanism that split into a “highbrow” “current of Transcendentalism” that reached its nadir in the philosophies of Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson before becoming feminized, passive, and intellectually lazy, and a “lowlbrow” “current of catchpenny opportunism” that coalesced in the figure of Benjamin Franklin before ultimately producing “the atmosphere of contemporary business life” (10). Brooks argues that this bifurcated culture, this slightly redefined “genteel tradition,” has stifled cultural and literary development in the United States, that even in the second decade of the twentieth century the nation is still “like a vast Sargasso Sea—a prodigious welter of unconscious life, swept by ground-swells of half-conscious emotion” from which very few authors of merit have been able to emerge (164).

Following Santayana, Brooks regards Emerson, Hawthorne, and Poe as qualified successes whose writings can do no better than present a “fastidiously intellectual” “shadow world . . . in which only two colors exist, white and black,” while hailing Walt Whitman as the only American literary figure who has been able to transcend the
strictures of his native culture (113). Whitman, Brooks argues, was “a great vegetable of a man, all of a piece in roots, flavor, substantiality, and succulence, well-ripened in the common sunshine” who offered America, “for the first time . . . something organic in American life” (112). Within his organic self, “the hitherto incompatible extremes of the American temperament were fused;” he “cast into a crucible” “all those things which had been separate, self-sufficient, incoördinate” in American culture, and “they emerged, harmonious and molten, in a fresh democratic ideal, which is based upon the whole personality” (112, 118).

As critical as they were to establishing the centrality of Emerson, Poe, Hawthorne, and Whitman within an emerging American national literature, these arguments of Santayana and Brooks alternately exclude and dismiss Cooper. Never a subject of discussion in Santayana’s work, where he looms as a silent and unacknowledged specter of the genteel tradition that disgusts him, Brooks describes Cooper as a participant in a womanish and domestic “literature of necessity” (47). Entirely secondary to a higher “absolute literature,” Cooper’s variety of literature, Brooks argues, was “simply a cog in the machinery of life” whose practitioners, “like prudent women who, having moved into a new house, energetically set to work laying down carpets, papering walls, cutting and hanging the most appropriate window-curtains, and pruning the garden–making it, in short, a place of reasonable charm and contentment” (47 emphasis added). Authors who participated in this “literature of necessity,” Brooks argues, “were moralists . . . shot through with all manner of baccalaureate ideals” who produced texts that were rendered “barren” by “ulterior” objectives of “success or
salvation” that were as ruinous to literary production as “the ulterior object of making money” (50, 53 emphasis added).

Brooks’s patronizing claim that Cooper’s art performs the “woman’s work” of a more masculine and “absolute” American literature is clearly meant to demean, as is his quick but stabbing suggestion that any awareness of market forces produces a debased literature. The more lasting violence that Santayana and Brooks exact against Cooper, however, is their almost entire erasure of the literary and political situations that surround his work. As two of his early twentieth-century defenders, Robert Spiller and Vernon Louis Parrington, argue, Cooper emerged from a federalist political tradition and he grappled with the federalist/democratic binary throughout his career. Cooper’s father was a federalist, he attended Yale during the reign of the arch-federalist Timothy Dwight, and as a landowner who wished to maintain his holdings against the wishes of an increasingly democratic populous, he had deep federalist sympathies during his own lifetime.³

The political system that the Santayana/Brooks train of Americanist criticism endorses, however, is clearly democratic. Brooks glorifies Whitman, after all, because he embodies “a fresh democratic ideal” and the critics who have shaped the field after Brooks have followed his lead. D. H. Lawrence opens his 1933 Studies in Classic American Literature with a discussion of Benjamin Franklin and continues on to Crèvecoeur, whose yeoman agrarianism anticipates Jeffersonian democracy, and arrives at Cooper with no more historical or political context than this. The first sentence of the prologue to Henry Nash Smith’s 1950 Virgin Land is Crèvecoeur’s question, “What is an American?” From there, Smith opens his book with a discussion of Jefferson and follows
a democratic trajectory that culminates in a chapter on democracy’s bard, Walt Whitman, before ever engaging Cooper. Even Leo Marx’s 1964 *Machine in the Garden*, which one might reasonably expect to engage Cooper, opens with a discussion of Hawthorne, proceeds into a discussion of Shakespeare, and then entirely overshoots Cooper and his historical moment as it moves from discussions of Robert Beverly and Jefferson to Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Twain, Henry James, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

**Rehistoricizing Cooper**

A century-old tradition of ahistorical criticism—punctuated only by the rare historical emphasis of a Spiller or Parrington until the paradigm-shifting work of Nina Baym, Jane Tompkins, Jonathan Arac, and Donald Pease in the 1980s and 1990s—stands in the way of historicizing Cooper in any fashion, but to suggest that Cooper’s famous lamentations of environmental abuse should be taken seriously as moments of legitimate environmentalist resistance is to stack roadblock upon roadblock.⁴ When Leo Marx initially published *The Machine in the Garden*, critics argued that his basic thesis transposed a twentieth-century technological anxiety onto nineteenth-century texts, that his work was anachronistic or “presentist,” and the threat of such criticism seems to continue to hang over any investigation of environmentalist sentiment in pre-contemporary American literature.⁵

Americanist scholarship in general and Cooper criticism in particular have each worked to squelch any suggestion that legitimate environmentalist sympathies can be read in Cooper’s texts. One of the first major critical texts to suggest such a reading, Annette Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land*, was met with almost immediate refutation.⁶ Kolodny argues that “young James Fenimore Cooper saw with dismay the gutting of forests and the increase of the population,” that his creation of Templeton in *The
*Pioneers* was a deliberate attempt “to correct some of the abuses he had witnessed,” and that his landowning aristocrat, Marmaduke Temple was a “well-intentioned conservationist” for his attempts at regulating fishing and hunting seasons and for his interest in similar means of protecting forests (72, 91). In her 1979 *New World, New Earth*, Cecilia Tichi attempts to sweep the feet from under Kolodny by arguing that the recognition of conservationist sentiments in pre-contemporary authors is nothing more than an act of “mistaking palpable present effects for past intentions” (xvii). “Far from heedlessly vandalizing the environment,” Tichi argues, “early Americans saw its modification—in fact, its reform—as an ideological imperative that must proceed together with America’s moral regeneration” (viii). Within this frame, Tichi argues that

In Cooper’s fiction, environmental reform is a national imperative authorized by the American gentleman who is Cooper’s national paragon. While the Leatherstocking Tales collectively affirm the aesthetic and ethical values of the pristine wilderness, principally through the character of Natty Bumppo, the novelist’s American gentleman mandate environmental reform in the name of civilization. (169)

The essential differences between the interpretations of Kolodny and Tichi lie in their critical and cultural politics. Kolodny is engaged in defining strains of dissent whereas Tichi, as this long passage demonstrates, only grants legitimacy to dominant or mainstream ideologies. Because Cooper was skeptical about the national project of transforming the New World into a “New Earth,” Tichi interprets Cooper’s entire artistic project as a failure that ends in “moral allegory” and “diatribe unleavened by satiric skill,” a “fecal commemoration of a rotten New Earth” (187).³

In essays that focus exclusively on James Fenimore Cooper, Richard Godden and Charles Swann follow Tichi in rejecting Cooper’s environmental anxieties by deconstructing the innocence of Marmaduke Temple’s game laws in *The Pioneers*. In a
statement that aligns his critical perspective with that of Tichi in *New World, New Earth*, Godden writes that “Temple’s game laws” are “too often taken ecologically. Temple as conservationist arises exclusively from twentieth-century misreading; his interest in deer, maple and bass, like his interest in coal and canals, expresses a preoccupation with development” (125). And while Swann does not entirely discredit the conservationist aims of Temple’s game laws in such a manner, he recognizes that “the history of game laws is a history of class laws,” and he argues that Temple’s game laws constitute “a democratic rhetoric referring to the rule of law which conceals the way in which a would-be American aristocracy is in danger of replicating an aristocratic Europe” (97, 100).

Tichi, Godden, and Swann submit Kolodny’s initial claims about Cooper’s environmentalist concerns to valuable scrutiny, but they perform their own misreadings by dismissing environmentalism as a strictly contemporary movement and by failing to read Cooper’s environmental interventions against the much different environmental attitudes of the federalist tradition out of which he emerged and for which we all know he held deep sympathies. Although environmentalism is popularly periodized as the product of the 1960s and 1970s (the decades that produced Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, and the celebration of Earth Day in 1970), historians of the movement agree, almost unanimously, that the movement has much older origins. Some scholars, such as Max Oelschlaeger and Carolyn Merchant, locate the origins of environmental crisis in “Judeo-Christian,” or “Abrahamic,” land ethics (Oelschlaeger’s terms) and the European Enlightenment while they locate points of environmentalist resistance throughout their telescopic historical narratives.
environmental resistance, but even the consensus among more conventional historians of environmentalism such as Samuel P. Hays, Roderick Nash, William Cronon, Stephen Fox, Robert Gottlieb, and Jack Davis, however, holds that “the roots of American environmentalism,” which is my most immediate concern here, “were planted well before the nineteenth century,” that “since the colonial times, there were those who perceived—and some who lamented—the dramatic transformation of a pristine continent as a result of European migration, European technology, European economics, and European values” (Shabecoff 2).

From a historical perspective that grants environmentalism a deep history, it is perfectly reasonable to situate American federalism in a long history of environmental destruction and environmentalist resistance, but situating Cooper in such a history is more difficult. Any sense of environment in mainstream American literary criticism has been thoroughly depoliticized and transformed into discussions of landscape, symbol, or myth, while the dominant critical tradition—as it has been shaped by those like Santayana, Brooks, and Lawrence—has created a literary teleology of democracy that finds its earliest articulation in a Crèvecoeur whose goal of defining a new and culturally autonomous American in largely optimistic terms has always suited the literary institution’s critical objectives. Through the work of those like Lawrence and Henry Nash Smith, Crèvecoeur’s 1784 *Letters from an American Farmer* has simply become an American master text that provides a familiar—but not necessarily the best or the most complete—context for all that surrounds it.

In *Cooper’s Leather-Stocking Novels*, Geoffrey Rans attempts to situate Cooper in the context of American federalism by the “trenchant republicanism of the opening of
“The Pioneers” as a continuation of Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s faith in “the happy effects which constantly flow . . . from sobriety and industry, when united with good land and freedom” (6). While I find Rans’s concern with republicanism well directed, I do not believe that Crèvecoeur’s text is the best point of entry into Cooper’s art. In his own day, Crèvecoeur’s 1784 Letters from an American Farmer would have hardly seemed more “literary” than several federalist histories of American settlement that were written by figures close to Cooper. Fenimore Cooper’s father, William Cooper, and Timothy Dwight, who was president of Yale University while Fenimore Cooper was a student there, both published texts that pay close attention to the relationship between American culture and the North American environment. Following the methods and concerns of Jeremy Belknap’s History of New Hampshire (published in three volumes between 1784 and 1792), William Cooper’s 1810 A Guide in the Wilderness and Dwight’s Travels in New England and New York (published in four volumes during 1821 and 1822) record the history of the United States in environmental, social, and religious terms, and they devote significant space to describing United States expansionism as a wholly benevolent process that nonetheless needed strict guidance to prevent it from becoming wasteful and environmentally unsustainable.

When Fenimore Cooper discusses processes of European settlement and the North American environment in the Leatherstocking series, he writes in conversation with these texts—sometimes extending their arguments and sometimes rejecting them. The most obvious difference between the federalist histories and Cooper’s historical romances are Cooper’s deep misgivings about the environmental consequences and sustainability of American expansionism. The federalist histories envision United States expansionism as
the extension of individual enterprise into a virgin void, and they identify environmental exhaustion as a real but remediable threat to the progress of national expansion. In the Leatherstocking series, on the other hand, Cooper presents American expansionism as a much more complex and insidious national project involving the military, linguistic, and scientific subjugation of a socio-politically embedded un-virgin space, and he rejects the managerial optimism of his father and Timothy Dwight to present resource exhaustion as an unsolvable impediment to the expansion of American “civilization.”

Throughout the four volumes of his *Travels in New England and New York*, Dwight explains that settlement involves unattractive phases characterized by tree stumps and burnt tree trunks like the ones that snow obscures from Elizabeth Temple’s view at the beginning of *The Pioneers*. None of the ugliness involved in the process, however, prevents Dwight from declaring that newly settled valleys in the bloom of cultivation present the “richest prospect in New England,” if not “in the United States,” that North America is filled with inexhaustible resources, and that the transformation of wilderness into civilization can be accomplished using methods that are alternately good and bad (1: 257). In one of his most ecstatic moments, for instance, he views the Connecticut River valley from the summit of Mount Holyoke and finds that

A perfect neatness and brilliancy is everywhere diffused, without a neglected spot to tarnish the luster or excite a wish in the mind for a higher finish. All these objects united present here a collection of beauties to which I know no parallel. When the eye traces this majestic stream, meandering with a singular course through these delightful fields . . . it will be difficult not to say that with these exquisite varieties of beauty and grandeur the relish for landscape is filled. (1: 259)

This vision, one of the most enraptured of Dwight’s entire four-volume travel narrative, is surely a legitimate response to a remarkable place, but it’s effect is aided by
the elevated, panoramic, and godlike perspective of Dwight’s gaze. At ground level, however, Dwight, like Belknap and William Cooper, cannot avoid the fact that such idyllic scenes depend on the perpetuity of the immanently exhaustible natural resources that make them possible. Of these three authors, only Belknap, in the earliest of the texts I am discussing here, entirely avoids issues of resource scarcity. Belknap never admits any real limits to nature’s resources, but he does suggest that human impact—deforestation in particular—may result in permanent climate change, and he offers detailed advice on “rural economy,” or how to make the best use of whatever natural resources may be available at any particular location (Belknap 3: 248).

William Cooper and Dwight, writing slightly later than Belknap, are deeply anxious about the durability of environmental resources. Cooper’s text is written in direct response to a letter from William Sampson that suggests Cooper should boast “of having cut down two millions of trees,” only before asking Cooper, several pages later, if “too great zeal for clearing may render [timber] in some time as scarce as it is now abundant” (4). The best Cooper can do is confirm that forest exhaustion is a real threat, but Dwight, who is reluctant even to make this concession, demonstrates more clearly that the only response to environmental depletion within a federalist vision of American society is a faith in the regenerative capacity of the natural world that he weds to a laissez faire faith in the ultimate triumph of the type of “good” federalism that Cooper spells out in his Guide.

In his most vehement critique of deforestation, Dwight writes that

The people of Newbury appear to have cut down their forest with an improvident hand: an evil but too common in most parts of this country. Unhappily it is an increasing evil, and may hereafter put a final stop to the progress of population long before it will have reached to the natural acme. Almost every person
complains of this imprudence; and yet not a single efficacious nor hopeful measure is adopted to lessen or even check it. . . . Forecast is certainly no predominant trait in the character of man, else an evil of this magnitude would create very serious apprehensions. (2: 238)

It may be obvious, but the particular vigor of this statement is worth emphasizing.

Dwight considers this “improvident” destruction of forest “evil,” and he recognizes that the situation in Newbury is merely representative of a much larger problem. The consequences, for Dwight, are clear and drastic: the misuse of resources may hinder population growth, and, to read what I think runs just beneath the surface of Dwight’s statement, may prevent the nation from reaching the “natural acme” that Dwight clearly believes throughout his Travels to be total transcontinental domination.

Dwight is clearly troubled by the fact that in Newbury’s representative situation “not a single efficacious nor hopeful measure is adopted to lessen or check” the course of environmental destruction, but he does nothing to suggest any regulatory measures. His most common response, to the contrary, is to emphasize that forests “renew themselves” (1: 75). In the first volume of his Travels, for instance, Dwight writes to his imagined British reader that “it may seem strange to you, accustomed as you are to see forest trees planted in great numbers and preserved with great care, that the inhabitants of this country should so soon after its colonization have cut down their forests in this extensive manner . . . . this wanton manner without any apparent reason” (1: 74–75). To explain this strange phenomenon—and to diffuse the environmental anxiety that I believe neither William Cooper nor James Fenimore Cooper can entirely ignore—Dwight explains that “the wood of this country is its fuel” and that the trees of New England “renew themselves” in a “manner and by a process totally superior to any contrived by the human mind;” they are “furnished by the Author of Nature with the means of perpetual self-
restoration” (1: 75). “Good grounds,” he continues “yield a growth [of wood] amply sufficient for fuel once in fourteen years” and with proper husbandry “the forests of New England become in a sense ever living and supply plentifully the wants of the inhabitants” (1: 75).

The only solution to environmental depletion for Dwight is nature’s regenerative capacity, which he believes to be greater in North American than anywhere else. William Cooper, however, mounts an argument in his Guide that Dwight would absolutely affirm: the only way to ensure a prosperous and sustainable settlement (in social, economic, and environmental terms) is to institute a benevolent federalist social and political plan. Where Cooper sees failed settlements (among which I believe Dwight’s Newbury would qualify), he sees the failure of “plans” in which large landlords “have reserved favorite tracts, retained mill sites in their own hands; . . . opened expensive roads, and built costly bridges at their own charge. They have too early insisted with rigor upon payment, and forced the purchaser to surrender a part or the whole of his possession” (37). Cooper’s plan, which he promotes throughout the Guide, involves large landowners granting land to both rich and poor settlers, actually selling rather than leasing tracts of land, and cultivating goodwill and a sense of community among settlers by practicing extreme patience with lien holders and accomplishing large-scale improvements through communal effort.

William Cooper and Timothy Dwight feel that an ill-managed federalist settlement governed by greedy and speculative patricians can produce results just as devastating to the raw materials of national prosperity as the type of thoroughly self-serving democratic mob that Fenimore Cooper represents in the pioneering Ishmael Bush
clan of *The Prairie*. Despite the fact that he always harbored deep misgivings about democracy, Fenimore Cooper breaks from the federalist faith of his father and Timothy Dwight. In structuring the central conflicts of *The Pioneers* around the looming spectre of environmental exhaustion that his forefathers ignored or downplayed, Fenimore Cooper demonstrates that he has no faith that any social or governmental system can control the environmental rapacity that he recognizes to be a fundamental component of an essentially violent and imperialistic Euro-American culture.

Scholars like Godden and Swann have certainly identified the self-interest involved in Marmaduke Temple’s creation of game laws, but such arguments fail to recognize that the federalist vision that William Cooper and Timothy Dwight promote relies upon a benevolent aristocratic self-interest and that in several key places Fenimore Cooper extends the problem of resource exhaustion beyond any sense of personal interest as he implies that it impinges on regional and national prosperity. In his *A Guide in the Wilderness*, William Cooper is quite clear that the best interests of landowners should also serve the best interests of their tenants, and Judge Temple’s laws represent an attempt at fulfilling the type of managerial perfection that William Cooper envisions. And when the game laws emerge flawed—they not only solidify a class system but, at least in the case of the fishing regulations, work against their own stated conservationist goals—, they signal not only the failure of Judge Temple but also the failure of the entire federalist system that extends back to Cooper and Dwight.

The failure of Temple’s game laws is all the more painful for the fact that throughout *The Pioneers* Cooper stares environmental destruction in the face as neither Dwight nor William Cooper ever could. Where Dwight and Cooper ignore or explain
away alarming forms of environmental destruction, in the 1832 introduction to *The Pioneers*, Cooper foregrounds his text with a footnote that calls particular attention to environmental destruction. Using language that could not be more direct, he writes that “the Otsego is beginning to be a niggard of its treasures,” and in the body of the novel itself—and significantly outside the dramatic pigeon-shooting and fishing scenes that garner so much critical attention—Cooper defines environmental scarcity as a problem with regional and national implications that extend beyond any sense of personal self interest (9). When Temple remarks that settlers are “‘already felling the forests as if no end could be found to their treasures, nor any limits to their extent . . . twenty years hence we shall want fuel,’” he presents a strident definition—against the resistance of Richard Jones, who constantly preaches nature’s illimitability—of the natural world as limited and threatened by destruction at human hands, and he offers this comment in a tone vague enough to suggest that the problem extends well beyond the bounds of Templeton (105). More than two hundred pages later, when the novel again turns to a discussion of the state of forests, Cooper absolutely rejects Dwight’s faith in forests’ regenerative capacity when he has Temple remind Billy Kirby that the maples he is damaging “‘are the growth of centuries, and when once gone, none living will ever see their loss remedied’” (228).

By the time that Natty Bumppo flees Templeton for the uninhabited wilds where he reappears in *The Prairie*, he and Cooper have both abandoned any faith in federalism’s ability to ameliorate environmental destruction. When Natty turns westward, he concedes that not even a federalist patrician like Oliver Edwards, who has been trained by Natty himself in the bosom of the nation’s nature and who has married a woman in
Elizabeth Temple who appreciates nature’s beauty, can quell either his own rapacious impulses or those of such reckless individuals as Richard Jones and Billy Kirby.

Ultimately, Cooper cannot see a way out of the patterns of environmental destruction that he confronts in *The Pioneers*, but his rejection of established federalist modes of viewing the environment and avoiding environmental crisis develop, as Leatherstocking series continues, into a thorough critique of the U. S.’s orientation toward the natural space it occupies. Although his engagement with the problem is often less explicit than it is in *The Pioneers*, throughout the rest of the Leatherstocking tales Cooper sustains a critical counternarrative against any triumphalist notion of North American environmental virginity or illimitability. From *The Last of the Mohicans* to *The Deerslayer* (the second and final novels of the series), Cooper situates American expansionism as the product of military, linguistic, and scientific violence taking place in a wholly unromantic space that does not constitute virgin ground so much as an already bloody field that Europeans and white Americans have recently come to occupy simply as the most violent, insidious, and numerous forces in play.

In *The Spy*, Cooper presents the North American environment as contested space, or “neutral ground,” but beginning with *The Last of the Mohicans*, he begins to mount a more radical rejection of the “virgin land” myth. Rather than empty or virgin space, in each of the Leatherstocking tales after *The Pioneers* (*The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Prairie*, *The Pathfinder*, and *The Deerslayer*) Cooper consistently describes the North American environment as a space of bloody conflict. As the first novel of the Leatherstocking series to descend into the prehistory of *The Pioneers*, *The Last of the Mohicans* describes the North American continent as a space that has been shaped by
violence since European settlement. Cooper insists that “there was no recess of the
woods so dark, nor any secret place so lovely, that it might claim exemption from the
inroads of those who had pledged their blood to satiate their vengeance, or to uphold the
cold and selfish policy of the distant monarchs of Europe” (11). He recognizes, as Rans
explains, that “European arms” represent a clear “threat to nature, powerful though the
presence of the forest is,” and that the European “imperial adventure” “has at its end the
defilement of nature” (Rans 109, 108, 107). The village of Templeton, Cooper suggests
at the outset of The Last of the Mohicans, is not simply the product of what Timothy
Dwight would describe as “equivocal,” or mysterious, “generation;” it is built, much to
the contrary, in a region that was first “a bloody arena,” a “scene of strife and bloodshed”
(Mohicans 13).

The Last of the Mohicans suggests that North American space has been a zone of
contest since the European incursion, but Cooper makes more radical claims in The
Prairie and The Deerslayer. In both of these novels, he denies any sense that the North
American continent had ever, at least within human history, constituted a virgin or empty
space. As Ishmael Bush and Thomas Hutter push their predictable ideas of property
ownership into various frontier zones, Cooper emphasizes that their claims of ownership
are not the first but merely the newest—that every North American space has always
existed under military and political mediation. Through the voice of Natty Bumppo in
The Prairie, for instance, Cooper insists that “The Teton and the Pawnee and the Konza,
and men of a dozen other tribes claim to own these naked fields” that Ishmael Bush is
attempting to possess, and in his own undisguised narratorial voice Cooper adds that
Bush’s attempt at legitimizing his land-grabbing is a “wild conceit” (78).
Cooper’s rejection of the virgin land myth is more radical in *The Deerslayer* by virtue of its deconstruction of the myth in an even more remote historical moment. Here, in a novel set in 1745 and well beyond the geographical boundaries of regular European settlement, in a scene that William P. Kelly receives uncritically as “a virgin wilderness,” Cooper punctures the myth of virgin land by planting a fortified house, “Muskrat Castle,” in the middle of the most unspoiled natural space that he ever describes (39). The very fact that Tom Hutter’s “castle,” which Kelly does recognize to contain contains numerous symbols of European power and violence, has come to be stationed in the middle of the lake in the first place is a constant reminder that this seemingly primitive location is already overwritten with conflicts of ownership—Hutter has built the castle in the lake because native Americans—who do not recognize Hutter’s claim of ownership—have repeatedly burnt him out of the homes he built on dry land. As Natty and Hurry Harry discuss the implications of this fortified house that seems to float in the middle of the lake, they enumerate the claims of ownership that hang over the place: they mention that the only “‘lawful owner’” of the place is “‘the King,’” but that “Tom Hutter . . . has got possession and is like to keep it as long as his life lasts,” while at the same time Native Americans “‘come and go’” but leave the impression that “‘the country seems to belong to no native tribe in particular’”—all of this despite the fact that “‘Mohawks’” are in a position to cede the land should a “‘heavy enough’” buyer emerge (37–38).

From particular points of view—particularly those that read Cooper’s engagement with issues of property and class in the context of his own loss of property and status—it is certainly possible to interpret Cooper’s rejection of the virgin land idea as little more than a legitimization of Europe’s bloody involvement in what was always a violently
negotiated space. Within the frame of federalist historiography and Cooper’s engagement with it, however, his rejection of the virgin land myth forces violent European (and later, American) imperialism to appear as the violent acts that they are without being distorted by a screen of cultural myth that transforms the acts into a sanitized and ambivalent expansion into empty space. This argument is further supported, I believe, by evidence that Cooper understood European and American imperialism to be vast and complex mechanisms composed of seemingly innocuous forces—namely, language and science.

Cooper invests language with significant spatial agency in *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Deerslayer*, while he places science—in the form of natural history—in the vanguard of American expansionism in *The Prairie*. In *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Deerslayer*, Cooper does something in his place descriptions that Timothy Dwight and William Cooper never do in their historical works: he peels away the layers of language that have been superimposed over particular places over spans of time, and he associates the most recent layers of language as racially and environmentally destructive. Cooper performs this archaeology of place names at the outset of *The Last of the Mohicans*. In a passage that would seem horribly and unnecessarily circumlocutious to Lawrence, Fiedler, or Chase, Cooper refuses to simply state that the action of the story occurs around Lake George, a place that Dwight visited and described in his *Travels* without any sort of equivocation whatsoever. Cooper explains, instead, that the central action of the story will occur around a lake that the French had named “‘du Saint Sacrement,’” that the English had named Lake George, and that the Native Americans had named “‘Horican’” (12). The process of naming, Cooper recognizes, erases not only
a Native American name but also the act of the violent act of *renaming*—the names “Lake George” and “du Saint Sacrement” were only established, Cooper writes, because European nations had “united to rob the untutored possessors of the wooded scenery of their native right” (12, emphasis added). Cooper finds this history of naming significant enough to expand it into a footnote where he suggests an even deeper linguistic history of the place (since the Indians have multiple languages and dialects, the lake may have even more names), where he translates the Indian name “Horican” into “The Tail of the Lake” (which is significantly devoid of the religious and nationalist connotations of the French and English names) and where he cheapens the enduring and legal “Lake George” appellation by describing it as “vulgar” (12).

This same attention to place names (which loosens the coherence of Cooper’s plots and adds a layer of complexity that would never improve his standing in the main line of Americanist criticism) also appears in *The Deerslayer*, with the added caveat that here the arrival of an English name is clearly understood to herald a place’s destruction. One of Natty’s reactions to seeing Glimmerglass lake is to ask Hurry Harry, “‘Have the governor’s, or the King’s people given this lake a name’” (44). Natty feels that to give a place an English name is to “‘disturb natur,’” and he is relieved to find that the place has “‘no pale face name, for their christenings always foretel waste and destruction’” (45). Despite finding pleasure in the absence of an official English name, Natty understands that the place still exists in a historical and social matrix involving “red skins,” who would “have their own modes of knowing it” and who would be “‘likely to call the place by something reasonable and resembling,’” even if he does not know the names himself (45).
Cooper clearly understands that language is an agent of imperial violence and erasure, and he describes language as one of the first mechanisms of imperialism to affect a place after European incursion. In *The Prairie*, however, Cooper draws science into the vanguard of American expansionism through his treatment of Obed Battius, whom Richard Chase dismisses as “a scientist-pedant who has stepped out of the pages of Smollett or Fielding to investigate the flora and fauna of the plains” who is “tiresome” and who appears in “comic passages” that “are incredibly bad” (59). Regardless of the literary history that may have influenced Cooper’s development of the character, Battius is also a significant representative in *The Prairie* of natural science, a science that has been complicit with imperialist expansion since its inception.

Numerous scholars have unpacked the politics of natural science since Michel Foucault’s groundbreaking critique of European rationalism in *The Order of Things*. By now, however, it is fairly commonplace to recognize, as Lee Rust Brown does in the context of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s interest in natural history, that natural science emerged “in the early sixteenth century” and “grew along a course parallel to that of European exploration and colonial expansion” (97). Mary Louise Pratt, who deals with natural science more directly than Brown, argues that natural science is actually deeply complicit with European imperialism, and she offers a much more vivid picture of the projects that natural science shared with European empire. Natural science’s drive toward the total “systematization of nature,” she writes, “coincides with the height of the slave trade, the plantation system, colonial genocide in North America and South Africa, slave rebellions in the Andes, the Caribbean, North America, elsewhere” (36).
In the Leatherstocking series, Battius, as a natural scientist, amounts to an “image of a European bourgeois subject simultaneously innocent and imperial” and the science that he brings into the American West asserts a seemingly “harmless hegemonic vision that instills no apparatus of domination” (Pratt 34). The scientific “apparatus of domination” that Battius represents is certainly less bloody than the military means of domination that appear in *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Pathfinder*, and *The Deerslayer*, but it is far more insidious. In *The Prairie*, this imperial natural science has penetrated the continental interior far beyond the reach of any significant military power, and even if Battius is a failure of a naturalist, his presence points to the fact that natural science has already reached and moved beyond the ground that he occupies with the Bush clan. As soon as Battius enters the novel, Cooper uses him to explain that even though Ishmael Bush and his family have penetrated the continent far beyond the bounds of “civilization,” they have not—and perhaps cannot—move into territory unknown to science. Battius, after all, has just completed a two-day walk in the wilderness “without seeing even a blade of grass that is not already enumerated and classed” (69). The place has already been penetrated, and every organism in it classified, by a quick-moving science that is already pushing into the West’s outer reaches, even as Battius speaks, with explorers like Lewis and Clark (whose expedition is, after all, the reason that Duncan Uncas Middleton enters the novel in the first place). Battius brings to *The Prairie* the natural scientist’s ability to read a place—and to read the scientific knowledge that has already been cast over it. Battius never finds any organisms that are unknown to science, but everywhere he looks he finds evidence of science’s presence, and by constantly articulating the otherwise invisible presence of science Battius offers a reminder that the
entire continental span has already been penetrated, classified, and brought to order by a scientific force that would otherwise remain invisible.

In the end, Cooper’s engagement with environmental crisis, which eventually becomes a critique of imperialist Euro-American culture, has hardly counted for anything for the better part of a century. Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, Robert Spiller and Vernon Louis Parrington recognized that Cooper may have been the most incisive critic of American literature and culture of his day, but their interpretations have been overwrought by a dominant mode of criticism that dismisses history and politics altogether. Cooper’s abandonment of a federalist faith in environmental inexhaustibility, his deconstruction of the American mythology of virgin land, and his recognition of American culture as a destructive and bloody imperial force have all gone unrecognized within a critical tradition that has considered him, in the words of Leslie Fiedler, an ultimate failure of an author who had “all the qualifications for a great American writer except the simple ability to write,” whose works are “monumental in their cumulative dullness,” nearly “unreadable” because of their “hysteria” and “piety,” appropriately “read . . .in large print and embellished with pictures,” and remembered “if at all, as children’s books, exciting and incredibly boring by turns” (191, 180).

As Rans recognizes, the gap between the publication of The Prairie and The Pathfinder “wrought a difference in Cooper” (173). Where the opening passages of the earlier three Leatherstocking novels begin with descriptions of nature overlaid with “historical, ideological, or political implications,” the opening scenes of The Pathfinder and The Deerslayer feature landscapes that are deliberately mythic–or
ahistorical—and explicitly defined in terms of “the sublime, the picturesque, and the beautiful” (Rans 173). Although, as I have demonstrated, the critique of American expansionism that Cooper develops throughout the first three novels makes its appearance in both *The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer*, these novels, the final two of the series, present markedly different visions of a natural world. Here, for the first time, Cooper explicitly describes nature as “sublime,” a term that Cooper never uses in the Leatherstocking series until 1841 in the opening pages of *The Pathfinder*.

While it is possible to explain the shifts that occur between *The Prairie* and *The Deerslayer* as Cooper’s efforts to finally turn Natty Bumppo into a mythical hero, Cooper’s turn away from the highly historically and politically enmeshed natural world of *The Pioneers*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *The Prairie* toward the deliberately mythical and self-consciously sublime landscapes of *The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer* also participates in a national movement toward the abstract vision of nature that Ralph Waldo Emerson articulated in his 1833 *Nature*. As I will discuss in the following chapters, it would be Emerson’s vision of a wholly abstract, ahistorical, and apolitical Nature that would become, to the critical detriment of Cooper and Longfellow (whom I will also discuss at length later in Chapter 3), the only legitimate notion of nature within the American literary canon that began to take shape, at the hands of critics like George Santayana and Van Wyck Brooks, in the early decades of the twentieth century.

**Notes**

1 I may have never become interested in Harvard’s impact on American literary history had I not encountered Frank Lentricchia’s *The Modernist Quartet*, which situates Santayana, John Dewey, William James, and Josiah Royce as chief influences of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and Robert Frost.
William Charvat’s discussion of Cooper in *The Profession of Authorship in America: 1800-1870* is still a foundational study of Cooper’s commercial success and his understanding of both his audience and the nuances of the nineteenth-century publishing industry. James D. Wallace’s *Early Cooper and His Audience*, however, offers a longer and more comprehensive analysis.

While William Cooper often garners a passing mention in James Fenimore Cooper’s critical biographies, as is the case in Donald A. Ringe’s standard *James Fenimore Cooper*, he has received very little sustained attention since Robert Spiller’s *Fenimore Cooper: Critic of His Times* and the second volume of Vernon Louis Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought*. In a significant exception to this tradition of silence, however, Wayne Franklin spends a bit more space on William Cooper in *The New World of James Fenimore Cooper*, but, on the whole,

Although it stands a bit apart from the tradition of American criticism that I am discussing, George Lukács’s *The Historical Novel* also grants Cooper in an incredibly insightful reading. For Lukács, Cooper is inferior to Walter Scott, but he still argues that Cooper’s greatest achievement lies his use of Natty Bumppo to demonstrate that “the enormous historical tragedy of those early colonizers who emigrated from England in order to preserve their freedom, but who themselves destroy this freedom by their own deeds in America” (65).

Marx’s study was first accused of presentism by Bruce Kuklick in “Myth and Symbol in American Studies.” More recently, this charge has been reanimated by Jeffrey Louis Decker in “Disassembling the Machine in the Garden: Antihumanism and the Critique of American-Studies.” Even ecocriticism, the theoretical school that seems most prepared to investigate American literature’s engagements with environmentalism, seems to have been stymied by just such accusations of presentism. Although ecocriticism has flourished since the mid-1990s, it has largely failed to engage the history of environmentalism. Texts that are central to ecocriticism, such as Cheryll Glotfelty’s introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* and Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* readily admit environmentalist motivations, but tend to focus their attention on ecological science and its philosophical implications (holistic worldviews, metaphors of connectivity) as an interpretive frame rather than investigating the intricacies of the history of the environmental movement that could legitimize the environmentalist sentiments that they identify but struggle to confront in “pre-environmentalist” literature. In short, I feel that up to this point ecocriticism has largely operated from the popular and highly limited of idea of environmentalism as a movement with little history beyond the late twentieth century, which meshes fairly easily with the ahistorical modes of literary criticism that have dominated the latter half of the twentieth century. One notable exception to ecocriticism’s tendency toward ahistorical and apolitical criticism is Buell’s second ecocritical work, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*, which is much more rooted in the nuances of the history of environmentalism.
Kolodny is not the first scholar to discuss Cooper’s interest in conservation, but she is the one who sparks the backlash of the critics I will discuss in the next several paragraphs. For an earlier treatment of the issue, see E. Arthur Robinson’s “Conservation in Cooper’s The Pioneers.” In the next several paragraphs I will discuss a protracted critical discussion between Annette Kolodny, Richard Godden, and Charles Swann, and I must give credit to Geoffrey Rans for first identifying the interplay between these texts in his *Cooper’s Leather-Stocking Novels: A Secular Reading*. Rans suggests that Godden and Swan effectively silence Kolodny’s acceptance of Cooper—and Marmaduke Temple—as a conservationist figure, but through the rest of this essay I hope to revitalize Kolodny’s initial assertion of Cooper’s environmentalism by suggesting a broader vision of environmentalism’s history and by slightly shifting the historical context in which we usually read Cooper.

By the very theoretical rubric that she establishes at the beginning of her text, in which no form of environmentalism can play any part in any pre-contemporary text, Tichi prevents herself from finding anything but failure in Cooper’s skeptical view of the American project of environmental modification. In staging her argument, Tichi uses scenes from *The Chainbearer* and *Wyandotte* to argue that Cooper has no essential problem with the destruction of wilderness but that the central thrust of his engagement with national expansion concerned who would authorize “the use of the American axe” (172). Tichi’s use of *The Chainbearer* and *Wyandotte* to suggest that Cooper “really” supports the clearing of wilderness allows her to flatten out the environmental tensions of the Leatherstocking series and reduce any sense of environmental anxiety in these novels into a discussion of class. In a similar manner, she uses Cooper’s bitterly satirical description of apocalyptic environmental disaster in *The Crater* (1847) (in which a massive earthquake swallows up the entire nation and all of its agrarian improvements) to condemn all of his environmental criticism as ridiculous.

In accusing Tichi of burying Cooper’s environmental anxieties in a discussion of class, I do not want to be misunderstood. My goal is not to merely replace her theoretical rubric with my own environmentally sympathetic approach. The real problem of Tichi’s argument is that it drastically reduces the environmental problems that Cooper engages in *The Pioneers* and the other novels of the Leatherstocking Series by transforming what is clearly a multivocal discussion of land ethics into a single narrative of cultural and political power that does not explain, as I will in the rest of this chapter, that the federalism of Cooper and Marmaduke Temple is significantly different from the earlier federalist discussions of the environment.

Of the recent historians of environmentalism, only Kirkpatrick Sale in *The Green Revolution* argues that late twentieth-century environmentalism possesses a moment of pure origin in the 1960s and 1970s. The question of every other historian is not whether or not environmentalism possesses a history but where it’s origins lie and how it is to be periodized. Some of the earliest historians of environmentalism, like Samuel P. Hays and Roderick Nash, recognized that late twentieth-century environmentalism had historical precedents but they emphasized its difference from the earlier conservationist and preservationist movements. William Cronon, Stephen Fox, Robert Gottlieb, and Jack Davis offer a slightly different interpretation of the history of environmentalism. They do
not abandon periodization as entirely as Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature* and Max Oelschlaeger in *The Idea of Wilderness* but they do emphasize continuities between late twentieth-century environmentalism and earlier forms of environmentalist resistance. This mode of environmentalist historiography, which limits itself largely to the history of environmentalism in the United States, is perfectly comfortable extending the history of environmental crisis and corresponding forms of dissent to the colonial period, as Peter Shabecoff recognizes in the statement that I have already quoted.

9 In an effort to reduce any undue confusion, when I discuss William Cooper and James Fenimore Cooper in close proximity, I will refer to James as “Fenimore Cooper.”

10 Belknap’s *History of New Hampshire* is a clear antecedent to Dwight’s *History of New England and New York*—Dwight refers to it repeatedly throughout his text. The fact that Cooper would have been familiar with his father’s *A Guide in the Wilderness* is rather obvious considering the paternal connection, but the fact that Cooper’s, 1838 *The Chronicles of Cooperstown*, is a deliberate revision of his father’s *Guide* stands as further evidence of a sustained intellectual engagement with the earlier text. It is also easy to downplay Cooper’s engagement with Timothy Dwight. Cooper was quite young when he attended Yale University—he was admitted at the age of thirteen and he was expelled for mischief at sixteen—and he publicly downplayed the impact of his formal education. During his presidency, however, Yale was in almost every way Dwight’s university, and it seems that it would have been impossible to attend the university during this period without coming into some sort of contact with him. He taught classes, preached sermons, and presided over public student disciplinary courts like the one that expelled Cooper from Yale after his junior year. Although we have no evidence that Cooper ever said or wrote anything about Dwight, he did strive to maintain contact with several of his Yale professors, particularly Benjamin Silliman, whose hiring was one of the most important events of Dwight’s tenure. The first volume of Parrington’s *Main Currents* contains a concise overview of Timothy Dwight, but Robert Spiller’s *Fenimore Cooper* offers the best description of Dwight’s Yale and Cooper’s engagement with it. Spiller discusses Cooper’s relationship with Silliman, but the best evidence of the relationship are the Cooper’s letters to the professor, which have been collected in *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, edited by James Franklin Beard.

11 For a detailed examination of how this particular type of elevated, panoramic gaze became commonplace in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century American culture, see Donald A. Ringe’s *The Pictorial Mode: Space and Time in the Art of Bryant, Irving, and Cooper*.

12 Belknap believes that deforestation will have a beneficial moderating effect on the climate. It is worth nothing, I believe, that Belknap is so far from condemning the clearing of forested land that he spends a great deal of the third book of his *History* describing the methods of clearing land and recommending the most efficient techniques. The rural economy promoted by Belknap combines the particularly American problem of clearing forested land and draining bogs with established practices of European
agriculture like enriching fertilizing cultivated fields with animal manure and planting grass in old fields to restore their fertility.

13 As Swann and Rans both recognize, the fishing laws that Judge Temple has procured from the legislature allow fishing when the fish of Lake Otsego are spawning, which is actually when fishing causes the worst ecological damage.

14 Natural history is not the only science that Cooper critiques. He also places the science of surveying in the vanguard of American expansionism in *The Prairie* and *The Deerslayer* before devoting an entire novel to it in *The Chainbearer*. I am not treating surveying at any great length, however, because natural science seems to be the most invisible and invasive science in the North American continent that Cooper imagines in the Leatherstocking Series.
CHAPTER 3
THE INSTITUTION OF EMERSONIAN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPERIALISM

While the American critical institution dismissed Cooper as a writer who “had . . . all the qualifications for a great American writer except the simple ability to write,” it formed a new American canon rooted in a modernist aesthetic and the authors, like Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, who anticipated it (Fiedler 191). For those like Santayana and Brooks who helped establish this ethic and form and national canon around it, it was Emerson—not Cooper or Longfellow, who had both established their cultural capital in terms of popularity and commercial success—who marked the emergence of a legitimate American literature. In Emerson, for instance, Santayana found a truly unique philosopher of nature, an author who found nature “all beauty and commodity,” who “while operating on it laboriously, and drawing quick returns . . . began to drink in inspiration from it aesthetically” (42). Continuing Santayana’s appreciation, Brooks regarded Emerson as a follower of Jonathan Edwards’s Puritan tradition—puritanism before it became corrupted, in Brooks’s formulation—at whose death “something in the American mind really did come to an end” (COA 39–40). For Santayana and Brooks, and for F. O. Matthiessen who would continue this argument several decades later in his American Renaissance, Emerson is most important because he laid the groundwork for the achievement of Walt Whitman. In Brooks’s words, Emerson “provided a skeleton outline . . . in black and white” that “Whitman filled in with color and set in three dimensions” (COA 119).¹
Scholarship up until this point has simply not admitted that the definition of the natural world Emerson presents in *Nature*—his first and most enduring treatise on the subject—does not arise *ex nihilo* so much as it abstracts, masculinizes, and depoliticizes existing notions of natural space to create a vision of nature that serves the purposes of the ahistorical and apolitical aesthetic program that Twain launched in his famous 1895 critique of Cooper. The reconfiguration of natural space that Emerson accomplishes in *Nature* renders a traditionally terrestrial, tactile, female gendered, and immanently destructible space—the type of natural space that operates in the work of Cooper and Longfellow, whose treatment of nature I will discuss in Chapter 3—into an abstract and masculine intellectual field that contains female nature in the drastically different form of disembodied, indestructible, and perpetually available essences that Emerson frequently ties to astronomical signifiers. Emerson’s re-theorization of nature offers, in other words, a logic of imperial environmental domination that denies any notion of environmental limitation or destructibility as it evades the central moral and representational crises inherent to the destruction of what is always regarded as a female space: the rape of a “virgin nature,” “mother nature,” or (perhaps the most frightening possibility) a simultaneously pure and generative “virgin mother” nature.  

Emerson’s imperialist theorization of an abstract nature is important for what it accomplishes in its own right, but also for the particular impact that it has had on American letters since shortly after its publication in 1833. As I will argue in the latter portions of this chapter, shortly after Emerson theorized a way to imagine nature masculine, illimitable, and indestructible, Henry David Thoreau would offer a praxis to Emerson’s environmental abstraction by suggesting that an imperialist quest for pure
wilderness is a legitimate method of preserving masculinity. And as I will argue in the final chapters of *Looking Away*, Emerson’s idea of nature—backed as it was by the literary, critical, and cultural institutions—would offer environmentally attuned twentieth-century authors like Willa Cather, John Steinbeck, and Ernest Hemingway a very powerful method of mediating the cultural and psychic loss that attend American expansionsism’s environmental toll.³

**Emerson, Gender, and Nature’s Gender**

The lives of James Fenimore Cooper and Ralph Waldo Emerson intersected at odd points. In the 1840s, for instance, they both had dealings with Horace Greeley: Cooper won a libel suit against him and was awarded a judgement of two hundred dollars in 1842 while Greeley and his *New York Times* were simultaneously declaring Emerson “the most important and original mind of his generation” (Teichgraeber 202).⁴ As this detail demonstrates, however, such points of intersection often constitute points of drastic personal, political, and critical divergence, and no such point of divergence is more central to the lives and work of these men than the relationships that they cultivated with female intellectuals, female audiences, and, ultimately, a natural world that was always gendered female in the first half of the nineteenth century. Cooper, after all, did indeed write his first book—to Fiedler’s horror—in a deliberate attempt to outwrite a female British writer, and he consistently oriented his work, without any sense of shame (and tremendous commercial success), toward a popular audience that included a daunting number of moderately educated women.⁵ Beyond the issue of audience, though, Cooper consistently genders natural space female and does very little to mediate the implications of sexual crime that attend its destruction, and he consistently values women’s responses to nature. Only his female characters, like *The Pathfinder*’s Mabel Dunham, after all, can
discuss the natural world outside of the language of ownership and domination that even Natty Bumppo cannot escape, and he found his daughter’s volume of nature writing, *Rural Hours*, a thoroughly feminine and therefore highly marketable response to the natural world.⁶

Emerson’s relationship with women and nearly all things feminine moved in quite a different direction. As numerous scholars have argued, Emerson conflated femininity with nature, devalued them both, and deconstructed the legacy of his one-time confidant, Margaret Fuller, who had offered counter-interpretations of nature, femininity, and female nature before her early death in 1850.⁷ Emerson, Stephanie Smith recognizes, asserts in *Nature* but believed throughout his lifetime that “‘Truth in Art’” is a purely abstract and therefore masculine production that cannot be produced by a concrete or material “maternal nature” he understands to be “vital but ultimately ‘ancillary to man’” (69). Emerson’s entire philosophical project, in Smith’s language, “metaphorized the material maternal as that which, through the alembic of spirit, would be abolished;” his “objective”—particularly in *Nature—“is to consign matter, which he repeatedly associates with the past and the natural and hence with the mother, to a discardable memory that may be overcome through the future-oriented potency of individual mind” (77).

Margaret Fuller, with whom Emerson was incredibly intimate for a time, offered a thorough counter-narrative to Emerson’s hyper-masculine drive toward abstraction and the devaluation of the feminine—including female nature. As Smith also understands, “for Fuller, Truth was best figured by the body of a nursing woman;” she “repeatedly expressed a desire to salvage the material and represent Mother Nature not simply as a frame for man, nor as blind form waiting to be seen, but as a creative force with a vision
of her own” (69, 70). Despite the fact that Fuller was Emerson’s intellectual equal, Emerson refused to take her arguments seriously—he even claimed that she did not make sense—and shortly after her death he subjected Fuller’s legacy to dual forms of erasure: he deconstructed her significance privately in his journal and publicly through his deeply flawed editing of her *Memoirs* (Berkson 25).\(^8\)

In an attempt to explain Emerson’s fundamental disconnect from Fuller, Lindsey Traub suggests that “‘Woman Thinking’” may simply have been “inconceivable to him” (288). Emerson’s inability to conceive of Fuller, however, is less a case of simple nineteenth century gender prejudice than it is a studied replication of the approach to the female that Emerson found in natural science. In 1827, in *The Prairie*, James Fenimore Cooper placed natural science in the vanguard of a destructive United States expansionism; for Emerson, however, the science was a messianic force capable of wedding the visible to the invisible, and the impact that the science had on him in 1833 at the Paris Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle was so strong that he proclaimed that he would become a naturalist.

Emerson’s interest in natural science has intrigued scholars because it holds a key to how and why Emerson wrote.\(^9\) He wrote as a scientist and he equated his own organization of thought and language with the organizing and classifying work of natural scientists. I wish to suggest, however, that natural science bears cultural and ideological significance to Emerson’s body of work outside of its usefulness as a hermeneutic tool. Natural science was based on an intellectual commitment to classifying and ordering a female nature, and it was politically inseparable from imperialist enterprise. It offered Emerson the hyper-masculinist and imperialist philosophical system that would
ultimately manifest itself in *Nature* as he defines the natural world away from femininity and destructibility and toward an illimitable, permanent, and perpetually available field that serves the ideological ends of empire.

The natural science that Emerson encountered at the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle was, in the words of Lee Rust Brown, “one of the Old World’s most complex and capable means of coming to adequate terms with the outlandishness of the New,” which Europe was uncovering, of course, through exploration and colonization. And the methodology of natural science consisted of “selecting, eviscerating, and hollowing” out objects belonging to “visible nature” (the form of nature always gendered female) into abstract (and therefore masculine and more valuable) “intellectual horizons” (97).

At the Paris Muséum that had such a life-shaking impact on Emerson, natural science had achieved a “severe aesthetic fulfilled in . . . sequences of glass-doored armoires lining the . . . galleries and . . . in the subordinated, pagelike surfaces of the formal gardens” where “all nature . . . yielded itself to the conceptual graphics of outline, series, and hierarchy” (65). It was a place where feminine nature, including raw materials and exotic specimens procured from the New World through the actions of empire, was splayed out, pinned down, stuffed, mapped, and classed; a place where the staunchly anti-feminine Enlightenment science of those like Francis Bacon found its most perfect embodiment.10

Emerson admired the Paris Muséum because it wedded the physical and the abstract, but it was also a site of the “aggressive-defensive activity” of empire: it fused the gender politics of the Enlightenment with European imperialism while helping create the image of the naturalist that Emerson ultimately became for American literature and
culture—the “bourgeois subject simultaneously innocent and imperial, asserting a harmless hegemonic vision that instills no apparatus of domination” (Pratt 34).

The Nature of Emerson’s Imperialism

Recognizing that Emerson was thoroughly committed, in a sense even “wedded” to this “innocent and imperial” science, it is less surprising that he ultimately rejects such an unclassifiable trouser-wearing and intellectual “unwomanly woman” as Margaret Fuller, just as it is less surprising, to return to Smith’s language, that his philosophical project in *Nature* and throughout the rest of his career consigns feminine and/or maternal matter to “a discardable memory” (Berkson 25, Smith 77). Emerson’s rejection of the feminine, which I find to be made possible by his investment in natural science and made manifest in his treatment of Margaret Fuller, plays a significant role in the thorough redefinition of nature that he accomplishes in *Nature*.11

Numerous scholars have recognized that Emerson, in *Nature* and in his other writings, legitimized the development of U. S. industrial capitalism and imperialism through what Jenine Abboushi Dallal has described as “disembodied discourse” and “rhetorical circumvention” (50).12 The imperial project of Emerson’s *Nature*, where it concerns the actual environment itself, though, involves neutralizing the economic, moral, and gender crises that were already understood to attend environmental destruction by the early nineteenth century and to therefore facilitate the continuation of United States expansionism regardless of its real human and environmental costs. In *Nature*, which would achieve canonical status as his fame grew throughout the course of the nineteenth century, Emerson completely reconfigures the meaning of “nature” in a way that ignores the environmental anxieties that slip into texts as early as Jeremy Belknap’s *The History of New Hampshire* and Cooper’s Leatherstocking series.
Emerson’s act of redefinition offers American literature and culture a mode of circumventing any awareness of, or any sense of guilt over, the destruction of natural space, and it accomplishes this by totally abandoning the commonplace functional definition of nature as a physical, terrestrial, and feminine space in favor of a “Nature” that is a disembodied, abstract, and masculine space composed of essential qualities locatable anywhere but often in an astronomical realm that is always available and always located beyond the reach of destructive human agency.

The re-theorization of the natural world that Emerson launches in Nature is, to some degree, a function of his own personal development and his own prejudices—it clearly bears the marks of his feelings on gender, for instance—, but it is also a significant political engagement into the nineteenth century politics of environmental vision. Emerson’s intervention into how nature should be understood amounts to a deliberate hedge against narratives of environmental scarcity, fragility, and destructibility that were gaining currency throughout the nineteenth century. He begins his refutation of these narratives by identifying a way to recover environmental purity and by reasserting claims of human environmental benignity that were already beginning to appear dubious by the 1830s. In the final paragraph of Nature’s introduction, Emerson offers these two fundamental claims that are couched in a differentiation that he draws between art and nature: “Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. Art is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result” (8).
In these three sentences, Emerson establishes a logic of environmental abstraction that runs throughout the rest of his essay. He recovers a natural world that is not only “unchanged by man” but absolutely unchangeable because it is no longer defined by its tactile, physical, or material qualities—the qualities associated with femininity. Nature is defined, rather, by its abstract and therefore masculine “essences” that endure despite whatever “chipping, baking, patching, and washing” may be performed on its feminine, material, and mortal body. Within this frame, the actual health and/or perpetuity of the feminine material nature is not so important as the endurance of the “impression” or “essence” that the feminine/material signifier makes on the “human mind.” It is a sweeping set of claims that privileges disembodied, abstract, masculine, and indestructible essences over the material, feminine, and destroyable body of nature that locates environmental health in, of all places, the human mind.

With verbs like “chipping, baking, patching, and washing” that largely evoke female domestic work, Emerson feminizes and dismisses the environmental activity of what he ordinarily believes to be a masculine culture. The phrase inverts the gender of a penetrative male American culture so that the culture’s environmental interventions can be cast as thoroughly nonthreatening female work upon a female body. Read against the rest of *Nature*, though, the gender inversion that Emerson performs here is simply disingenuous. Emerson might recognize American masculinity as threatened, but it still exists, and it needs to continue to exist, in Emerson’s formulation, so that American men can reassert their masculinities by penetrating it—not “washing” or “patching” it.

Men, and particularly men “in the streets of cities,” need nature to help them “believe and adore” a thoroughly masculine Christian God (8, 9). It is “so needful to
man,” he continues, that it is a healing “commodity” capable of restoring mind, body, masculinity and sense of self:

To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone. The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm, he finds himself. (13)

In the shorter “Nature” that he included in his 1844 Essays, Second Series, Emerson makes it even clearer than it is in Nature that this restorative meeting between men (and, as always, particularly with city men) and nature is an act of penetration, not “chipping, baking, patching, and washing.” In this essay, nature is again explicitly “medicinal,” particularly for men threatened by cities that “give not the human senses room enough,” but regeneration is available “at the gates of the forest” (312, 311). Here, Emerson writes, the city “man . . . is forced to leave his city estimates of great and small, wise and foolish. The knapsack of custom falls off his back” as he “penetrate[s] bodily this incredible beauty” before regaining a state after penetration that is not only embryonic but parasitic: “we nestle in nature, and draw our living as parasites from her roots and grains, and we receive glances from the heavenly bodies, which call us to solitude” (311, 313, 312, emphasis added).

Emerson’s theory of nature is at conflict with itself. The gender categories upon which it is based slip and slide depending upon the argument Emerson needs to make, but Emerson’s argument in Nature faces two critical obstacles outside of its own logic: first, how can faith in nature’s medicinal, curative capabilities be maintained in the face of growing concerns about its destructibility or exhaustibility, and, secondly, how can an increasingly urbanized population maintain contact with the type of space that restores its atrophied masculinity? One half of Emerson’s response to this problem is, as I have
already argued, to create an abstract and disembodied idea of nature that evades the threatened status of material nature. The other side of Emerson’s project, however, is to revise the national environmental gaze by replacing a Cooper-eque gaze that necessarily encounters tree stumps and threatened species with a metonymic one that locates environmental health and perpetuity in exceptional specimens and celestial objects that lie beyond the reach of human activity.

Emerson creates this new method of seeing the natural world in the same moments that he champions nature’s ability to salvage a threatened masculinity. When, in *Nature*, Emerson confronts the problem of the man “in the streets of cities,” he does not find it absolutely necessary that the man, with his masculinity collapsing under the weight of an urban crush, drop his “knapsack” “at the gates of the forest” and regain himself in “the tempered light of the woods,” which is one way that he suggests masculinity may be regained in his later “Nature” (*Nature* 8, “Nature” 311). His primary move, much to the contrary, is to simply elevate his environmental gaze so that he literally *looks over* the problems that threaten terrestrial nature—it is a visual move that mirrors what Dallal has described as “a widening of the lens” that displaces imperialist “conquest, violence, and death”–and locates the essential qualities of nature in absolutely indestructible and immaterial astronomical bodies (49).

Throughout *Nature*, Emerson locates nature in woods, horizons, sunrises and sunsets, and the sky in general, and he claims that “all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence” (9). Over the course of the essay, however, stars emerge as especially effective signifiers of nature. Nature and all of its medicinal qualities may be found, Emerson writes, by simply “look[ing] at the stars” (8).
The mere visual presence of stars, according to Emerson, grants solitude; the “rays” that they emanate “separate between him and vulgar things;” and they offer “the perpetual presence of the sublime” (8). “If . . . stars should appear one night in a thousand years,” Emerson continues, “how men would believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown!” (8–9). They are “envoys of beauty” that “light the universe with their admonishing smile” and, perhaps most important, they “awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are always inaccessible” (9).

By creating an environmental gaze that is fixed on astronomical space, Emerson finds a way to see everything that he wants to see in nature. This particular gaze presents a natural world that is “uncontained,” “immortal,” “always present,” and “always inaccessible;” entirely beyond the impact of any destructive human agency. With this environmental gaze, Emerson consolidates the qualities that he associates with the natural world into “stars,” which function in the essay as discrete and ultimate metonyms for all that his vision of nature encompasses, and he protects this move toward an abstract metonymic nature by suggesting again that the actual presence and viability of nature’s material phenomena are not so important as the disembodied “impression” of presence and viability that they offer the human mind. In the rhetoric of current critical discourse, Emerson creates a situation in which the continued existence of a signifier of natural health and perpetuity is dispensable so long as the signification of natural health and perpetuity endures.
The Consequences and Endurance of Emersonian Nature

The process of abstraction that Emerson carries out in these passages—with its consolidation of meaning and its transformation of the physical and feminine into the masculine and symbolic—is one that leads, as Henri Lefebvre has theorized, to the absolute erasure of the natural world. Emerson’s involvement in this process, moreover, is critically important to the formation of the spatial experience and practice of nature in the United States for two interconnected reasons: the peculiar power of narrative to shape spatial experience and practice, and the immediate and enduring influence of Emerson in numerous fields including literary and cultural production. Considering the sustained cultural and institutional power that Emerson has been granted throughout the past 150 years, his theory of abstract natural space has been central to the development of a largely unconscious national politics of environmental evasion that developed with particular intensity throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In The Production of Space, Henri Lefebvre writes that “everyone wants to protect and save nature; nobody wants to stand in the way of an attempt to retrieve its authenticity. Yet at the same time everything conspires to harm it. The fact is that natural space will soon be lost to view. . . . nature is resistant, and infinite in its depth, but it has been defeated, and now waits only for its ultimate voidance and destruction” (30–31). Lefebvre blames this situation on “capitalism and neocapitalism,” but he does not attribute the destruction of natural space to the march of technological industrialism (53). The exploitative power of capitalism resides, rather, in processes of abstraction—like Emerson’s—that Lefebvre believes to begin with the transformation of natural space into systems of signs and symbols.
For Lefebvre, abstract space does not occur outside of state or otherwise institutional power; “As a product of violence and war,” he writes, abstract space “is political; instituted by a state, it is institutional,” and it is created, in large part, through the deployment of institutionally sanctioned signs and symbols (285). Just as “there is a violence intrinsic to abstraction, and to abstraction’s practical (social) use,” moreover, signs and symbols “have something lethal about them” (288). “Any space infused with value by a symbol,” Lefebvre remarks, is also a reduced—and homogenized—space”–it is removed from the realms of physicality and history as it is rendered abstract (289).

Emerson immediately reduces and homogenizes space at the opening of Nature when he invokes community knowledge to claim that “Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man” (8). Such a claim denies the fact that “nature” was a site of contention in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and it neutralizes the voices of those like James Fenimore Cooper who might have replied that a definition of nature based on a claim of environmental purity was already deeply flawed.

Emerson’s most important and most lasting act of environmental violence, though, lies in the symbol-making project that he follows throughout the essay. When Emerson argues that an essential nature—the type of nature that he really values—can be found at any time and at any place by looking toward the heavens, he removes the power of signification from earthly natural space and thoroughly reduces its value. Through Emerson’s process of environmental abstraction, terrestrial, material, and feminine natural space undergoes the very “voidance” that Lefebvre suggests—it becomes fundamentally emptied of meaning and value as it is emptied of the “essences” that Emerson privileges. As Donald Pease recognizes, Emerson’s process of symbolization empties “objective Nature” of all
meaning and brings it “to an end” so that any appreciation of nature’s beauty requires “a
taste for the beauty of the morbid” (53, 52).

As helpful as I believe his work is in uncovering the method and results of
Emerson’s abstraction of natural space, Lefebvre cannot explain the special importance
of Emerson’s role in shaping spatial practice in the United States, which I believe lies at
the nexus of narrative’s unique spatial agency and Emerson’s celebrity status. Although
Lefebvre seems to imply it (particularly when he discusses the destructive power of signs
and symbols), he does not spell out, as Michel de Certeau does in The Practice of
Everyday Life, that narratives are a particularly powerful agent in the formation and
modification of spatial practices. As he works to differentiate between “place,” which he
defines as a static “configuration” of subjects and objects, and “space,” which he defines
as a the dynamic intersection of “mobile elements,” de Certeau argues that narratives
perform a function “that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places”
(117, 118). Narratives, according to de Certeau, are “‘culturally creative act[s] that
‘found’ spaces just as they register “the loss of space” “where stories are disappearing”
(123).13

In surprising fashion, the act of spatial abstraction that Emerson carries out in
Nature inverts and darkens de Certeau’s claims. Emerson’s culturally creative act founds
an abstract space that philosophically effaces—and justifies the actual destruction of—a
physically defined space upon which (as Lefebvre recognizes) cultures themselves are
constructed. This narrative of spatial abstraction possesses a measure of inherent spatial
agency, but this agency is tremendously amplified by the enormity of Emerson’s
celebrity, which is so powerful and so carefully guarded that it approximates the type of
institutional or state power that Lefebvre associates with all processes of spatial abstraction. Emerson cultivated his own celebrity during his lifetime, by the time of his death he had become an icon of American-ness, and in the twentieth century his influence infiltrated fields as diverse as American politics, economics, architecture, and music as his literary-critical reputation underwent successive renewals that prevented him from ever slipping into a period of Melvillian obscurity.  

Whenever Emerson has come under critical assault, his centrality to American culture has remained unquestionable. Whether his influence is regarded as positive or negative, it is impossible, it seems, to step outside of a series of assumptions that Harold Bloom reaffirms in his often reprinted “Mr. America”:

> Emerson is the mind of our climate, the principal source of the American difference in poetry, criticism and pragmatic post-philosophy. . . . Emerson, by no means the greatest American writer . . . is the inescapable theorist of all subsequent American writing. From his moment to ours, American authors either are in his tradition, or else in a counter-tradition originating in opposition to him. (section I, emphasis added).

Bloom’s comments leave no room for a plurality of American mind, experience, or expression, but—and this is a discomfiting fact—even critics who work against the grain of affirmative Emersonian criticism accept a similar vision of Emerson’s cultural centrality. In an age that aims to question hegemony, this appears to be one of the most undebatable phenomenon in American literary and cultural history. The only remaining line of inquiry for Emerson criticism is whether this representative American is to be regarded as the source of cultural success or cultural failure; whether the consequences of his influence are a radical form of selfhood and a tradition of literary exceptionality that flows through Thoreau and Whitman, or a logic of colonialism, imperialism, and
environmental destruction that has produced war, the subjugation of numerous subaltern populations, and the erasure of natural space on a global scale.

Harold Bloom’s 1982 defense of Emerson is a direct and acknowledged response to the claim of Bartlett Giamatti, in his 1981 Yale baccalaureate address, that “it is Emerson who freed our politics and our politicians from any sense of restraint by extolling self-generated, unaffiliated power as the best foot to place in the small of the back of the man in front of you” (101). In less direct ways, Bloom’s essay also rejects Donald Pease’s 1980 “Emerson, Nature, and the Sovereignty of Influence,” which introduced Emerson to deconstructive theory. Although he never names him in the essay, Pease’s deconstructive method is precisely what Bloom attacks when he jeers at “the European modes [of interpretation] . . . currently touching their nadir in a younger rabblement celebrating itself as having repudiated the very idea of an individual reader or an individual critic,” and the “‘Marxist literary groups’” and “‘Lacanian theory circles’” that he believes to have generated such cockeyed criticism (“Mr. America” section III).

This debate between Bloom, Giamatti, and Pease has been kept alive throughout the 1980s and 1990s in a series of essay collections that sharply defend the institution of positive Emersonianism. Since Bloom’s initial reaffirmation of Emerson’s cultural centrality, Bloom himself, Lawrence Buell, and Joel Porte and Saundra Morris have published collections of Emerson criticism that maintain his positive institutional status against what they clearly understand to be the rising threat of revisionist scholarship in the vein of Giamatti and Pease. Bloom’s “Mr. America” has been republished three times under the title “Emerson: Power at the Crossing”—in a collection of his own essays, in the collection of Emerson criticism that he collected, and in Buell’s collection of
Emerson scholarship—and where it is not reprinted Porte and Morris repackaged his defense in their own words. Although Giamatti’s essay is mentioned in Bloom’s response and in Porte and Morris’s introduction, neither it nor Pease’s essay, nor any of the later criticism that has carried their project forward is included in any of these collections—even in their (highly) selective bibliographies of Emerson scholarship. Responses to such re-interpretive work range, in these collections, from silent omission in Buell’s volume (where only Bloom’s reprinted essay performs any critique of the course of Emerson scholarship) to an outright assault from Porte, whose editorial introduction undercuts postcolonial interpretations of Emerson’s legacy without ever even speaking the names of the scholars who have posed these arguments.¹⁶

Despite such strong commitments to preserving his status as a positive cultural icon, the body of Emerson’s work and the uses to which it has been put contain a powerful, if often painful and nearly unspeakable dark side that legitimizes, to return to Lefebvre’s language, multiple forms of “violence and war.” Emerson’s abstraction of natural space, without doubt, is an essential part of this dark heritage. It fulfilled the desires of the merchant class audiences that Emerson encountered on his speaking tours in the nineteenth century, and, as I will discuss in later chapters of Looking Away, it met the needs of a twentieth century American culture that had to cope with the constant erasure of natural spaces that it relied upon for claims of national exceptionality, for the expression of an autonomous selfhood, and for the construction and maintenance of masculinity.¹⁷ As natural space consistently fell under the thrall of twentieth century progress, Emersonian abstraction offered a way of maintaining nature’s transcendental availability and permanence just as Emerson’s elevated and metonymic environmental
gaze offered convenient and established methods of looking away from unsettling terrestrial situations.

**Thoreau and the Continuation of Emerson’s Abstract Spatial Imperialism**

While I obviously believe that Emerson’s abstract, astronomically oriented environmental vision is the one that was adopted by mainstream American culture until the environmental awakening of the late twentieth century, other critics have ignored or devalued Emerson to promote Thoreau as the real locus of significant nineteenth-century environmental thought.18 For scholars like Max Oelschlaeger in *The Idea of Wilderness* and Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination*, who are both interested in tracing the roots of environmentalist and ecological thought, Thoreau is an environmental hero because his writing is less anthropocentric than Emerson’s, because he is more interested in strict environmental observation than Emerson, and because his emphasis on environmental wholeness is more well defined than Emerson’s. In a move that illustrates the new hege mony of ecocritical praise that has sprung up around Thoreau, Oelschlaeger literally proclaims Thoreau’s environmental sainthood in “Environment and the 21st Century: A Thoreauvian Interlude” that proclaims Thoreau “St. Henry” (13).19

Despite such rhetorical excesses, critical work in the mode of Buell and Oelschlaeger has performed the necessary tasks of expanding the history of environmentalism and connecting it with literary history. Still, however, it has largely ignored the uglier and more embarrassing aspects of Thoreau’s treatment of the natural world. Even while scholars like Andrew McMurry and James McKusick have worked against the grain to reinstate Emerson as the central figure of environmental thought in American literature, only Ira Brooker, Paul Giles, and Karl Kroeb er have extended any
sort of postcolonialist critique into Thoreau’s work or suggested that the entire Emersonian-Thoreauvian tradition of environmental writing overwrites or obscures alternative traditions. Writing against the cult of “St. Henry,” Brooker suggests that Thoreau imperializes Walden pond by converting it into an intellectual commodity that he sold to the masses as a wilderness lifestyle and sensibility, while Giles recognizes such patterns of intellectual commodification as part of an overarching tendency in Thoreau’s writing to “to sublimate historical and political conflicts into a narrative conflating nation with nature” that, when Thoreau’s attention turns to the natural world, amounts to a continuation of Emerson’s imperialist environmental vision (Giles 69). To Brooker and Giles, Kroeber adds that the Thoreau’s institutional power obscures an “un-Thoreauvian tradition of nature writing,” made up of authors like William Bartram, Susan Fenimore Cooper, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson, that is “more scientifically oriented, more scientific in mode, and more focused on long-term, noncyclic natural changes” (313).

In *Walden*, upon which his sainthood has been constructed more than any other text, Thoreau, like Emerson, finds natural space absolutely critical to the maintenance of masculinity, but he cannot maintain his faith in nature’s regenerative capacity—as Emerson does—by merely restricting his environmental gaze. Thoreau, rather, keeps the faith alive by adopting an imperialist perspective of global environmental availability. In *Walden*, which in one sense is *all* about his own personal need to experience the natural world, Thoreau argues that

our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wilderness . . . we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild . . . we must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features . . . of Nature. (298)
Almost everything that Thoreau identifies as fundamentally important in this passage—“unexplored forests and meadows,” even “wilderness” itself—is either an object of Euro-American fantasy or, by the middle of the nineteenth century, deeply threatened. His own simulacral wilderness at Walden Pond, after all, bore the scars of settlement. To keep the revitalizing presence of wilderness alive, however, Thoreau poses two divergent arguments: locate wilderness in the self, and find wilderness in the corners of the globe where it has not been entirely effaced. In *Walden*, Thoreau argues that the Emersonian inquest is the best method of experiencing wilderness in an age of environmental destruction. In typically epigrammatic fashion, Thoreau writes, “One hastens to southern Africa to chase the giraffe; but surely that is not the game he would be after. How long, pray, would a man hunt giraffes if he could? Snipes and woodcocks also may afford rare sport; but I trust it would be nobler game to shoot one’s self” (300). As he advocates this turn into the self, however, Thoreau calls upon the language of imperialism. “Be rather the Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clark and Frobisher, of your own streams and oceans; explore your own higher latitudes,” he commands, “be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought” (300–01).

Despite all the emphasis that Thoreau places upon exploring interior wildernesses, his entire discussion is rife with exotic locations (Tierra del Fuego, Africa, China, Japan) and the explorers, like Mungo Park, who “opened” them to the West. At the very least, the presence of these places and explorers underscores the fact that imperialism was a very real force in Thoreau’s world. In *Walden* imperialism offers a secondary but still powerful avenue of nature experience that is entirely different from the inquest that
Thoreau simultaneously promotes. Explorers and exploration usually appear in *Walden* as metaphors for this inquest, but Thoreau confesses that actual colonialist adventuring is a real and viable way to come into contact with a curative nature. “It is not worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar,” he writes, “*Yet do this even till you can do better,* and you may perhaps find some ‘Symmes’ Hole’ by which to get at the inside at last” (302 emphasis added).

On his way to discussing exotic manifestations of wilderness in *Walden’s* “Conclusion,” Thoreau mentions the wilds of Canada, Ohio, Colorado, and the Yellowstone, but the trajectory of his narrative moves without hesitation toward Tierra del Fuego and the other extra-continental locations that offer purer wilderesses. *Walden* itself does not explain why Thoreau would overshoot the American West as he maps the globe’s wildest regions, but eight years later, in “Walking” (1862), Thoreau hints that he has consigned natural space in North America to obliteration. In almost the same breath, he touts wildness, wilderness, and fertile soil as the primary sources of national power, he praises more explorers, and he glorifies the regions they have penetrated, and he unequivocally endorses the logic of imperialism.

Thoreau never explicitly discusses the fate of nature on a national or continental scale, but his comments upon New England land use contain a sense of environmental anxiety that is as representative and expansive as it is particular. He writes, for instance, that

> A hundred years ago they sold bark in our streets peeled from our own woods. In the very aspect of those primitive and rugged trees there was, methinks, a tanning principle which hardened and consolidated the fibres of men’s thoughts. Ah! Already I shudder for these comparably degenerate days of my native village, when you cannot collect a load of bark of good thickness, and we no longer produce tar and turpentine. (648)
In typical fashion, Thoreau associates environmental health with intellectual health, but his concern with the state of the New England mind should not obscure the fact that he clearly understands the natural environment of New England as “degenerate[d]” in its own right.

The state of environmental degeneration, though, is not the whole story for Thoreau. It is equally disturbing for him, I believe, that the entire situation is taken as a matter of course. When he returns to the topic of ecological degeneration later in the essay, he writes that “We are accustomed to say in New England that few and fewer pigeons visit us every year. Our forests furnish no mast for them . . . . and there is scarcely a twig left for them to perch on” (660–61). In my reading at least, the most compelling element of this passage is its opening, which centers the entire anecdote around the community’s response to the disappearance of the pigeons. The objective of the passage, it seems, is not to simply relate an ecological fact but to register the community’s apathy. The disappearance of the pigeons is merely a custom that has woven itself into the fabric of the community, and the way that Thoreau treats this communal indifference suggests that he understands this attitude as the problem facing nature in North America. It is this combination of environmental destruction and communal apathy, I believe, that causes Thoreau to concede the ultimate destruction of wild nature in North America.

Even though Thoreau seems to acquiesce to the destruction of North American nature, he does not so easily abandon the project of American empire that he understands to depend upon close contact between nation and nature. In “Walking,” all of Thoreau’s examples of national strength simultaneously signify imperial strength—“Greece, Rome,
England”–, and he argues that all such enduring empires “have been sustained by the primitive forests which anciently rotted where they stand. They survive as long as the soil is not exhausted” (648). Thoreau is suggesting, of course, that national and imperial strength are constructed with very real natural resources, but he also believes that state power depends upon a “wild source” of a vitality that resides in the nation’s soil and forests (644).

With this combined awareness of a compromised North American natural environment and his sense that nations derive their strength from contact with wild nature, Thoreau faces a critical problem: if the destructive and apathetic culture of the United States destroys the vitality of it’s environment, how will the nation maintain its strength? As he does in Walden, Thoreau offers two alternatives: inquest or imperialism. In the case of “Walking,” the inquest involves finding wilderness where you are. For Thoreau in Walden and “Walking,” every swamp, bog, and patch of woods, in the right frame of mind, can become a revitalizing wilderness. Life itself, he argues, can be viewed as a “wildness” that “refreshes” (“Walking” 646). “One who pressed forward incessantly and never rested from his labors, who grew fast and made infinite demands on life,” he writes, “would always find himself in a new country or wilderness, and surrounded by the raw material of life” (646).

Amid such transcendental arguments, though, lurk subaltern figures and newly colonized regions that offer the promise of contact with real, rather than imagined, wild nature–regions and figures, incidentally, that play no part at all in any of the traditional discussions of Thoreau’s work. They raise questions with ugly answers, but they are there in the text nonetheless: Thoreau mentions “the Hottentots” and “our Northern
Indians,” as well as the archetypal figures of “the African” and “a Tahitian” (644–45). Just as “One who pressed forward incessantly and never rested from his labors,” might generate his own regenerative wildness, it seems that in Thoreau’s vision one could just as easily find fulfillment (and probably better fulfillment at that) by following the path of “the African hunter Cummings,” whose clothes even bear the odor of close contact with a revivifying wilderness (646, 644).

Every explorer, exotic location, or subjugated population that Thoreau mentions can be dismissed as a metaphor for introspective searching, but these places and figures exist in his work alongside a tacit acceptance of a particularly American colonialist logic that makes any such dismissal much more difficult. In a statement that legitimizes, if it does not endorse, the imperialist quest for contact with soil and wilderness, he writes that “It is said to be the task of the American ‘to work the virgin soil,’ and that ‘agriculture here already assumes proportions unknown everywhere else.’ I think that the farmer displaces the Indian even because he redeems the meadow, and so makes himself stronger and in some respects more natural” (648, emphasis added). It can be argued in his defense that Thoreau promotes non-imperialist methods as the first and best ways to maintain contact with wild nature (however it is construed), but his allusion to the displacement of Native Americans unequivocally endorses the logic of imperialism that stalks Walden and “Walking” in the specters of Cummings, Park, Africa, and Tahiti.

For all of the attention they grant the natural world, for all of their perceptions of ecological wholeness, and for all of their efforts to reconcile the Cartesian binary of the human and the natural, the environmental legacy of Emerson and Thoreau contains an
undeniable dark underside that works against the very forms of space that they each seem to privilege. Their abstraction and dislocation of natural space offered philosophical and artistic legitimacy to the environmentally destructive practices of American culture at large just as they established precedents of environmental evasion that would shape the twentieth century literary response to environmental degradation. As I will argue in the rest of this project, the institutionalization of Emersonian environmental imperialism obscured less destructive methods of nineteenth and twentieth century literary environmental engagement. It devalued Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s environmentally determined vision of United States national literature, it offered institutionally endorsed patterns of looking away from environmental destruction that would help authors like Willa Cather, John Steinbeck, and Ernest Hemingway maintain faith in a completely viable natural world well into the twentieth century, and it silently disqualified the narratives of environmental enmeshment offered by African American writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer from the categories of both “literature” and “nature writing.”

**Notes**

1. It may seem strange, considering the institutional impact of *American Renaissance*, that at this juncture I am granting more attention to Santayana and Brooks than I am to Matthiessen, but these two earlier scholars did indeed establish foundational arguments of Emerson’s centrality to American literature well before Matthiessen’s landmark text—and Matthiessen directly acknowledges Brooks’s influence while alluding to Santayana several times throughout *American Renaissance*. If anything, when Matthiessen also writes in *American Renaissance* that “Emerson’s theory of expression was that on which Thoreau built, to which Whitman gave extension, and to which Hawthorne and Melville were indebted by being forced to react against its philosophical assumptions,” he institutionalizes a critical opinion that had already been in circulation since the turn of the century (xii).

2. Terms like “virgin nature” and “mother nature” are so prevalent in both casual and academic discourse that they can seem banal and/or meaningless. Louise Westling,
though, offers a concise history of the gendering of nature in *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction* that reinforces just how long North American nature has been understood as a virginal or maternal force rather than an antagonistic demonic power. Westling identifies two divergent “views of the feminine in European culture” that she defines as “that of the pure virginal or maternal source of life and comfort, and that of the demonic witch,” but she argues—for the very reason that I have left it out of my list of gendered appellations—that beyond the Puritan era American culture is worried very little by notions of howling wilderness or figurations of nature as “demonic witch” (36). She argues later that the any sort of demonic female wilderness would have been rather remote to Emerson in New England where by the early nineteenth century, “deforestation . . . was almost complete, and the . . . Indians were equally devastated, reduced to small bands of ragged paupers by European disease, colonial appropriation of land and natural resources, and ecological transformation that made traditional subsistence impossible” (45).

While I think that *Nature* is Emerson’s most significant discussion of the natural world because of its role in the establishment of his early reputation and because of its continued status as one of his most widely read, most influential texts, Emerson’s other writings—particularly “Circles” (published in the 1841 *Essays: First Series*), “Nature,” (a shorter treatise published in the 1844 *Essays: Second Series*), “The Method of Nature” (an 1841 address to Colby College) and some of his often neglected poetry—did engage the natural world in drastically different ways. In these essays, Emerson’s tone is radically different. He is no longer the all seeing, all knowing “part and parcel of God” that he is in *Nature*, and he tends to find the natural world much more of a mystery than an open book. In “Nature,” “Circles,” and “The Method of Nature,” Emerson believes the natural world to be controlled by divine design but nonetheless finds it dynamic and ultimately unknowable—in “The Method of Nature” in particular he suggests that the natural environment is an unobservable stream of perpetual motion (124-25). In poems like “Hamatreya,” “Earth-Song,” “Woodnotes I,” and “Woodnotes II,” he presents a vision of the natural world that is very similar to Longfellow’s environmental vision and frequently slips into a form of environmental apocalypticism that anticipates Robinson Jeffers’s lyrics about the continued existence of the natural world after the demise of the human species. As diverse and compelling as these pieces show Emerson’s philosophy of nature to be, however, I simply do not believe that they represent, as *Nature* does, the institutionalized Emerson, which is the Emerson that most interests me.

Cooper’s libel suits have received little critical attention, and his suit against Greeley usually receives nothing more than a passing mention. Considering the power and celebrity that Greeley enjoyed from the mid-to-late nineteenth century, I think that the vastly different relationships that he had with Cooper and Emerson, which I believe are embodied in these otherwise rather esoteric details, illuminates just how early their critical trajectories were beginning to diverge and just how public this divergence was. By the 1840s, as Teichgraeber argues, Emerson was already achieving the status of an icon in American popular culture despite the fact that his works were not printed in large numbers or widely distributed. Teichgraeber differs from earlier critics, like Mary Kupiec Cayton, by arguing that Emerson’s lecturing was not as important to his rapid
success as his particular knack for networking among powerful literary and journalistic editors like Greeley. “Before 1845 at least,” Teichbraeber writes, “it was Greeley who served as the single most important source of popular knowledge of Emerson’s name and ideas;” although he was “in no position to dictate any sort of national consensus regarding Emerson, he did gain and hold institutional power that he used to provide what at that time was arguably a more important service: the continuing publicity needed to make and keep Emerson’s name and writings visible in American culture at large” (211).

While Emerson was earning a national reputation, Cooper was rapidly alienating his own audience. Beginning in 1837 he was embroiled in a host of libel suits that all stemmed from the Three Mile Point controversy in Cooperstown (in which Cooper forbade public use of a popular tract of land that he owned). Cooper filed his first libel suit in 1837; the final case was settled in 1843, one year before he took another deeply unpopular stance by defending the landholders in the 1844 New York State anti-rent agitation. During the years that Cooper was defending himself against a libelous press, that same press was deeply supportive of Emerson.

5 In Early Cooper and His Audience, James D. Wallace writes that “by the time he published The Pilot in 1823, Cooper was ready to abandon women readers altogether,” but he also explains that Cooper feared the possibility of a negative responses from large female audiences. Considering his willingness to engage in “women’s writing,” his recognition of the power of a female reading public, his savvy negotiation of the tenuous early nineteenth-century American publishing market, and the difference between his sometimes ambivalent orientation toward female audiences and the wholly reactionary responses of those like Hawthorne and Melville, Cooper’s approach seems relatively progressive and open-minded. The discussion of the power of female audiences in the nineteenth-century United States that William Charvat offers in The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870 articulates several facts about nineteenth century female audiences that have come to be taken for granted in much more contemporary literary scholarship. See, in particular, the discussion of Longfellow’s orientation toward female audiences in chapter eight and the more general discussion of female readers in chapter fifteen.

6 The primary sources for insight into how James Fenimore Cooper understood Susan Fenimore Cooper’s Rural Hours are his letters to George Putnam, the initial publisher of Rural Hours, which are included in The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper. Several scholars, however, have recently offered insightful readings of the relationships between Susan Fenimore Cooper and her father and her relationships with other prominent writers of the period. See, for instance, Rochelle Johnson’s introduction to the 1998 University of Georgia Press edition of Rural Hours (which excerpts many of the letters that James Fenimore Cooper exchanged with Putnam) as well as her “Walden, Rural Hours, and the Dilemma of Representation” and Vera Norwood’s chapter on Susan Fenimore Cooper in Made from this Earth: American Women and Nature.

7 See, for instance, Stephanie Smith’s Conceived by Liberty: Maternal Figures and Nineteenth-Century American Literature, Louise Westling’s The Green Breast of the
New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction, Dorothy Berkson’s “‘Born and Bred in Different Nations’: Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson,” and Lindsey Traub’s “Woman Thinking: Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the American Scholar.”

For two of the most recent discussions of the Emerson-Fuller relationship, see Traub and Berkson. Berkson pays particular attention to the facts that Fuller saw herself as Emerson’s intellectual equal, that Emerson embarked on a mission of character and legacy assassination after Fuller’s death that culminated in his disastrous editing of Fuller’s Memoirs after he death. It is through Emerson’s management of the Memoirs project, Berkson argues, that many of the myths about Fuller ever gained momentum: that she was “a physically ugly, overwhelming, and egotistical woman” and that her attraction to Emerson was romantic (24).

Laura Dassow Walls, with Emerson’s Life in Science: The Culture of Truth, and Lee Rust Brown, with The Emerson Museum: Practical Romanticism and the Pursuit of the Whole, have published the two most recent book-length studies of Emerson and his involvement with natural science, but they write in a long tradition of scholarship on the subject. For earlier interpretations of Emerson’s engagement with science, see Leon Chai’s The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance, H. H. Clark’s “Emerson and Science,” Elizabeth A. Dant’s “Composing the World: Emerson and the Cabinet of Natural History,” Harold Fromm’s “Overcoming the Oversoul: Emerson’s Evolutionary Existentialism,” B. L. Packer’s Emerson’s Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays, David Robinson’s “Emerson’s Natural Theology and the Paris Naturalists: Towards a Theory of Animated Nature,” and Carl F. Strauch’s “Emerson’s Sacred Science.”

I am obviously following the critique of the Enlightenment that has been carried out by scholars in fields ranging from the history of science, to environmental philosophy and literary studies. The scholars who have most directly impacted my brief interpretation of the European Enlightenment are feminist historians of science like Carolyn Merchant and Donna Haraway, environmentally oriented philosophers and like Max Oelschlaeger, Fritjof Capra George Sessions, Arne Naess, and environmentally oriented feminist literary scholars like Louise Westling. See, for instance, Merchant’s The Death of Nature, Haraway’s Modest_Witness @Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_Oncomouse™, Oelschlaeger’s The Idea of Wilderness, the essays of Capra, Sessions, and Naess that are collected in Sessions’s Deep Ecology for the 21st Century, and Westling’s The Green Breast of the New World.

Although the rest of this chapter is going to discuss the imperialist work of Nature (which continues a feminist critique in another form), it is worth noting before this shift that Louise Westling has recognized Nature as the most pure embodiment of the ambivalence Emerson holds toward women. In her own words, “The most profound anxiety revealed in Nature is fear of the feminine, with a corresponding need to ensure the subjective distance from it that defines male control. That Nature is feminine is a cultural given, as we have seen. It is everywhere apparent in the essay, from the
consistent use of feminine pronouns to explicit personification of Nature and feminine clothing metaphors. The problem for Emerson’s persona is an infantile yearning for passive bliss in a maternal embrace. This ‘effeminacy’ must be fought and overcome by manly assertions of will” (41).


Throughout this paragraph I modify the language that Steven Rendall uses in his translation of The Practice of Everyday Life. De Certeau, via Rendall, most often uses the word “stories” in his discussion of the creation and modification of spatial practices, and in some places he discusses a particular type of story—the story of spatial mapping that is centered around the navigation of a particular space (to use my own examples rather than de Certeau’s, be this space urban in the guise of J. Alfred Prufrock’s experience in London or rural in the fashion of Tess Durbeyfield’s navigation of Thomas Hardy’s rural Wessex in Tess of the D’Urbervilles). I find, however, that de Certeau oscillates freely between the specific genre of spatial mapping and stories in general, and that he often invokes “story” with such generality that it would not take him out of context to substitute “narrative” for “story” as I do in this paragraph. As I hope is apparent by this point in my argument, I find that Emerson’s work—which is, of course, much more easily classified as “narrative” rather than “story,”—an exceptional narrative intervention into spatial practice that should not be kept from de Certeau’s theoretical concerns on the basis of generic classifications that are slippery even in de Certeau’s own text.

Bloom’s collection is entitled *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1985) and “Mr. America” appears as its untitled introduction; Buell’s collection is entitled *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1993) and “Mr. America” appears as “Emerson: Power at the Crossing;” and Porte and Morris’s collection is *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1999) and the spirit of “Mr. America” is kept alive—recast, in fact, to meet new challenges to Emerson’s positive heritage—in the volume’s preface and introduction. I mention these collections of essays with some hesitation. They present nothing new or groundbreaking, after all, but as texts intended for the use of Emerson initiates they seem an exceptional site for the construction—or maintenance—of Emerson’s status as a positive icon of American literature and culture.

In response to postcolonialist interpretations of Emerson’s work, Porte writes that “Emerson would have nothing to do with an American civilization, so-called, willing to cover its crimes with cries of manifest destiny and America first. . . . [he] was a severe critic of an America capable of invading Mexico, oppressing blacks, and denying women equal rights” (11). Although he never explicitly reveals the source of his anxiety, Porte is probably responding to Eric Cheyfitz’s *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan,* (1991), which introduces the thesis about Emerson’s imperialism that Cheyfitz develops more fully in “A Common Emerson: Ralph Waldo Emerson in an Ethnohistorical Context” and sets the stage for the more recent arguments posed by Brady Harrison and Jenine Abboushi Dallal.

Cayton’s “The Making of an American Prophet” discusses the relationship that Emerson developed with the merchant class audiences that funded, publicized, and attended his lectures after the waning of the initial New England lyceum movement. Cayton draws a crucial distinction between the initial lyceum movement, which was “begun by John Holbrook in 1929 to promote dissemination of useful information, discussion, and debate’ and the “Young Men’s Associations” that began to supercede the lyceums by 1840 (83). The Young Mens’s Associations were different from the lyceums in several ways: they were more deliberately intended to “inculcate certain moral values,” they were “intimately linked to city boosters and businesspeople” in ways that lyceums were not, and their reliance upon traveling lecturers cultivated a culture of celebrity (86). One of Cayton’s central theses is that Emerson’s later audiences, which cared less about the actual substance of Emerson’s speeches than they did about experiencing a bonafide celebrity, had already begun to excise the cultural criticism from Emerson’s lectures to hear only the parts that seemed to support or legitimize their commercial desires.

As the rest of *Looking Away* will demonstrate, I believe that Emerson’s environmental vision bears an incredibly strong influence on the ways that American authors engaged environmental crisis well into the twentieth century, and much of this influence is the direct result of the tremendous commercial and critical success that launched Emerson into public consciousness very early in his career—a level of commercial and critical success, that is, that Thoreau never achieved. In the comprehensive and incisive history of Thoreau’s reception that he offers in *The Environmental Imagination,* Buell suggests that Thoreau’s current stature is the result of long-term and determined marketing first by Ticknor and Fields and then by Houghton,
Mifflin (who also published John Muir’s books). Buell argues that Thoreau, despite his association with (and the publicity he garnered from) the vastly more famous Emerson, had no real widespread popularity until around the turn of the twentieth century after repeated marketing efforts by his publishers. Ticknor and Fields/Houghton, Mifflin slipped Thoreau’s name into introductions to other and newer books, like those of John Burroughs and Charles Dudley Warner in efforts to promote Thoreau as the chief influence of these writers. Despite such efforts, however, the real breakthrough was the appearance of Thoreau in anthologies designed for classroom use that extracted “comparatively descriptive and scientific, nonmystical, and non-pugnacious essays” (346). The irony of this is that the publication industry essentially turned Thoreau into a Fireside/Schoolhouse figure in efforts to sell his books. Later, of course, he came to supercede Whittier, Longfellow, Holmes, and the other poets who are still derogatorily known as Fireside or Schoolhouse poets in the larger scope of American literary studies. Buell writes that *Walden* was being vastly outsold by *Evangeline* as late as 1906 (60,000 copies to 2,500). As Buell states it, “Between 1880 and 1903, the sales of Thoreau’s books had indeed quadrupled, but his annual thousands were dwarfed by Emerson’s ten thousands, not to mention Longfellow’s hundred thousands” (342). His ascension into the favor of Houghton, Mifflin corresponded to the company’s downgrading of Whittier, whose copyright fees were becoming unattractive while his sales were beginning to erode by the turn of the century. Particularly because of its concision and the attention it grants to Ticknor and Fields/Houghton Mifflin, I am particularly fond of Buell’s interpretation of Thoreau’s publication history. For other accounts, however, see Wendell Glick’s *The Recognition of Henry David Thoreau*, Michael Meyer’s *Several More Lives to Live: Thoreau’s Political Reputation in America*, Michael Meyer and Walter Harding’s “Thoreau’s Reputation,” Raymond R. Borst’s *Henry David Thoreau: A Reference Guide, 1835-1899*, Gary Scharnhorst’s *Henry David Thoreau: A Case Study in Canonization*, and Robert Sattelmeyer’s “Walden: Climbing the Canon.”

Buell and Oelschlaeger are by no means the only scholars to valorize Thoreau as the pre-eminent nineteenth-century philosopher of nature, often to the denigration of Emerson, but the arguments that they pose in *The Environmental Imagination* and *The Idea of Wilderness* have had a singular influence on a tremendous amount of recent, often explicitly ecocritical, scholarship on Thoreau. For other declarations of Thoreau’s exceptionality as an early environmentalist and visionary ecological thinker, see Daniel Botkin’s *No Man’s Garden: Thoreau and a New Vision for Civilization and Nature*, Philip Cafaro’s “Thoreau’s Virtue Ethics in *Walden*” and “Thoreau’s Environmental Ethics in *Walden*,” Robert Kuhn McGregor’s *A Wider View of the Universe: Henry Thoreau’s Study of Nature*, Oelschlaeger’s “Environment and the 21st Century: A Thoreauvian Interlude,” Scott Russell Sanders’s “Speaking a Word for Nature,” William Rossi’s “Thoreau’s Transcendental Ecocentrism,” and Donald Worster’s *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* and “Thoreau and the American Passion for Wilderness.”
CHAPTER 4
HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW, UNITED STATES NATIONAL LITERATURE, AND THE AMERICAN CANON’S ERASURE OF MATERIAL NATURE

When George Santayana and Van Wyck Brooks began constructing an American canon around Emerson and Whitman during the early decades of the twentieth century, they initiated a long fade into obscurity for a range of authors like Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, John Greenleaf Whittier and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Irving’s popularity had always been tenuous, though, and Cooper had damaged his own reputation so badly with his libel suits that the new generation of critics simply finished a critical dismantlement that was already well under way. Bryant supported himself primarily as an editor throughout his career and he never produced a huge body of literary work, and Whittier was remembered as an abolitionist as much as a poet. It was Longfellow, though,—the most successful, most widely read American poet of the nineteenth century—who embodied better than any other literary figure “the genteel tradition” that Santayana and Brooks sought to overthrow. Ultimately, Santayana and Brooks accomplished their goal of breaking the “genteel tradition,” and in the process they also broke Longfellow, whose reputation, despite a mild revival over the last fifteen years, has never recovered.¹

Longfellow’s erasure from the American canon surely marked an extreme shift in literary aesthetics, but it also constituted a pivotal moment in the history of American literature’s silent environmental politics. Regardless of how unpalatable Longfellow’s
poetry may have been to early twentieth century poets and critics, and regardless of how foreign it may seem in the twenty-first century, many of Longfellow’s most enduring artistic productions, like *Evangeline* and *The Song of Hiawatha*, were conscious efforts to enact an environmentally determined American literature. This national literature, as Longfellow envisioned it, would draw its uniqueness from a North American environment that he understood in physical and terrestrial terms—nature, for him, was a visible, tactile phenomenon, not a set of abstractions like those formulated by Emerson in *Nature*.

Three times during his career, in his 1824 “The Literary Spirit of Our Country,” in his 1832 “Defence of Poetry,” and in his 1849 *Kavanagh*, Longfellow argued that any legitimate national literature of the United States should have to spring from European literary roots but depend upon the influence of North American nature for its uniqueness. After the first of these manifestoes, which establishes the fundamental position that persists throughout subsequent arguments, each restatement of Longfellow’s position participates in a debate over the course of American literature that drew the support of figures like James Russell Lowell and C. C. Felton and the ire of hypernationalistic and nativist Young Americans like Evert Augustus Duyckinck and Cornelius Mathews.

**Longfellow’s Literary Manifestoes**

When it is mentioned at all, Longfellow’s theorization of an American literature is regularly reduced to a single essay—usually the 1832 “Defence of Poesy”—or dismissed as a voice in the crowd. Admittedly, Longfellow published his first literary manifesto, “The Literary Spirit of Our Country,” when he was very young—he published it in the *United States Literary Gazette* in 1825. Regardless of its early date, however, this manifesto is critical to understanding the endurance of Longfellow’s commitment to an
environmentally determined and Trans-Atlantic American literature. It offers a prehistory to the more fully developed 1832 “Defence of Poetry,” which has attracted some critical attention, just as Longfellow’s discussion of United States national literature in his 1849 *Kavanagh* carries his plan for American literature into mid-century.

Over the course of these three pieces, Longfellow remains committed to a middle course between American literary nativism and the imitation of European models, he laments the impediments to literary culture that exist in the United States, and he always argues that the North American environment must be the source of any emergent American national literature. While Longfellow’s theoretical commitments remain consistent, however, each subsequent argument presents a more vehement engagement with general and critical American cultures. As Longfellow moves from “The Literary Spirit of Our Country” to “The Defence of Poetry” and eventually to *Kavanagh*, he sharpens his critique of print culture in the United States and he takes issue with the New Americans, like Cornelius Mathews, who were arguing at the time for the creation of a nationalistic American Literature that would sever itself entirely from British and European culture.

From the very beginning of his career, Longfellow believed that any U. S. national literature would have to base its claims of vitality and originality on the qualities of its natural environment because the new nation could match neither the educational superstructure nor the deep cultural legacies that had produced enduring literary traditions in Europe. In “The Literary Spirit of Our Country,” for instance, Longfellow resigns himself to the enduring influence of “English taste” in literature but he claims that the exceptionally sensitive “poetic mind” would be deeply affected by a North American
nature that is “more exquisite than elsewhere” (793). On this particular continent, even in
the particular country of the United States, Longfellow believes that “nature has
exhibited her works upon the most beautiful and magnificent scale” and that this “vast
theatre” can be “the school in which the genius of our country is to be trained” (793).
Here, the environment bears such “an influence upon the mind . . . that the features of the
intellect are moulded after those of nature” (793).

In his second literary manifesto, “The Defense of Poetry,” Longfellow seems
more representative of what we regard today as mainstream nineteenth century literary
criticism; that is, he seems more Emersonian. After summarizing the national zeitgeist–
he finds the nation gripped in a pervasive sense of utility, proud of its territorial size, and
enraptured with “the magnificence and beauty of our natural scenery”–he remarks that
“the true glory of a nation consists not in the extent of its territory, the pomp of its forests,
the majesty of its rivers, the height of its mountains, and the beauty of its sky; but in the
extent of its mental power” (60). From this point, Longfellow launches into a long rant
about a nation’s power being manifest in “the majesty of its intellect,—the height and
depth and purity of its moral nature . . . in what nature and education have given to the
mind . . . in the world within us . . . in the attributes of the soul . . . in the incorruptible,
the permanent, the imperishable mind. True greatness is the greatness of the mind;—the
true glory of a nation is moral and intellectual pre-eminence” (60).

It is this keen interest in the mind of the nation that causes Eric Carl Link, in
“American Nationalism,” to conclude that Longfellow envisioned American national
literature to be purely a poetry of the mind (revelatory merely of “‘the majesty of the
intellect’” and concerned “‘not in the world around us, but in the world within us’”) that
was dreadfully stunted by a national spirit preoccupied with materialistic utility (“American Nationalism” section II). Link overlooks, however, Longfellow’s continued obsession with the destining power of the North American environment. Regardless of how concerned Longfellow is about the state of American culture or how much he wants to locate national power in the intellect, his belief in environmental determinism is just as strong in “The Defence of Poetry” as it is in “The Literary Spirit of Our Country.”

Here, as in the previous essay, the natural world offers the best avenue toward a viable and original American literature. Longfellow still believes, in 1832, that nature shapes “the character of the mind, the peculiar habits of thought and feeling, and, consequently, the general complexion of literary performances,” and he extends this sentiment into a claim that the effects of “natural scenery and climate” on the mind are “the most obvious . . . in their influence upon the prevailing tenor of poetic composition” (70). He supports his argument with claims that the particular environments of England, Italy, Spain, and Portugal have shaped each nation’s literature, and he ultimately recommends that American authors submit the formation of a new national literature to nature’s deterministic power. Openly desiring that “our native poets would give a more national character to their writings,” Longfellow simply suggests that “they have only to write more naturally, to write from their own feelings and impressions, from the influence of what they see around them, and not from any pre-conceived notions of what poetry ought to be, caught by reading many books, and imitating many models” (74, 75).

**Longfellow and the Nineteenth Century American Literature Debates**

Longfellow’s suggestion in “The Defence of Poetry” that an American literature would develop on its own due to the influence of the natural world differs drastically from other early-to-mid nineteenth-century manifestoes of American national literature.
No manifesto presents a more different vision, for instance, than Cornelius Mathews’s hyper-nationalistic 1847 “Nationality in Literature”--the essay, it seems, that caused Longfellow to restate his theory of environmentally determined poetry for a third time in his 1849 prose tale, *Kavanagh*. In “Nationality in Literature,” Mathews (who is remembered today as an overzealous member of the Young Americans who often irritated his more conventional associates like Evert Duyckinck) is frustrated to distraction by the fact that “this great country . . . has no native literature, but is, in letters, in a state of colonial and provincial dependency upon the old world” (60). The United States, he finds, exists in an “old literary domination;” it is “overmastered by the literature of England” and mired “in a state of pupilage” that can be best overcome through the cultivation of “a clear development of the idea and the necessity of nationality” (61).

American national literature, as far as Cornelius Mathews is concerned, should involve “home writers . . . . home themes, affording opportunity for descriptions of our scenery . . . events . . . [and] the manners of the people” all “penetrated and vivified by an intense and enlightened patriotism” (62 emphasis added). Nationalism, Mathews argues, “guard[s] the soil and preserve[s] the sacred independence of nations,” but it also inspires great literature. (65). Using Greece, Rome and England as examples because their “writers have been most penetrated by the sense of nationality,” Mathews argues that nationalism, “instead of narrowing the domain of . . . great writers, has made their chief works the peerless gifts and priceless treasures of the whole intellectual world” (63). Mathews feels that American authors “slavishly adhere to old and foreign models,” and he demands that they abandon their “unnational spirit” to finally create a new American
literature (65). It should be thoroughly independent of Europe, Mathews argues; it should be (quoting a speech that he had earlier presented in New York City) “‘instinct with the life of the country, full of a hearty, spontaneous, genuine home feeling; relishing of the soil of the spirit of the people,’” and it should “sound of the great voices of nature, of which she is full” (65–66).

Mathews’s “Nationality in Literature” shares one idea with Longfellow’s manifests— it believes that any emergent American literature would require the particularly powerful influence of the North American environment. However, it attacks the internationalism of Longfellow and other like-minded intellectuals like C. C. Felton (the classicist who was Longfellow’s colleague at Harvard before eventually becoming the college’s president) until it finally arrives at a plan that would have American literature actually look like the literature of, to use the term that Perry Miller made famous, a “Nature’s Nation”—a nation sui-or-ex natura, composed only from nature without any inheritance from European culture.

Beyond simply being angry that the United States has not produced a spectacular nativist literature, in “Nationality in Literature” Mathews is irritated by the fact that patriotism “has been denied in a quarter of respectability” by elites like C. C. Felton, who had just written an article in The North American Review disclaiming patriotism as tawdry and counterproductive in the march toward an American national literature. Mathews’s entire argument in “Nationality in Literature” is written in explicit response to the critique of literary patriotism that Felton incorporated into his October 1846 review of “Simms’s Stories and Reviews.” In this review, which strays significantly from its primary subject—two works by William Gilmore Simms—, Felton argues that “national
literature cannot be forced like a hothouse plant” while he accuses (through suggestion rather than name-calling) the New Americans of producing merely “a good deal of unmeaning talk about American literature” without doing anything substantial to bring such a national literature into being (377).

Felton’s discussion of the New Americans manifests itself in a critique of “certain coteries of would-be men of letters, noisy authorlings” who “waste their time and vex the spirits of long-suffering readers, by prating about our want of an independent national American literature” (377). As if this is not a sufficiently direct condemnation of Mathews, Felton adds a damning dismissal of Mathews’s The Career of Puffer Hopkins that draws Mathews into the center of his critique (377). Mathews recognized in “Nationality in Literature,” Felton felt that “an intense national self-consciousness, though the shallow may misname it patriotism, is the worst foe to the true and generous unfolding of national genius”(377). Any viable national literature must speak to the universal rather than the national or provincial, Felton believes, and the New American dismissal of “the English language and its glorious treasures” amounts to a calamitous rejection of the nation’s “birthright” (377). This dismissal, moreover, requires American authors to “limit themselves to American subjects . . . as if, forsooth, the genius of America must never wander beyond the mountains, forests, and waterfalls of the western continent” (377).

When Mathews turns Felton’s position on its head in “Nationality in Literature,” he is not merely rejecting the theory of national literature held by a Harvard classicist, but the primary theory of an internationalist and environmentally determined American literature that Longfellow had already once restated since his 1824 “The Literary Spirit of
Our Country.” And it was Mathews’s 1847 reaction against Felton in “Nationality in Literature,” it seems, that inspired Longfellow to once again redefine his position in his 1849 Kavanagh, a tale that he began writing in 1847 shortly upon the heels of Mathews’s essay.

Longfellow’s Kavanagh tells a conventional tale of country romance, but in the center of the tale a new character named Mr. Hathaway—modeled after Cornelius Mathews—enters the scene with no purpose beyond sparking an extended debate about national literature with Longfellow’s persona in the text—a school teacher and aspiring author, Mr. Churchill.⁶ Kavanagh cannot be properly classified as either a romance or a novel (historical or otherwise), but it is a self-conscious work of fiction, and as such it is not surprising that Longfellow never actually speaks the name of Cornelius Mathews. Hathaway bursts on the scene, however, attempting to enlist Churchill in “a new magazine he was about to establish, in order to raise the character of American literature, which, in his opinion, the existing reviews and magazines had entirely failed to accomplish” (754). The journal, which Hathaway plans to call “The Niagara” is incredibly similar in its plan to The Arcturus that Mathews edited with Evert Duyckinck from 1841 to 1842, and both Hathaway’s nativist literary vision and his overzealous rhetoric point unequivocally toward the brash Cornelius Mathews whose unchecked passion embarrassed his friends.

Over the course of the discussion that springs up between these two characters, Hathaway offers a number of claims that allow Longfellow to methodically refine the theories of national literature that he offered in 1825 and 1832. As he lays out the plan for his new nativist literary magazine, Hathaway explains that he wants an American
national literature that is as grandiose as the North American environment and as wild, uncultivated, and free:

We want a national literature commensurate with our mountains and rivers,—commensurate with Niagara, and the Alleghanies, and the Great Lakes! . . . We want a national epic that shall correspond to the size of the country; that shall be to all other epics what Banvard’s Panorama of the Mississippi is to all other paintings,—the largest in the world! . . . In a word, we want a national literature altogether shaggy and unshorn, that shall shake the earth, like a herd of buffaloes thundering over the prairies! (754-55)

Such a literature, for Hathaway, must be absolutely “‘original’” (or unrelated to any existing literary tradition) and absolutely national (“‘If it is not national,’” he argues, “‘it is nothing’”) (756, 755).

Longfellow uses this series of claims to explain his own faith in the American environment’s ability to eventually cultivate a national literature and to reassert the value of European literary models in the face of nativist literary isolationism. While Longfellow essentially agrees with what Hathaway calls “‘the influence of scenery on the mind,’” he qualifies his earlier manifestoes’ broad claims of environmental determinism by having Churchill—his own persona in the text—explain that “‘scenery’” cannot “‘create genius’” but “‘only develop it’” (755). It is not so much a concession on Longfellow’s part so much as a careful qualification made necessary by what he regarded as Mathews’s cockeyed and overly emotional hyper-nationalism, which threatened what Longfellow and Churchill believed would be the “natural” development of an American literature (756). As Longfellow explains through the mouth of Churchill, “‘national literature is not the growth of a day’” but of “‘centuries;’” “‘our own is growing slowly but surely, striking its roots downward, and its branches upward, as is natural; and I do
not wish, for the sake of what some people call originality, to invert it, and try to make it grow with its roots in the air’’ (756).

Longfellow expects the particular qualities of the North American environment to shape whatever genius arises in the United States, but he wants to allow nature the time it takes to create a national literature that is ‘‘universal’’ and internationally engaged rather than narrowly nationalistic and mired in a patriotism that ‘‘is often ridiculous’’ (756). Regardless of nature’s power to shape the literary mind, in Kavanagh as in each of his previous literary manifestoes, Longfellow neither believes nor desires that American literature will ever be able to exact the clean break from British literature that Hathaway– and Cornelius Mathews–want. Churchill, constantly speaking for Longfellow, simply cannot ‘‘see how our literature can be very different from theirs. Westward from hand to hand we pass the lighted torch, but it was lighted at the old domestic fireside of England’’ (756). Moreover, he does not recognize this extension of the British tradition as ‘‘an imitation’’ so much as ‘‘a continuation’’ that ‘‘we may well be proud of’’ (756). There is nothing in Kavanagh to dilute, in other words, the staunch sense of trans-Atlantic unity that inspires Longfellow to write near the end of his ‘‘Defence of Poetry’’ that any aspiring American poet ‘‘should make . . . the whole body of English classical literature, his study’’ (77).

**Longfellow’s Un-Emersonian Nature**

In the scattered fits and bursts that he devotes to Longfellow in American Renaissance, F. O. Matthiessen argues that Evangeline (1847) and The Song of Hiawatha (1855) demonstrate the chief problem with Longfellow’s poetry: his poetic forms ‘‘were not brought into fusion with his native themes’’ (174). Longfellow’s manifestoes were all but forgotten by the time Matthiessen published American Renaissance and their
approach was thoroughly out of step with the modernist program that Matthiessen
promoted. They suggest, however, that Longfellow’s fusion of European forms and
“native themes” was entirely intentional.

In “The Literary Spirit of Our Country,” “Defence of Poetry,” and Kavanagh,
Longfellow asks that poets turn to American nature for inspiration and for literary subject
matter while maintaining ties to European literary traditions, and he argues repeatedly
that any American exceptionality in culture or literature would have to be
environmentally determined. In Evangeline and Hiawatha Longfellow attempts to carry
this poetic project forward, and while he fuses the forms of Scandanavian sagas with
North American subjects he presents the natural world in a way that is wholly different
from Emerson’s system of environmental abstraction. Longfellow, rather, consistently
represents the natural world as a terrestrial and material, grounded and tactile
phenomenon, and in these two long poems he spends tremendous amounts of space
describing it because it bears such incredible cultural significance.

Nearly half of Evangeline, after all, constitutes a ranging tour of the North
American continent, and throughout the poem Longfellow depends upon an
environmental gaze that despite it frequent panoramic sweep remains fixed on a physical,
terrestrial American environment. After the village of Grand-Pré is burned and its
inhabitants are dispersed by the British navy, the poem follows Evangeline
Bellefontaine’s search for her fiancé, Gabriel Lajeunesse, as she travels down the
Mississippi to Louisiana, and from there to the American West. The entire second section
of “Part the Second,” in fact, catalogs what Evangeline sees as she travels “through a
wilderness sombre with forests:”

    cotton-trees . . . broad lagoons, where silvery sandbars / Lay in the stream . . .
china-trees . . . groves of orange and citron . . . a maze of sluggish and devious
waters . . . towering and tenebrous boughs of the cypress . . . trailing mosses . . .
erons . . . columns of cypress and cedar . . . the whoop of the crane and the roar
of the grim alligator . . . water-lilies in myriads (43–45)³⁸

After Evangeline reaches the Louisiana home of Basil the Blacksmith and finds that
Gabriel has “sought in the Western wilds oblivion of self and of sorrow,” her continued
search for Gabriel takes the poem into the West, where Longfellow again presents a
sweeping, panoramic representation of the North American continent (47). The poem’s
movement into the West allows Longfellow to cartographically enclose the expansive
natural space that he expects to nourish a national literature, and he does this in a
language of scale, wonder, beauty, and luxuriance that constantly emphasizes the
exceptionality of the North American environment.

    The same claim of environmental exceptionality motivates Longfellow’s The
Song of Hiawatha, which makes an explicit claim of its own environmental
determination. The “stories,” “legends and traditions” that the poem will relate,
Longfellow explains, have come “From the great forests and the prairies, / From the great
lakes of the Northland, / From the land of the Ojibways, / From the land of the Dacotahs,
/ From the mountains, moors, and fen-lands / Where the heron, the Shuh-shuh-gah, /
Feeds among the rushes”(141). Not from any person in particular, but explicitly from
places—“great forests and prairie,” “great lakes,” ancestral “lands,” and “mountains,
moors, and fen-lands.”
After his opening claim of nature’s literary agency, Longfellow claims that Native American oral literature (which he did take seriously) is itself evidence of the natural world’s artistic agency. The “legends and traditions” that Hiawatha relates, Longfellow’s narrator explains, have come to him “from the lips of Nawadaha,” an Indian “singer,” who, in turn, heard them directly from the natural world (141). Nawadaha, Longfellow writes, found the stories “In the bird’s nests of the forest, / In the lodges of the beaver, In the hoof-prints of the bison, / In the eyry of the eagle” (141). “In the moorlands and the fen-lands, / In the melancholy marshes” “All the wild-fowl said them to him;” “Chetowaik, the plover sang them, / Mahng, the loon, the wild goose, Wawa, / the blue heron, the Shuh-Shuh-gah, / And the grouse, the Mushodosa” all sang the stories of Hiawatha to Nawadaha, the Indian singer who pulled a native literature out of the natural world (141).

The Nation’s Shifting Sense of Nature and Longfellow’s Hedge Against the Future

As Longfellow was arguing for an environmentally determined American literature and working to create it, the nation’s perception of its own environment was undergoing a drastic shift. Over the course of the nineteenth century, in the words of Shawn Leowen, the nation’s “dominant conception of nature” shifted from “a discourse of abundance” to a “discourse of scarcity” (98). Emerson and his abstract vision of an immortal nature were becoming canonical, but the nation’s sense of nature was moving closer to the pessimistic environmental vision that Cooper presented in the Leatherstocking Series earlier in the century even as Cooper was being driven into obscurity.

Longfellow clearly sensed this shift in environmental perception, which fundamentally threatened his plan for an environmentally determined American
文学。它刺穿了他的自然宏大的叙述，在出乎意料的时刻，它迫使他准备一系列的应对措施，以保存他的美国文学免受自然最终的可能。所有这——朗费罗对环境变化的认识和他的反对——在《伊甸园》中出现了。此诗以北美的广阔为背景，它在中心被一个令人震惊的对北美自然可毁灭性的承认所刺穿。在对美国进步的赞颂中，同时使朗费罗的文学计划的耐久性受到怀疑，朗费罗写道：“土地可以得到，森林可以被砍伐并被制作成房屋”（60–61）。

替换森林为房屋是朗费罗不能也不愿意否认的，但它仍然为他带来了巨大的问题。尽管所有积极的暗示，但“房子”而不是自然、森林，他相信能够塑造美国的文化发展，”尽管他认识到北美自然的威胁状态，朗费罗仍然需要相信阿卡迪亚环境能够继续像他的诗中那样存在。文学项目，他从青年就一直在理论和细化，它依赖于这一点。

结构上，《伊甸园》保持了阿卡迪亚环境的活力。它在诗的终结时和诗的开始时一样纯真，不可避免地和不可改变。但它在北美内部的问题是不同的。在这里，尤其是在诗的最后一半，朗费罗采用了

The replacement of forests with houses was something that Longfellow could not–and would not have wanted to–denounce, but it still presented him with a tremendous problem. For all of their positive implications, it was not “houses,” but nature, forests, that he believed could shape the cultural development of the United States,” and as much as he recognized the threatened status of North American nature, Longfellow still needed to believe that the Acadian environment could continue to endure as it does in his poem. The literary program that he had theorized and refined since his youth depended upon it.

Structurally, Evangeline keeps the Acadian environment alive. It is as pure, inexorable, and immutable at the end of the poem when Longfellow returns to it as it is at the poem’s beginning. But the problem in within the bounds of the United States is different. Here, especially in the final half of the poem, Longfellow becomes adopts an
apocalyptic, even post-apocalyptic, view of the natural world and imagines a way to preserve the cultural force of the natural world even if it meets its actual end.

Almost immediately after the iconic pioneering axe punctures Longfellow’s poem, he narrates a voyage down the Mississippi river and begins interpreting the natural world as a glorious ruin—in much the same way that Walter Benjamin relies upon the image of the ruin in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*—that can retain its cultural value even after its destruction as a viable physical entity.

As he narrates this voyage down the Mississippi, Longfellow slips into the same discourse of architecture that Benjamin uses to formulate his idea of the ruin. On the Mississippi, for instance, the “tenebrous boughs of the cypress,” Longfellow writes, “met in a dusky arch, and the trailing mosses in mid-air / Waved like banners that hang on the walls of ancient cathedrals” (43). Rows of trees are “columns,” “colonnades,” and “corridors,” and when beams of moonlight penetrate the forest canopy, the light shines into “broken vaults . . . as through chinks in a ruin” (44–45).

In describing nature with architectural metaphors—even metaphors of ruined architecture—, Longfellow is preparing North American nature to become the same type of culturally significant ruin that Walter Benjamin understood to operate in the *Trauerspiel*, a form of baroque sixteenth-century German drama. In the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin explains, ruins and fragments of antiquity—“the highly significant fragment, the remnant”—were the ideal materials for the creation of new art (178). The ruin embodies history, and as an artistic medium fragments of ruined greatness allow for the creation of new “structure[s]” that would, even “in destruction, still be superior to the harmonies of antiquity,” even in its original state of wholeness (177–78).
In each of his manifestoes, Longfellow argues that Native American cultures grant North America a cultural history that rivals Europe, but he also clearly suggests that Native American culture is most powerful to white culture when the Natives themselves have disappeared. By the same token, if North American nature were to collapse as the viable physical entity that allows him to make claims of American exceptionality and to argue for an American national literature, it could still serve the purposes of U. S. national culture. Even in a ruined state, it could grant the United States a sense of deep history that it lacked. Even in decay it would suggest greatness, perhaps still determine the nation’s character, and possibly fulfill Longfellow’s environmentally determinist literary program. After all, as Benjamin recognizes, “in the ruins of great buildings, the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are” (235).

**Erasing Longfellow and Naturalizing American Literary Personality in the Early Twentieth Century**

Longfellow believed that the differences between American and European literatures would ultimately be the function of a distinctly American nature, and he composed poems in *Evangeline* and *The Song of Hiawatha* that attempt to offer examples of just such an environmentally determined American literature. These poems map a geographical space that they explicitly define as exceptional; they claim this space as both an artistic subject and art’s destining force; they argue that a new national literature can emerge out of the North American continent; they cultivate an environmental gaze that consistently focuses on a natural world that is terrestrial and material nature rather than abstract in the mode of Emerson; and they prepare American literature for an
existence beyond the death of North American nature. In the end, however, none of this held sway into the twentieth century.

During his lifetime, Longfellow had his critics. Poe famously accused him of plagiarism. Margaret Fuller, while dismissing Poe’s claims on the grounds that Longfellow’s very poetic project cause depends upon poetic borrowing and imitation, argued in “American Literature: Its Position in the Present Time, and Prospects for the Future” that Longfellow “had no style of his own” and that the derivative style he did have simply sucked the life out of his poems (154). In her own words, “this want of the free breath of nature” in his poetry, “this perpetual borrowing of imagery, this excessive, because superficial, culture which he has derived from an acquaintance with the elegant literature of many nations and men out of proportion to the experience of life himself, prevent Mr. Longfellow’s verses from ever being a true refreshment to ourselves” (154).

It was not Poe and Fuller, however, who excised Longfellow from the American canon. He was firmly entrenched in the American cultural memory—still recognized, in fact, as one of the U. S.’s representative authors—when Santayana and Brooks began their work of canon construction at the turn of the twentieth century. Nearly every aspect of Longfellow’s literary program ran counter to the goals of these critics. To Santayana and Brooks, Longfellow’s literary manifestoes were simply unimportant—unworthy of discussion, in fact—, his vision of trans-Atlantic literary unity seemed weak-minded and unimaginative, his poetry seemed childish and fit for no higher purpose than children’s reading, and he mattered most as the representative figure of an American culture that by the turn of the twentieth century had become soft, feminized, and “genteel.”
The roles of Santayana and Brooks in this canonical intervention cannot be overstated, particularly because they played such central roles in the formation of subsequent American literary criticism. Santayana and Brooks accomplished their erasure of Longfellow from the American literary canon with a veritable blitz of publications between 1911 and 1936. Santayana defined gentility as an American cultural plague in his 1911 “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy” and he explicitly connected this cultural problem with Longfellow in his 1915 “Genteel American Poetry,” and his 1920 “The Moral Background.”

Considering the iconic status—and tremendous commercial success—that Longfellow had achieved by the late nineteenth century, it is hardly surprising that he would eventually become a representative figure of the genteel tradition that Santayana deplored. But when Santayana does finally confront Longfellow, he bridges the gap between nineteenth century critical discussions that concern themselves primarily with the development of a national literature and the twentieth century conversations that finally do accomplish an American canon at Longfellow’s expense. In “The Moral Background,” for instance, Santayana describes “Rip Van Winkle,” “Hiawatha,” and “Evangeline” as the best literary productions of New England’s mid-nineteenth century “Indian summer of the mind,” but—continuing the sentiments of Mathews and Fuller—he condemns the writings of Irving and Longfellow as unoriginal or un-American: they “lacked native roots and fresh sap because the American intellect itself lacked them. Their culture was half a pious survival, half an intentional acquirement; it was not the inevitable flowering of a fresh experience” (78).
It is precisely this insistence upon new, uniquely American experience that shaped the nineteenth century response to Longfellow’s work, but Santayana inaugurates a new line of critique—the line that would be pursued with particular vigor by Van Wyck Brooks—when he condemns Longfellow’s poetry on gendered grounds in “Genteel American Poetry.” Here, Santayana deploys the usual critique of antebellum American poetry as “a boundless field of convention, prosperity and mediocrity,” but for the first time he also describes Longfellow’s poetry as the expression of an aged and atrophied femininity: “it was a simple, sweet, humane, Protestant literature, *grandmotherly* in that sedate *spectacled* wonder with which it *gazed* at the terrible world and said how beautiful and how interesting it all was” (73 emphasis added). Longfellow’s poetry does not merely represent a feminine literature, but, the most negative form of femininity that Santayana can muster—a naive and visually impaired femininity that lacks even sexual or generative vitality.

To one degree or another, whenever Santayana discusses the “genteel tradition” Longfellow looms as an omniscient example. For Van Wyck Brooks, however, Longfellow is a subject of direct, persistent, and consistently gendered attack. Brooks finds him, like Cooper (as I explained in Chapter 1), a member of the “first generation of American writers” who wrote “like prudent women” preparing a home for habitation (47). The work of both Cooper and Longfellow constitutes a “literature of necessity” in Brooks’s formulation, that “like the first warm blaze in a newly constructed hearth. . . . takes away the sense of chill” and makes “the room . . . at once cozy and cheerful” (47). By no means do either Cooper or Longfellow accomplish what Brooks regards as the primary purpose of a poet: “to revivify a people” (51).
In the introduction to his 1934 *Three Essays on America*, which reprints some of *America's Coming-of-Age*, Brooks offers an apology to Longfellow and the other authors that he feels he may have treated unfairly in the earlier book. He explains that he his generation “were tired of hearing Longfellow called ‘the Just,’ and we inscribed our shards against him,” ultimately confessing that “in Longfellow’s case, and that of most of the others . . . I attempted no rounded estimates. I meant merely to brush them lightly, with reference to a point of view that seems to me now sufficiently incomplete. But the tone of my remarks was sometimes rash, even to the point of impudence” (11).

Despite his attempt to apologize for his early treatment of Longfellow, Brooks never really change his opinion of the man he regarded–like Santayana–as a worthless, old, and (certainly not the least of his concerns) womanish, genteel poet. Much to the contrary, just two years after this apology Brooks offers the twentieth century’s most sustained critical dismissal of Longfellow in his 1936 *Flowering of New England*. In this text, which attempts to mask it disdain for Longfellow by acknowledging that he “had an original mind. He was an innovator in metres and rhythms; he introduced new modes of feeling; he touched his world with a magic that was mild but unmistakable,” Brooks pins Longfellow down as, once again, a womanish poet, a poet for children and, (in a new twist) an immanently impotent poet (317 or 318).

The long concession that I have just quoted is typical of Brooks’s treatment of Longfellow throughout *The Flowering of New England*, and while it marks a significant departure from the way that Santayana and Brooks un-apologetically dismiss him in their earlier critiques, each half-praise comes with a swipe at his poems’ “burden of youthful nostalgia” or a condescending remark about the fact that Longfellow “seemed to write for
the joy of sharing his treasures, as if he were glad to be thought a mere translator, a simple storyteller, a nursery minstrel” (168, 317 or 318). Of these pejorative titles, “nursery minstrel” has the strongest legs. It moves Brooks, in ways that “translator” and “storyteller” do not, directly toward his primary problem with Longfellow and his poetry: simply that they are engaged with a wholly feminine and emasculating domestic sphere of human life. Before Brooks leaves Longfellow, he suggests that Longfellow’s poetic process involved “walking in his garden,” certainly a feminine place, “among the birds, to the trilling of the frogs in his pond” composing “the stories he was telling his children” and “passing . . . on to a larger world that was an extension of his household” (510). His compositional process, for Brooks, essentially amounted to “woman’s work” (although it may not have been physical labor in the way that domestic “woman’s work” is often imagined, the very fact that it happened in a feminine domestic space would have carried strong enough implications for Brooks) that stripped him of his masculinity so that he himself became childlike and told these poetic stories “with a childlike air of trust” (510). In the end, this male but domestic poet suffered from a “flaccidity” that “debarred him from the front rank” of American litterateurs (512).

Domestic, and by implication rendered impotent by his domesticity, the Longfellow of Brooks’s account was essentially little more than a child himself—and “child,” it is important to remember, bears no positive implication in the scope of Brook’s argument, where real poets are first and foremost expected to be men—and firm, potent men at that. When he told the stories that he composed as he walked in his garden, after all, Longfellow told them “with a childlike air of trust,” or in other words, as if
Longfellow was himself a child (510). For all this emasculating domesticity, Longfellow only remains important, for Brooks, as one of “the popular New England authors,” like Whittier and Holmes (whom he includes in this group earlier in the paragraph), “whom every child could understand” and whose works “remained as classics indeed, but mainly for children” (530).

Thus, Santayana and Brooks effectively buried Longfellow beneath an attack on domestic literature that stood essentially unchallenged until Jane Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs* defended domesticity and questioned the critical institution’s modernist aesthetics. And since David Leverenz’s *Manhood and the American Renaissance* furthered Tompkins’s line of inquiry by illuminating nineteenth century “dramas of beset manhood,” critics have controlled a critical apparatus capable of redeeming Longfellow’s domesticity—and a considerable number of scholars have used it. Despite it’s critical redemption, however, Longfellow’s domesticity is just one element of a poetic project that underwent as near a complete erasure as is possible for an author who enjoyed Longfellow’s nineteenth century status.

Longfellow’s vision of an environmentally determined American literature may have ultimately proven untenable, but in at least one way it was remarkable: it yoked American literature to the North American environment and forced the two to be invested in each other. It marked a high point in American literature’s awareness of, and dependence upon, the natural world. When Santayana and Brooks performed their erasure of Longfellow, however, they could not entirely discard nature from the literary sphere. They wrote, after all, in a moment when nature bore particularly high cultural capital and when the new sense of environmental scarcity had sparked a sustained and
very public conservation movement. In the thirty-year period preceding the publication of Santayana’s 1911 “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,” the nation had witnessed the appearance of John Muir’s preservationist essays in journals like *Scribner’s*, the *Atlantic*, the *Outlook*, and the *Overland*; the creation of the Yosemite, General Grant, and Sequoia national parks; the formation of the Sierra Club with the of Muir and Robert Underwood Johnson; the appointment of Gifford Pinchot as the director of the national Division of Forestry; the formation of the Audubon Society; and the beginning of John Muir’s very public battle to save the Hetch Hetchy Valley from being turned into a reservoir for the city of Los Angeles. By the time that Brooks published his 1915 *America’s Coming-of-Age*, the battle for the Hetch Hetchy had ended, Muir had died, the natural world had been revealed, for a moment, as the field of political conflict that it always is, and the conservation of nature had become a subject of both household and national debate.\(^{13}\)

Santayana’s “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy” even participates in the nature-oriented spirit of the early twentieth century by suggesting that Americans turn to nature as a remedy for their own gentility. In this essay, which directly addresses an American audience, Santayana argues that “the mountains and the woods should make you at last ashamed to assert” the central claim of American gentility, that “the conceited notion that man, or human reason, or the human distinction between good and evil, is the center and pivot of the universe” (63). Before the essay ends, Santayana goes so far as to claim that “the society of nature,” can remove “the yoke of this genteel tradition itself . . . from your shoulders;” the mountains and woods of North America, which Santayana describes as “virgin and prodigious,” he writes, “allow you, in one happy moment, at
once to play and to worship, to take yourselves simply, humbly, for what you are, and to salute the wild, indifferent, noncensorious infinity of nature (63–64).

With the natural world still so immanently important to American culture, Santayana and Brooks promote a literary program that strips the American environment of any power to shape or create a national literature (thus severing Longfellow’s intimate link between American literature and American nature) while subsuming the culturally important rhetoric of nature into a new vision of American literary personality. When Santayana and Brooks proclaim Whitman the true beginning of any real American literature (a proclamation that I also discuss in Chapter 1) Whitman essentially becomes American nature, effectively removing the physical environment from the American literary equation and replacing it with a new, “natural,” American self.¹⁴ Brooks accomplishes this in America’s Coming of Age at the same moment that he explains Whitman’s greatness in terms that approximate the language of environmental determinism that Longfellow uses in his manifestoes. For Brooks, Whitman reveals “something organic” in American life and he is himself organic (112). As I have already mentioned in my discussion of Cooper, Brooks writes that “Whitman was himself a great vegetable of a man, all of a piece in roots, flavor, substantiality, and succulence, well-ripened in the common sunshine” (112). By transforming Whitman into something organic—specifically, a succulent, raw, undressed, and certainly phallic vegetable—Brooks manages to maintain the convincing language of the earlier environmental determinist models of American national literature while allowing the influential force of a physical nature to fade behind walls of naturalistic language and personality.
As Brooks appropriates the language of environmental determinist models of a national literature, he also manipulates the national relationship to the vast category of “the organic” by recasting the nation itself as a sort of organic protoplasm. In Brooks’s formulation, the nation is envisioned as a pre-human figure suspended in a process of Darwinian evolution:

America is like a vast Sargasso Sea—a prodigious welter of unconscious life, swept by ground-swells of half-conscious emotion. All manner of living things are drifting in it, phosphorescent, gayly colored, gathered into knots and clotted masses, gelatinous, unformed, flimsy, tangled, rising and falling, floating and merging, here an immense distended belly, there a tiny rudimentary brain (the gross devouring the fine)—everywhere an unchecked, uncharted, unorganized vitality like that of the first chaos. It is a welter of life which has not been worked into an organism, into which fruitful values and standards of humane economy have not been introduced, innocent of those laws of social gravitation which, rightly understood and pursued with a keen faith, produce a fine temper in the human animal. (164-65)

Despite the fact that it makes an unmistakable appeal to “the natural” through its Sargasso Sea metaphor, this passage performs a semiotic reversal that first of all sublimates the natural world into the world of the sign, thereby removing all agency from the realm of the environmental component of the passage, and then transfers whatever value the organic possessed away from the natural world to the exclusively human sphere. The United States, its literature, and its culture are not determined by an organic sphere—they are the organic, they are nature.

Ultimately, Brooks’s replacement of literary environmental determinism with a cult of a naturalistic Whitmanian personality eroded nature’s literary agency and its literary/cultural capital at one of the most dramatic preservationist moments of United States history, and it gave to the American critical tradition that developed in Brooks’s wake a method of discussing literature that had almost no connection at all to any sense
of a material nature. It preserved, as these passages from *America’s Coming-of-Age* demonstrate, a naturalistic rhetoric that possessed considerable cultural power in the historical moment, but only by relegating the environmental language of earlier manifestoes of U. S. national literature to a realm of signification that is entirely removed from any actual environmental signifier. Rather than an environment that shapes a national literature, Brooks offers an American culture that *is* nature, a primordial and evolutionary “Sargasso Sea,” and one poet, Walt Whitman, who had emerged out of this “welter of life” as a true “organism” who contained a self from whence all of the the environment’s qualities could be mined.

The critical decisions of George Santayana and Van Wyck Brooks were not inevitable events so much as deliberate actions of an implicit environmental politics that overwrote and silenced the vastly different literary plans of nineteenth century literary figures like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Santayana and Brooks were repelled by Longfellow’s social conservatism and poetic restraint, but when they rejected his poetry on these grounds and in favor of new modernist literary projects, they also discarded elements of his thinking—his focus on a material nature and his terrestrial environmental gaze—that could have contributed to a much more environmentally engaged course for American literature in the twentieth century. Even Santayana himself, had he given Longfellow a fairer reading, would have appreciated the poet’s frequently non-anthropocentric environmental vision of a natural world that Santayana believed to be the great hope for a culture that was mired in gentility. As the twentieth century progressed, however, the environmental politics of American literature would become the politics of evasion and displacement that Santayana and Brooks theorized and legitimimized.
in their canonical decisions. As authors like Willa Cather and John Steinbeck struggled to reconcile environmentalist sympathies with their positions within national and literary cultures of environmental disengagement, Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer wrote of liberatory environmental absorption, and Ernest Hemingway carried American environmental imperialism to its fulfillment, each of these authors wrote within a critical climate and a literary tradition that Santayana and Brooks helped construct against the material nature and terrestrial environmental vision of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Notes

1 For one of the best descriptions of Longfellow’s popularity and commercial success during the nineteenth century, see William Charvat’s Literary Publishing in America: 1790-1850 and The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870. Both of these volumes declare Longfellow the first professional poet in the United States and detail the qualities that precipitated Longfellow’s success, not the least of which was his willingness to devote himself “to a kind of poetry attractive to young women of his day,” specifically an audience of “young girls, who were that portion of the public most endowed with leisure” (Literary 70, Profession 121). The degree to which Longfellow has fallen out of the canon has been discussed by nearly every critic who has written about Longfellow in the past twenty years—each critic that I will mention in the next paragraph has covered this ground—, and I am therefore reluctant to recapitulate what has become a trope of Longfellow scholarship. For a very concise, and the most recent, history of Longfellow’s twentieth century reception, see Charles C. Calhoun’s “The Multicultural Longfellow.” For more elaborate discussions, see any of the essays that I will mention in the next paragraph.

Longfellow has undergone a bit of a critical recovery since Penguin published Longfellow’s Selected Poems in 1988 with an introduction by Lawrence Buell that demands just such a critical return. The critical work that has been performed on Longfellow and his texts since Buell’s call for reconsideration, though relatively small, has been surprisingly diverse. In essays that focus on Longfellow’s relationship to labor, Jill Anderson discusses Longfellow’s treatment of poetry as labor and his construction of a sustainable poetic lifestyle, while David R. Peck takes a much more negative view and criticizes Longfellow of being complicit in the construction of bourgeois ideologies and hegemonic capitalist materialism. In essays that approach Longfellow’s work in terms of gender, Jill Anderson, Eric L. Haralson, and Kirsten Silvia Gruesz, working in the tradition of Jane Tomkins and David Leverenz, argue that Longfellow presented feminine and sentimental modes of masculinity that were profoundly antithetical to the notions of vigorous masculinity that came to dominate the Progressive Era and that Longfellow’s sentimental/domestic masculinity therefore contributed to the modernist revolt against his poetry. Still other scholars, like Christoph Irmscher, Virginia Jackson, and Eric Carl
Link in “American Nationalism and the Defense of Poetry,” argue that Longfellow was a deeply democratic poet who not only wrote for the masses, but attempted to extend the privileges of poetic authorship to his audience while maintaining a persistently internationalist approach to poetry that ran directly counter to the more narrow visions of nationality espoused by the Young Americans and Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. Almost all of these critics discuss canon formation, its effects on Longfellow, and the ways that it might be manipulated, but this topic frequently becomes, as in the case of Link’s “Canon Formation and Marginality,” the central focus of critical inquiry. Finally, even fifteen years after Buell exhorted scholars to return to Longfellow, articles like John Derbyshire’s New Criterion review of a new collection of Longfellow’s work continue to apologize for and defend Longfellow against the critics who have hounded him for more than a century.

There was a fourth time that Longfellow presented this argument, but I have not listed it here. After publishing “The Literary Spirit of Our Country” in The United States Literary Gazette in 1824, he repeated the spirit of this piece in his 1826 Bowdoin commencement oration, “Our Native Poets.” “Our Native Poets” made its way into print shortly after Longfellow gave the address, but it is most accessible today as it is reprinted in Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a biography that was printed in 1902. It has not been reprinted since. Because “Our Native Poets” is largely a recapitulation of “The Literary Spirit of Our Country,” I will not spend any real space on it in this chapter.

Two of the figures that I mention here are important, but in the sake of brevity I will not discuss them directly in this chapter. James Russell Lowell was a key supporter of Longfellow’s vision of American literature, and he is even more important now because he has been used (in my opinion, misread) in the last half of the twentieth century to actually discredit the types of literary environmental determinism that interest Longfellow. Shortly after Longfellow published Kavanagh, Lowell published a review essay in the North American Review that thoroughly supported Longfellow’s position on American national literature—almost point-by-point. Lowell’s essay has not attracted tremendous critical attention in quite some time, but one critic who has discussed it, Cecilia Tichi in New World, New Earth, has argued that the essay attacks those who thought “that a great national literature would come largely from the ‘rolling rivers, dark & green woods, boundless meadows, and majestic peaks’ of the American landscape” (151). Tichi explains that this particular passage is directed primarily at Timothy Dwight’s The Columbiad, but her treatment of the essay as a whole suggests that Lowell may have also meant to discredit the types of claims that I am recognizing in Longfellow’s work. This is simply not the case. The main objective of Lowell’s essay is to support Longfellow’s claims in Kavanagh that a national genius must be born—and borne out of a European tradition that, like Longfellow, he did not want American literature to abandon—before it can be molded by an environment. The fact that a genius, once born, can be molded by an environment, Lowell accepts implicitly.

In addition to Lowell, I will not directly discuss Duyckinck in this chapter. I include him here as a way to quickly expand what I mean by “Young Americans” beyond the highly esoteric figure of Cornelius Mathews. We remember Duyckinck much more
readily today than Mathews, of course, because he was Melville’s editor and chief promoter, he was linked with almost every mid-nineteenth century author that we now consider significant, and he was one of the most powerful editors of the century. Duyckinck, in short, was much more poised and well-connected than Mathews, but he shared his friend’s vision for a national American literature. Between 1840 and 1842, Duyckinck and Mathews collaborated on Arcturus: A Journal of Books and Opinions, which, like the Niagara that Hathaway proposes in Longfellow’s Kavanagh, was launched with the explicit purpose of cultivating an American national literature that was much more patriotic and nativist than Longfellow’s vision of a national literature.

4 Any discussion of Longfellow’s literary manifestoes is rare, but the types of limiting analysis that I mention here may be found in Eric Carl Link’s “American Nationalism and the Defense of Poetry” and Van Wyck Brooks’s The Flowering of New England. Link’s essay essentially forgets Longfellow’s other manifestoes as it claims that “The Defence of Poetry” is “the principal document that sets forth Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s views of poetry,” while The Flowering of New England claims that the same essay amounted to “sufficiently mild words with which to announce an era;” that “twenty other poets and orators were saying the same things. Longfellow spoke for them all and only spoke with more authority because, with his chair at Harvard, he had an ampler sounding-board behind him” (Link Section II, Brooks 154). For a more extensive treatment of Longfellow’s manifestoes, see Cecil B. Williams’s Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and for a brief general overview of the aesthetic system that Longfellow presents in these manifestoes, without Brooks’s condescension of Brooks’s account, see Lawrence Buell’s New England Literary Culture: From Revolution Through Renaissance, especially pages 44-45.

5 Although it sympathizes with Mathews, supports his literary nationalism, and joins his critique of internationalist literary figures like Longfellow, Perry Miller’s The Raven and the Whale still offers one of the most thorough treatments of Mathews’s role in the nineteenth century debates over U. S. literary nationalism. For a more recent discussion of Mathews and his circle, see Edward L. Widmer’s Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City. Both Miller and Widmer acknowledge that Longfellow’s Kavanagh is a direct engagement with Cornelius Mathews. Beyond Miller and Widmer, numerous scholars have written about the role that Young Americans played in nineteenth century American imperialism. For two recent arguments in this vein, see Brady Harrison’s “The Young Americans: Emerson, Walker, and the Early Literature of American Empire” and Jenine Abboushi Dallal’s “American Imperialism UnManifest.”

6 The similarities between Churchill and Longfellow and Hathaway and Mathews are quite stark. So stark, in fact, that in The Raven and the Whale Perry Miller refers to these characters as “Churchill-Longfellow” and “Hathaway-Mathews” (252)

7 As all of Longfellow’s standard biographies have acknowledged, Longfellow never traveled into the (near or far) West, and he never actually saw the Mississippi; his ability to describe the West depended upon artistic renderings of the West, particularly
John Banvard’s panorama of the Mississippi, which he saw on display in Boston on December 19, 1846. For descriptions of Longfellow’s experience with this panorama and discussions of its effect on Longfellow as he composed *Evangeline*, see Samuel Longfellow’s *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, Cecil B. Williams’s *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, and Charles C. Calhoun’s *Longfellow: A Reconsidered Life*.  

8 Here and in the rest of my citations of Longfellow’s poetry, I list page numbers rather than line numbers because each of the volumes of poetry I quote do not list line numbers.

9 Virginia Jackson offers an excellent reading of Longfellow’s treatment of Native Americans, and Native American languages, in “Longfellow’s Tradition; or, Picture-Writing a Nation.” Jackson explains that Longfellow was as well informed as possible about Native American languages and cultures—largely through a close engagement with Henry Schoolcraft’s work on these subjects—but that he still conceded the eventual disappearance of these people, their languages, and their cultures. “*Hiawatha*,” Jackson recognizes, “actively joins the American campaign to ‘disappear’ native cultures by appealing to chronicle genocide passively as a fait accompli,” and it thus participates in the same narrative of “Vanishing Americans” that Lora Romero identifies while discussing James Fenimore Cooper’s work in her *Home Fronts: Nineteenth-Century Domesticity and Its Critics*.


11 The process of feminization that both Santayana and Brooks identify in mid-to-late nineteenth-century American culture is precisely the type of feminization that Ann Douglas makes the subject of her famous *Feminization of American Culture*. Although I feel that Douglas’s text bears no real explication here, I do find it interesting to see the ways that her argument extends the critical efforts of early twentieth-century male critics who were explicitly afraid of, and worked against, the power of femininity in American (and American male) culture.

12 Brooks’s dismissal of Longfellow in the texts that I am discussing here is powerful in its own right, but it is important to note that much of Brooks’s critique of Longfellow came to be reprinted in works that were published later in the twentieth century, keeping his interpretation of Longfellow in circulation long after Brooks’s initial texts had gone out of print. The particular passage that I quote here is part of a larger idea that Brooks republishes verbatim in *Our Literary Heritage: A Pictorial History of the Writer in America*, which he published with Otto Bettman in 1956, fully twenty years after he initially offered the sentiment in *The Flowering of New England*. The larger passage that makes it into the later work reads like this: “In later days, when other
fashions came, when the great wheel of time had passed beyond them, one saw these poems in another light. They seemed to lack finality and distinction, whether in thought or phrase. But no one could quite forget their dreamy music, their shadowy languor, their melodious charm, their burden of youthful nostalgia” (*Flowering* 168).

Muir began publishing in these journals in 1890, and continued to do so until his death, and the Yosemite, General Grant, and Sequoia national parks were created in the same year. Muir and Johnson founded the Sierra Club in 1892, Pinchot became the director of the Division of Forestry in 1898 and would hold the post under presidents McKinley and Roosevelt before resigning from Taft’s administration in 1910. The Audubon society was formed in 1905 and Muir’s battle for the Hetch Hetchy began in 1909; it continued until 1913, when the construction of the Hetch Hetchy Dam was approved by Congress. Muir died the next year, in 1914. These events are discussed in virtually every history of environmentalism. Although the Muir-Pinchot debates, which I am focusing on with this list, only represent one form of environmentalism (that which focuses on the preservation of “wild” spaces), it stands out as one of the most public environmental debates of the early twentieth century. Muir’s battle to save Hetch Hetchy gripped national print media in a way that would only be matched fifty years later in the controversy surrounding Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. For more about these events, see Fox’s *The American Conservation Movement*, Gottlieb’s *Forcing the Spring*, Hays’s *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind* and *Readings in Conservation History*, Shabecoff’s *A Fierce Green Fire*, and Worster’s *American Environmentalism*. For particularly insightful treatments of the Hetch Hetchy debate, specifically see Fox and Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind*.

While I am interested in the ways that Whitman himself engaged the natural world, I cannot fully engage this subject in this chapter—even in this book. My concern here is primarily with what Whitman became in Brook’s critical rendering. For one of the first arguments to make an explicitly ecocritical investigation into Whitman’s work, however, see M. Jimmie Killingsworth’s *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Ecopoetics*.

In “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,” Santayana declares that egocentrism and anthropocentrism are two of the primary flaws of the genteel tradition. In his own words, Santayana writes that America’s genteel “systems are egotistical; directly or indirectly they are anthropocentric, and inspired by the conceited notion that man, or human reason, or the human distinction between good and evil, is the center and pivot of the universe” (64). It is this very manifestation of genteel ideology that prevents Santayana from declaring Emerson a writer of the first rank; Emerson’s “love and respect for nature” is perverted in Santayana’s opinion—“Nature . . . is precious because it is his own work, a mirror in which he looks at himself and says (like a poet relishing his own verses), ‘What a genius I am! Who would have thought there was such stuff in me?’” (53).

In a passage that has made him famous amongst Deep Ecologists, Santayana argues that the only real cure for American gentility is unmediated contact with the natural world:
[Anthropocentrism and Egocentrism are] what the mountains and the woods should make you at last ashamed to assert. From what, indeed, does the society of nature liberate you, that you find it so sweet . . . it is the yoke of this genteel tradition itself, your tyrant from the cradle to the grave, that these primeval solitudes lift from your shoulders. They suspend your forced sense of your own importance not merely as individuals, but even as men. They allow you, in one happy moment, at once to play and to worship, to take yourselves simply, humbly, for what you are, and to salute the wild, indifferent, noncensorious infinity of nature” (62-64)

When I claim that Longfellow’s environmental vision resisted anthropo-and-egocentrism, I am specifically referring to Evangeline and The Song of Hiawatha, which, with the occasional moment when nature darkens with Evangeline’s mood, generally do not project human problems or motivations onto the natural world.
Willa Cather and John Steinbeck were not environmental activists. But they could have been.\textsuperscript{1} More than any other authors who thought of themselves as participants in American literary tradition during the early twentieth century, Cather and Steinbeck were equipped to register environmental change in the terms of ecological science, and their novels do indeed recognize it on regional, national, and international scales.\textsuperscript{2} Cather witnessed the progressive conservation movement from within a magazine industry that participated in the conservation movement as well as the era’s more generalized spirit of activism and reform, and Steinbeck began his writing career in the wake of this conservation movement.

Rather than articulating environmentalist positions that went beyond the “radical ambivalence” that they felt for the general trajectory of American culture, both Cather and Steinbeck navigated literary and cultural situations that made any such plan of environmental politics impossible. By the early twentieth century, it had become impossible to pursue such a course and remain within the field of “the literary,” and as the twentieth century progressed radicalism of any sort would bear increasingly severe penalties in the United States as the twentieth century progressed.\textsuperscript{3} Rather than articulating a new relationship between literature and the environment, as they might have in slightly different circumstances, the writings of both Willa Cather and John
Steinbeck capture a tense environmental schizophrenia that is controlled by the environmental legacy of nineteenth-century American literature—abstract notions of nature, skyward environmental gazes, and metonyms of environmental health—and the dangers that they believed would have accompanied environmental radicalism in the early-to-mid twentieth century.

**The Progressive Conservation Movement, The Hetch Hetchy Debate, and Cather in New York City**

Since Susan Rosowski’s 1995 “Willa Cather’s Ecology of Place,” it has become common knowledge among Cather scholars that the author was deeply interested in ecological science; that she went to the University of Nebraska planning to become “‘a great anatomist or a brilliant naturalist’” at a moment when the university was dominated by the personality of the pioneering ecologist Charles Besey; and that F. E. Clements, another extremely influential ecologist, was her classmate and friend at the university (37). Joseph Urgo has advanced Rosowski’s efforts by juxtaposing Cather’s career with the events of the “National Parks Movement” and arguing that *My Ántonia* converts the spirit of the conservation movement into “an aesthetic projection of the will to preserve” (51).

Rosowski and Urgo establish Cather’s interest in the science of ecology and situate her historically in a particular conservationist moment, but by limiting the focus of their essays to ecological science and the creation of national parks they miss both the tension of the early twentieth century environmental debates and Cather’s nearness to them. Even before Longfellow’s death in 1882, the environmental anxiety that he had managed to control in *Evangeline* had been expressed in George Perkins Marsh’s 1864 *Man and Nature* (the first systematic critique of American land use) and had inspired
governmental intervention into the state of the nation’s nature: in 1864 the Congress ceded the Yosemite Valley to the State of California as a public park, in 1872 Congress created Yellowstone National Park, and in 1872 the Division of Forestry was created within the Department of Agriculture to help manage the nation’s suddenly ephemeral resources. The forty years after Longfellow’s death witnessed the progressive conservation movement and a tremendous acceleration of conservation measures: the federal government alone (not to mention the actions of state governments) created 20 national parks and 24 national monuments in addition to the 53 wildlife refuges that Theodore Roosevelt created through the use of executive orders.\(^5\)

As helpful as they are as historical markers, the creations of parks, monuments, and refuges cannot capture the degree to which conservation polarized public opinion during the first decades of the twentieth century. Although the history of conservation rarely overlaps with traditional literary history, the most dramatic and well publicized event of the progressive conservation movement—John Muir’s battle to save Yellowstone’s Hetch Hetchy from being dammed and converted into a reservoir for the city of San Francisco—occurred in close proximity to Willa Cather. When he began his conflict to save the valley, Muir had been publishing in the nation’s major periodicals since the 1870s. He had published in *Scribner’s Monthly, The Century, The Atlantic Monthly, The Overland Monthly, Harper’s Magazine,* and *The Overlook.*\(^6\) Between 1901 and 1914, Muir published four long prose works with Houghton Mifflin, the era’s pre-eminent publisher, and after his death Houghton would publish four additional volumes of his work in addition to a collection of letters and a biography.\(^7\) During his campaign to save the Hetch Hetchy, Muir’s most steadfast allies were Lyman Abbott, editor of the
Overlook, and Robert Underwood Johnson, associate editor of the more influential Century, but his supporters also included “Charles Eliot, Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr., Ethan Hitchcock, Enos Mills, the novelist Ellen Glasgow, the journalist Henry Watterson, and Henry Fairfield Osborn” (Fox 143). Before the Hetch Hetchy argument was finally closed, moreover, “The Outlook, Nation, Independent, World’s Work, Collier’s, the New York Times, Tribune, and World, and a hundred or so other newspapers and magazines opposed the project” (Fox 145).

When Muir committed himself to resisting the Hetch Hetchy project in 1907, Cather had already been working as an editor at McClure’s magazine in New York City for a year, and in 1908 she became the magazine’s managing editor—a position she would hold until 1912, one year before Congress and Woodrow Wilson passed legislation to permit the flooding of the valley. During the years of the Hetch Hetchy debate, McClure’s published a vitriolic condemnation’s of the nation’s misuse of natural resources (Rudolph Cronau’s “A Continent Despoiled” in April of 1908) and a laudatory biography of Gifford Pinchot (Will C. Barnes’s “Gifford Pinchot, Forester”), but it never directly engaged the Hetch Hetchy debate in the manner of The Century or the New York newspapers. Before, during, and after the Hetch Hetchy conflict, however, Cather published her writing in the same venues that published Muir and supported his Hetch Hetchy campaign. Her writings appeared in The Century, The Overland Monthly, Collier’s, and Scribner’s and her first four novels—Alexander’s Bridge (1912), O Pioneers! (1913), The Song of the Lark (1915), and My Ántonia (1918)—were published, like nearly all of Muir’s book-length works, by Houghton Mifflin.
Environmental Desire and Environmental Schizophrenia

When Longfellow registered a fissure in the idea of an immutable and permanent North American nature, he wrote well before the furor of the progressive conservation movement, and the loss of nature mattered most to him, it seems, for the implications that it held for his particular vision of American literature. By the time that Cather began her writing career, however, environmental loss had accelerated and become a national issue that would have been particularly difficult to ignore for anyone who had Cather’s ecological sensibilities, her central position in the same New York magazine industry that had taken up the cause of progressive conservation, and her interest in writing novels that she imagined to have grown out of the long grasses of the prairies.

Despite being uniquely equipped and positioned to become an environmental activist, however, Cather rejected the type of social activism, or muckraking, that she had been a part of at McClure’s. M. Catherine Downs has argued that Cather was deeply engaged in her journalistic work and that she even participated in the magazine’s muckraking tradition when she re-wrote Georgine Milmine’s The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy for McClure’s, but it is difficult to overturn James Woodress’s longstanding claim that Cather “had no interest in muckraking, found social reformers very dull people, [and] took the dimmest possible view of literature that had a message” (Life and Art 123). In several essays, Cather clearly states that the novel should not become the vehicle for social agendas and that she had lost her zeal for muckraking. In her 1936 essay, “Escapism,” for instance, she mocks the current sentiment that the novelist’s “first concern should be to cry out against social injustice” and confesses that “when I first lived in New York and was working on the editorial staff of a magazine, I became disillusioned about social workers and reformers” (970). It was not just the social
workers that lost their luster for Cather, but the entire mission of social activism. If she ever had any real interest in reform movements (and Woodress is adamant in Willa Cather: Her Life and Art that she did not), it clearly had no place in her vision of literature. In her literary credo, “The Novel Démeublé,” which also appeared in 1936 (as an essay in Not Under Forty), Cather postulates, after all, that “If the novel is a form of imaginative art, it cannot be at the same time a vivid and brilliant form of journalism” (836).

By abandoning social activism in favor of a de-politicized literature, Cather simultaneously abandoned the sphere of women’s writing (which had been associated with social activism throughout the nineteenth century’s abolition, temperance, women’s suffrage, and urban reform movements) and dove into the masculine tradition that had been moving in a steadily apolitical direction since at least the mid-nineteenth century. It was an assault on the male literary institution and a function of her particular literary feminism, but her rejection of social activism largely precluded any overt political confrontation with the processes of environmental destruction that were rapidly changing the very places that she was using to ground her novels.

Both O Pioneers! and My Ántonia admit widespread environmental change, but, with activism out of the question, they defuse the potentially revolutionary force of such change. Before the mid-1990s, when the sudden appearance of ecocriticism inspired a second look at it, Cather’s treatment of the environment was tacitly dismissed as a function of the nostalgia that Granville Hicks famously identified in Cather’s work in his 1933 essay, “The Case against Willa Cather.” In this essay, Hicks writes that “Miss Cather . . . is concerned with” a “past era, and she looks back on it with nostalgia;” she
“has simply projected her own desires into the past: her longing for heroism, her admiration for natural beauty, her desire—intensified by pre-occupation with doubt and despair—for the security of an unquestioned faith” (139, 145).11

Cather’s nostalgia, though is not so simple. As Sarah Wilson has recently argued in the context of *The Professor’s House*, Cather was aware of and manipulated the nostalgia that runs through her texts. She understood that a “colonial gaze” was building new “national histories” out of Native American cultures in the Southwest, she knew that nostalgia was playing a critical role in this process of national myth-making, and she believed—as “Tom Outland’s Story” attests—, that nostalgia was ultimately an evasion of “social and intellectual responsibility” that was “profoundly unsuited . . . to the brokering of a flexible and inclusive community” (Wilson 578, 586, 584).

When Granville Hicks bristled at the nostalgia he sensed in Cather’s “admiration of natural beauty,” he was writing primarily of *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, but the environmental nostalgia that he recognizes in these texts is just as controlled as that which Wilson identifies in *The Professor’s House*. In *O Pioneers!*, two manifestations of nostalgia battle against each other. Carl Linstrum’s backward gaze recalls the prairie as it was before it was developed into an agricultural grid; his gaze forgets all of the privation that drives his family to move back to the city, but it recalls the original glory of the prairie and illuminates the history of a place that has become an agricultural grid.

Against Carl’s oddly historicizing nostalgia, Alexandra Bergson poses a nostalgia for the present. Especially during the first two major sections of the novel—which record her big dream of large-scale agricultural success and the fulfillment of this dream—, Alexandra views the current moment as the fulfillment of a historical process, imagines the present
itself as a pivotal moment in history, and erases the ugly imperialism that contributed to it. The nostalgia that runs throughout *My Ántonia* is not polyvocal as it is in *O Pioneers*, but it is no less complex. Every time that Jim Burden looks backward to his boyhood and youth on the glorious prairie, his gaze is forced through the filter of Cather’s introduction to the novel, which casts Jim first and foremost as a romantic and exposes his entire narrative—and its nostalgia—to scrutiny.

Cather neither affirms nor denies the environmental nostalgia that her characters display in *O Pioneers* and *My Ántonia*; she seems, rather, to simply observe it. This environmental nostalgia, though, is symptomatic of a much more pervasive environmental schizophrenia that courses through these two novels in ways that approximate the operation of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s schizophrenic mind. *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* are crisscrossed with currents of environmental yearning and lamentation that are held in check by perpetual returns to an Emersonian relationship to the environment that maintains its faith in nature’s permanence and purity through metonyms of environmental health and a tightly controlled environmental gaze.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the schizophrenic is the product of, and a threat to, capitalism. S/he is deaf, mute, and catatonic, withdrawn into a fractured self through which desire flows freely and unchecked, and capable of sliding through space and time to “everywhere something real has been and will be produced” (*Anti-Oedipus* 87). It is only through the repression of both individual and social desire, after all, that capitalism commodifies the self, and schizophrenia’s ability to unleash all that is repressed—even to remove both mind and body from processes of capitalist production—holds the power to unhinge the capitalist order. Because “desire does not ‘want’ revolution, it is
revolutionary in its own right,” capitalism controls, confines, and imprisons schizophrenia—and its coursing flows of unchecked desire—to preserve itself (116).

The environmental nostalgia that operates in Cather’s novels is a function of such schizophrenia; it allows characters to move through space and time to locate real or original environments irregardless of historical circumstances, and it allows Cather to momentarily fulfill desires for contact with “pure” and/or “original” environments that undercut the narratives of unapologetic progress that are promoted by Alexandra Bergson and Jim Burden. Nostalgia keeps such space available regardless of any actual environmental loss, but as much as Cather’s characters fulfill their environmental longings by looking backward they also restrict their flows of environmental desire by relying upon metonyms of environmental health and tightly controlling their environmental gazes.

Cather’s Canonically Modulated Environmental Schizophrenia

In *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, the Nebraska prairie is both stultifying and magnificent. It breaks Carl Linstrum in *O Pioneers!* and essentially kills John Bergson; it is “bewildering . . . depressing and disheartening . . . an enigma” unlike any other land (13–14). It is a site of extreme privation for European immigrants and it blots out Jim Burden’s sense of himself in *My Ántonia* just as it had blotted out Cather’s own identity as a child.13 At the same time, however, the prairie in *O Pioneers!* is “the great fact,” a powerful place that wishes to “preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness;” in *My Ántonia* Jim Burden’s “first glorious autumn” is glorious because the prairie is wild, free, fenceless, and full of motion (*O Pioneers!* 10, ).14 In each of the novels the original uniqueness and power of the prairie—its essence—is bound up in its most distinct single feature—its native grasses.
"O Pioneers! and My Ántonia are both driven steadily away from this dually-interpreted original environment by characters that play critical roles in converting it into a highly ordered agricultural space. Alexandra Bergson and Jim Burden both privilege optimistic environmental narratives that emphasize the glory of the prairie’s transformation. In each of the novels, however, Cather punctures the grand narratives of national and agricultural progress to reveal an undercurrent of environmental longing that privileges a benevolent vision of the prairie during an earlier moment. These ruptures, which are provided in large part by Carl Linstrum in O Pioneers! and Cather’s narratorial interventions in My Ántonia, insert unwieldy flows of environmental desire into Jim and Alexandra’s master narratives that are ultimately controlled through various forms of Emersonian environmental misdirection.

From the beginning of O Pioneers!, Cather establishes that Alexandra Bergson is a visionary–she first appears as a girl “who seemed to be looking with . . . anguished perplexity into the future” (9). As Alexandra matures, she accomplishes her father’s mission of forging a highly ordered space out of the wide expanse of the indomitable prairie, and she manages “the big chance” of land speculation when other settlers fail (41). All in all, watching her big dreams act themselves out on the prairie is an exhilarating experience for Alexandra. The prairie–especially when she sees it within the scope of the plan she has for it–seems “beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious” (41–2). So glorious, in fact, that it brings her to tears.¹⁵

Carl Linstrum exists in the first part of O Pioneers! as a “bitter” and sullen boy whose family is failing at frontier life, and he ultimately exits the narrative when his family abandons its homestead and returns to St. Louis (10). He reappears at the
beginning of Part II, however, when the scene is “sixteen years since John Bergson died,” and he returns to a place that is radically different. “The shaggy coat of the prairie,” Cather writes, “has vanished forever. From the Norwegian graveyard one looks out over a vast checkerboard, marked off in squares of wheat and corn; light and dark, dark and light. Telephone wires hum along the white roads, which always run at right angles.”

(49)

As soon as Carl finds himself alone with Alexandra he punctures her sense of triumph by stating that he prefers the original, untamed prairie to the new prairie of Alexandra’s own creation. In what could be construed as an expression of a very simplistic nostalgia, Carl says,

“I think I liked the old Lou and Oscar better, and they probably feel the same about me. I even, if you can keep a secret,–Carl leaned forward and touched her arm, smiling,–‘I even think I liked the old country better. This is all very splendid in its way, but there was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years. Now, when I come back to all this milk and honey, I feel like the old German song, ‘Wo bist du, wo bist du, mein geliebtest Land?’–Do you ever feel like that, I wonder?” (75).

Jim’s question is nostalgic insofar as it looks back to an idealized past–it’s retrospective view of the prairie erases the distinctly negative view of the place that he himself held early in the novel–but it also gives expression to an environmental anxiety that Alexandra seems to sense but evade throughout the novel.

When she wants to see the inexorable perpetuity of the natural world that used to be written all over the face of the prairie, Alexandra casts her gaze skyward; when she wants to re-experience the former glory of the place, she looks toward the bits of native prairie grass that endure within the fences of cemeteries; and when she is consolidating her power as a landowner she incorporates “Crazy Ivar,” the only figure in the novel who
lives in total ecological harmony with the prairie, into her own family as if his assimilation grants her operation a sense of ecological benevolence. When Carl asks his pivotal question, Alexandra immediately shifts the discussion from the terrestrial nature that Carl recognizes as fundamentally—and unfortunately—changed to a nature that is construed as abstract and astronomical. In response to Carl’s question about changes on the face of the prairie, Alexandra turns her attention to the unchanging heavens and directs Carl’s gaze to the place where a fragment of original prairie remains: Alexandra, Cather writes, “paused and looked thoughtfully at the stars” before immediately diverting Carl’s attention to the old Norwegian graveyard that reappears throughout the novel as a final preserve of native prairie grass (75).

By the time that Carl asked Alexandra if she missed the old prairie, she had already learned to depend on an averted and restricted environmental gaze to repress any potentially subversive environmental desire from undercutting the narrative of success that she was constructing for herself. Relatively early in O Pioneers!, after the mildly traumatic moment in which Alexandra tells her brothers that she plans to expand the family’s landholdings, Alexandra re-centers herself against the vision of unchanging nature that she finds in the night sky. After her talk with her brothers, she stands against a windmill “looking at the stars which glittered so keenly through the frosty autumn air,” and thinking “of their vastness and distance, and of their ordered march” (45). In this recumbent position, with her eyes focused above the space that is capable of being entirely transformed and with her mind on vastness, distance, and cosmic order, Cather writes that “it fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security” (45).
Similarly, the graveyard that Cather recalls after Carl’s question had always existed within the scope of the novel as a veritable museum of native prairie biota. From the opening chapter of the novel it is a place where the native endures, “where the grass had, indeed, grown back over everything, shaggy and red, hiding even the wire fence” (10).

Jim Burden is at least as involved as Alexandra Bergson in drastic environmental change, and he deals with such change just as she does—by looking away from it and fixing his gaze on what are essentially taxidermied remains of a formerly wild, free, glorious, and clearly exceptional place. Jim Burden, however, gets a much different treatment from Cather. While both Alexandra and Jim contain multiple orientations toward the environment and mechanisms to control them, in *My Ántonia* Cather works to expose everything Jim does as dubious—including the relationship to the environment that he creates for himself.

Cather quickly undermines Jim’s narrative before she ever turns the novel over to him. In the novel’s introduction, as it appeared in the original version of 1918, the female narrator (presumably Cather herself) who will ultimately present Jim’s narrative “substantially as he brought it to me” presents Jim as a conniving social climber with a stilted worldview and an explicitly contradictory relationship with the natural world (6). This narrator states quite frankly that Jim’s “career was suddenly advanced by a brilliant marriage,” that she rarely spends time with Jim because “I do not like his wife,” and (in a claim that drastically undercuts his veracity as a narrator) that Jim possess a “naturally romantic and ardent disposition” (3). On the heels of these serious blows to Jim’s reliability, Cather’s female narrator specifically identifies Jim’s relationship with the
environment as a point of conflict. Jim “loves with a personal passion the great country” of his youth, but “he is legal counsel for one of the great Western railways” that “runs and branches” through the very place that he loves (4, 3). Jim has a great “faith in” and “knowledge of” this land, and he has “played an important part in its development,” but his “part” has moved in particularly exploitative directions:

He is always able to raise capital for new enterprises in Wyoming or Montana, and has helped young men out there to do remarkable things in mines and timber and oil. If a young man with an idea can once get Jim Burden’s attention, can manage to accompany him when he goes off into the wilds hunting for lost parks or exploring new canyons, then the money which means action is usually forthcoming. (4, emphasis added)

Joseph Urgo, who claims that Jim Burden is a preservationist, grounds his argument on this passage. In Urgo’s words, “Jim Burden is emblematic of the conservation debate. He is both a legal counsel for the railroads (and so he profits from development), and he is a preservationist, someone you can count on for funding ‘big Western dreams’ of uncovering secret canyons and lost parks” (50). Urgo makes his central claim, however, without acknowledging that Jim’s grand plans involve “mines, timber, and oil” and that Jim funds young men who want to take “action” in the “lost parks . . . [and] new canyons.” Although the word is vague, this “action” seems much more likely to involve the extraction of natural resources rather than any sort of preservation (or conservation, for that matter), especially considering Jim’s lines of work.

All things considered, Jim’s relationship to the natural world is much less preservationist (or conservationist or environmentalist) than Urgo admits. The more compelling facet of Jim’s relationship with the natural world concerns how he maintains his own multiplicities—how he can continue to love the land of his childhood and continue to be involved in its erasure.
The burden of environmental guilt that Jim Burden faces in his narrative is more intense than the one that Cather created in *O Pioneers!*. In the earlier novel, the prairie may have been glorious but in the early years it was also a bitter place that killed or broke vigorous men. In *My Ántonia*, however, the prairie lacks the menacing half of this binary. Surely, Mr. Shimerda dies and the prairie has collected a wide variety of broken individuals (Pavel and Peter, for instance, and all of the “Working Girls” whose lives have been made difficult by conditions on the prairie), but very little blame falls on the prairie itself. To Jim Burden, the prairie of his boyhood is a wholly magnificent—even magical—place. Even if Jim remembers his first encounter with the prairie as an encounter with profound nothingness against which he “felt erased, blotted out,” from the beginning he paints the prairie as the mother of a nation (13). In coming into the prairie he found himself enveloped in a black “nothing” that was, nevertheless, “the material out of which countries are made” (12).

As he moves away from his initial definition of the prairie as a generative nothingness, Jim sings a song of its glories until he elevates it to the sublime. He revels in its openness and lack of fencing: “all the years that have passed have not dimmed my memory of that first glorious autumn [. . .] there were no fences in those days, and I could choose my own way over the grass uplands, trusting my pony to get me home again” (27). He fixes his environmental gaze upon the prairie’s native grasses, which he argues are the locus of the prairie’s incredible motion and vivacity: “as I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the color of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be
running” (18). In Jim’s most enraptured moment, the wild fenceless prairie of his boyhood, with all of its native grasses, becomes a sublime, transfigurative space of heroic and Biblical scale:

All those fall afternoons were the same, but I never got used to them. As far as we could see, the miles of copper-red grass were drenched in sunlight that was stronger and fiercer than at any other time of the day . . . the whole prairie was like the bush that burned with the fire and was not consumed. That hour always had the exultation of victory, of triumphant ending, like a hero’s death—heroes who died young and gloriously. It was a sudden transfiguration, a lifting-up of day.

How many an afternoon Ántonia and I have trailed along the prairie under that magnificence! And always two long black shadows flitted before us or followed after, dark spots on the ruddy grass. (35)

For Jim, the death of the prairie as he found it in his boyhood would amount to the loss of the pure and original, the loss of the exceptional, and the loss of a source of the sublime. His reaction to this incredible source of loss that he has helped precipitate, like Alexandra’s, is to simply look away. Having already established that the prairie’s grasses metonymically represent a pure and vibrant prairie, Jim fixes his environmental gaze on the scant patches of prairie grass that remain, and when he comes face to face with the colossal changes that have taken place on the prairie he manipulates visual perspective to further mediate the environmental losses that he willingly admits.

As time passes and the native prairie recedes before the plow, Jim and Ántonia repeatedly and “instinctively” retreat to the one place where the native grasses remain—the grave of Ántonia’s father, Mr. Shimerda (239). Although the place is clearly significant because it is tied to Mr. Shimerda and his terribly traumatic death, it is also magnetic because it contains some of the last remaining prairie grass that Jim represents as the soul of the original prairie. The gravesite is a persistent “little island” “with a sagging wire fence around it” that contains the “tall red grass that was never mowed”
This place and its metonymic grass, Jim explicitly points out, continued unchanged “when the open-grazing days were over, and the red grass had been ploughed under until it had almost disappeared from the prairie; when all the fields were under fence, and the roads no longer ran about like wild things, but followed the surveyed section-lines” (94). This gravesite is a monument to Mr. Shimerda and to the prairie itself, but Jim does not recognize it as a monument. For him, it is the original prairie still alive, and it’s perpetual existence allows him to extend the life of the highly significant original prairie even beyond its effectual end.

While Jim usually enforces a constricted environmental gaze that focuses strictly on Mr. Shimerda’s metonymic grass, he is equally capable of widening the lens and recasting the prairie as a panorama of expansionist triumph that obliterates environmental loss from a different direction. Near the end of *O Pioneers!*, Jim adopts this panoramic gaze to praise the new, thoroughly controlled, thoroughly agricultural prairie. During a trip to “the high country, to visit Widow Steavens,” he reports that

> The wheat harvest was over, and here and there along the horizon I could see black puffs of smoke from the steam thrashing-machines. The old pasture land was now being broken up into wheatfields and cornfields, the red grass was disappearing, and the whole face of the country was changing. (229)

For Jim, the pastures, the harvest, and the new wooden homes that he also witnesses all mean “happy children, contented women, and men who saw their lives coming to a fortunate issue,” and in aggregate “the changes seemed beautiful and harmonious . . . it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea” (229).

This statement, Jim’s only unequivocal praise of prairie development in the entire novel, is remarkable for the circumstances it involves and for what it does not say. Jim only experiences this moment of enthusiasm when he is in a “high country” that grants
him a particular perspective. From this vantage point, the entire place loses its
particularity and becomes more like an Albert Bierstadt panorama than the actual place
that Jim loves, or like the idea of American “progress”–an idea, of course, that rarely
admits the costs it entails. And it is only from this perspective that the life of the prairie
cannot be measured in the motion of its rapidly disappearing grasses.

On that particular highland, with the prairie spread out across his horizon, the
situation was right for Jim to find the new prairie “beautiful and harmonious,” or for his
own personal interests (his love for the place as it was) to become secondary to a grand,
panoramic idea of progress. It is not insignificant, though, that after his triumphalist
vision he repeatedly moves in the opposite direction–away from the heights, where
change is visible on an overwhelming scale and back to ground level where draws,
gullies, and fences limit the line of sight to remaining bits of native prairie. Between the
mountaintop scene and the end of the novel, Jim encloses himself in Ántonia’s
homestead, with its concentric rings of trees and hedges, where he experiences the type of
domesticity he imagined in his highland vision, and immediately before his final
departure from Black Hawk he wanders away from the train station into the pastures,
draws, and hillocks “where the land was so rough that it had never been ploughed up, and
the long red grass of early times still grew shaggy” (272). Even after helping create a
new prairie, seeing it, and registering the loss of the original environment, Jim finds a
way–somewhere behind the train station–to find a bit of the “old road, which used to run
like a wild thing across the open prairie,” the same prairie that he says used to run like a
wild thing itself. Mike Fischer has recognized that this “old road” “recalls the road for
which he works as a lawyer, that ‘Great Western Railway’ that ‘runs and branches’
through Nebraska, leaving scars far more permanent—and serious—than those Jim can trace to wagon ruts,” but as long as this patch of old road exists, just as patches of native prairie grass continue to exist, Jim will be able to believe that the prairie of his boyhood still exists and he will be able to maintain his contradictory stance toward the environment will always be able to control the emotion that he feels for the environment (38).

_Steinbeck, Ecology, and American Culture_

More than any other factor, the male literary tradition–and its established modes of mediating environmental loss–shaped Willa Cather’s evasion of environmental crisis, but she still understood, as John Steinbeck would demonstrate later in the century, that environmental activism also faced tremendous opposition from a hostile American culture. This, after all, is the moral of Crazy Ivar’s story in _O Pioneers!_. Ivar knows that he is different because he practices a strange (ecocentric) Norwegian religion, but it is not his religion so much as it is his unusual symbiotic relationship with nature that earns him his “Crazy” moniker. Alexandra treats Ivar’s unorthodox relationship with the natural world as a commodity worth exploiting, but for her brothers Lou and Oscar (who often speak for the larger community) Ivar is a pariah largely because he can live “without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done” (24). Because of his unique relationship with nature, Ivar is faced on every side with incarceration. He fears being sent to an asylum that “they have built . . . for people who are different” (and it is significant that the word is “different” rather than something like “insane” or “crazy”), but even when he is ultimately incorporated into Alexandra’s household he simply experiences a more pleasant variety of institutionalization(60). As a part of Alexandra’s farm, he functions semiotically as an emblem of environmental
benevolence and understanding—in his mere existence he keeps his old ecologically symbiotic mode of life alive and stands as a constant resource of unorthodox agricultural advice for Alexandra.

John Steinbeck was born in 1901, practically in the middle of the progressive conservation movement that would erupt around Cather in New York City several years later, and his connection with ecology—while still largely informal—would be composed of at least as many strands as Cather’s. For all this, Steinbeck would be no more successful than Cather in articulating an unequivocal environmentalist position. While Cather’s work demonstrates how the American literary tradition could control the flow of environmental desire, Steinbeck’s writing focuses more intensely upon the Crazy Ivar’s problem: the precarious position of the environmental radical in the United States.

In the summer of 1923, with his sister, Steinbeck took a course in marine biology at the Hopkins Marine Station in Pacific Grove, California. His instructor was Charles Vincent Taylor, who was deeply influenced by William Emerson Ritter, the influential zoologist, marine biologist, and founder of the Scripps Institute of Oceanography who promoted an idea of ecological interconnection, or “superorganicism,” that captured Steinbeck’s imagination. In 1930, he befriended the marine biologist Ed Ricketts, who in turn exposed him to another important early ecologist—W. C. Allee, the specialist in animal group behavior, whose influence Ricketts had felt as a zoology student at the University of Chicago.¹⁸

Steinbeck was an intellectual heir, twice-removed on each side, of two incredibly important twentieth century ecologists. His exposure to these strains of ecological thought allowed him to imagine humans as members of a larger biological community,
and it allowed him to register environmental loss in scientific terms. It enabled him to create a series of characters, including Joseph Wayne in *To a God Unknown* (1933), Muley Graves in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and Doc in both *Cannery Row* (1945) and its sequel, *Sweet Thursday* (1954), who feel a powerful transcendental connection to the natural world, and it even allowed him to participate in the ecological expedition that he records in the *Sea of Cortez* (1941).

Steinbeck is unique among U. S. authors because he recognized the scope, scale, and implications of twentieth century environmental destruction better than any other “major” American author before Edward Abbey, who published his environmentalist polemic, *Desert Solitaire*, in 1968, the year of Steinbeck’s death. This awareness of environmental crisis is most explicit in Steinbeck’s late nonfiction works, *Travels with Charley* (1962) and *America and Americans* (1966). In *Travels with Charley* he is frustrated by “chemical wastes in the rivers, metal wastes everywhere, and atomic wastes buried deep in the earth or sunk in the sea,” he argues that the pervasive and felicitous waste that he sees in the U. S. is a particularly American phenomenon, and he emphasizes the foolishnes of all this waste (26). As insightful as they are, Steinbeck’s comments about the state of the environment in *Travels with Charley* are fleeing. In *America and Americans*, though, he rereads the whole of United States history in terms of environmental catastrophe and recognizes that the Untied States operates on an outmoded and unsustainable system of environmental ethics:

I have often wondered at the savagery and thoughtlessness with which our early settlers approached this rich continent. They came at it as though it were an enemy, which of course it was. The burned the forests and changed the rainfall, they swept the buffalo from the plains, blasted the streams, set fire to the grass, and ran a reckless scythe through the virgin and noble timber. . . . This tendency toward irresponsibility persists in very many of us today; our rivers are poisoned
by reckless dumping of sewage and toxic industrial wastes, the air of our cities is filthy and dangerous to breathe from the belching of uncontrolled products from combustion of coal, coke, oil, and gasoline. Our towns are girdled with wreckage and the debris of our toys—our automobiles and our packaged pleasures. Through uninhibited spraying against one enemy we have destroyed the natural balances our survival requires. All these evils can and must be overcome if American and Americans are to survive; but many of us still conduct ourselves as our ancestors did, stealing from the future for our clear and present profit. (377)

This polemic extends through five additional pages. It follows the westward wake of environmental destruction that accompanied U. S. expansion, describes the nineteenth century as environmentally “merciless,” and concludes that the “atom bomb” is the culmination of the American tradition of environmental recklessness (379).

If Steinbeck had offered these observations and cultural critiques in isolation, no one would claim that he fell short of an unequivocal environmentalist position. As Hedgpeth, Timmerman, and Gladstein and Galdstein all point out, however, he constantly represses his pessimism with proclamations of faith in an American culture that he portrays as bumbling and mistake-prone but still essentially good-hearted. In the words of Joel Hedgpeth, “Steinbeck is always apologizing for saying bad things and reassuring us that he still loves us all” (Hedgpeth 306).

The ultimate flaw in Steinbeck’s environmentalism, according to John Timmerman, is that he offers no “specific program to rectify” the U. S.’s flawed environmental ethic, but the body of Steinbeck’s work suggests that there is a very distinct reason that his environmentalism went no further than it did (312). His environmentalist sympathies were held in check by an American culture that he regarded as hegemonic and particularly hostile to any type of radicalism—including both ecological science and environmentalist activism. Anyone who stepped forward and delivered a strident environmental message, Steinbeck believed, would be assaulted with charges of
monstrosity and threatened with a ceremonial murder that would reaffirm the nation’s environmentally exploitative status quo.

**Steinbeck and Monstrosity**

Monstrosity was central to Steinbeck’s understanding of American culture from the beginning of his career, and two of his early works of fiction, *To a God Unknown* (1933) and *Of Mice and Men* (1937) demonstrate that he understood the cultural history of monstrosity and its role as a regulatory device for American culture. A significant portion of *To a God Unknown*, for instance, focuses on the Renaissance belief that monstrous birth defects are caused by the wayward imaginations of expectant mothers. Throughout the novel, Rama, a mystical matriarch and duenna to a young, expectant mother named Elizabeth, speaks of “children born with tails, with extra limbs, with mouths in the middle of their backs,” and Elizabeth, accordingly, lives in fear of having experiences that will transform her unborn child into a monster (99).

As much as he recognizes that it has a history, though, Steinbeck also understands that monstrosity is a cultural weapon. He knew, as several scholars have recently argued, that, “monsters are . . . political beings” who are “chosen with deliberation to do quite specific narrative and social work” (Ingebretsen 26). Monsters are used to map social edges and centers, they “delineate and buttress the norms of behavior and belief understood to be matters of ‘common sense,’” and when they are ceremonially murdered their deaths are always intended to strengthen a “communal body” (Ingebretsen 26).²⁰

Well before Steinbeck associated ecology and environmental activism with it, monstrosity functioned as a device for social regulation in *Of Mice and Men*. Lenny, the story’s protagonist, bears physical marks of monstrosity—he possesses superhuman strength, works like a machine, and lacks normal human capacities for judgment and
restraint–, but he is most menacing to the ranch community as a threat to women and
(along with his partner, George) to the community’s almost overdetermined
heteronormativity. Lenny never intentionally harms anyone, but he does physically
assault–even kill–the wife of the ranch’s foreman. The incident enters the script of
monstrosity, though, when the crime is immediately registered as an assault upon the
purity and virtue of womanhood that requires immediate and fatal vengeance to restore
the community’s expectations of normal human behavior and the sanctity of femininity.
Beyond the incident with Curley’s wife, which ultimately precipitates his death, Lenny is
monstrous because he shares an exclusive homosocial relationship with George. Lenny
and George are constantly called to answer for their unusual relationship throughout
Steinbeck’s narrative, and the particular way that Lenny is ultimately killed is shaped by
George’s love for his friend and his desire to remove from himself the mark of
monstrosity that the relationship placed upon him. In an act that denies the larger
community the curative public killing that would have reaffirmed its concepts of
normalcy, deviance, and the consequences of deviance, George kills Lenny privately and
thus proves to the public community that his bond with Lenny did not overstep the
bounds of its unspoken codes of normal heterosexual male behavior.

*To a God Unknown* and *Of Mice and Men* demonstrate just how well Steinbeck
understood monstrosity as a historical phenomenon and a culturally regulative device.
As his career progressed, though, monstrosity became a much larger problem. Beginning
with *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck was no longer exclusively concerned with the
insular communities that he engages in *To A God Unknown, Tortilla Flat, and Of Mice*
and Men; his focus became national, and, accordingly, the community that wielded the deadly brand of monstrosity against all forms of radicalism became national as well.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is a pivotal novel for Steinbeck because it marks the shift of his focus to the national scene, but it also announces the fundamental assessment of American culture that would endure throughout the rest of his career. Although it is a position that he often undercuts, this novel cringes at the scope and scale of American technocapitalism. The culture of “progress” that displaces the Joad family and their values of agrarianism, independence, and toughness is advanced by faceless conglomerates and by cyborg men who seem melded to their tank-like tractors. Everyone (including Tom Joad and Jim Casy) who exists outside of this new and menacing mainstream culture, moreover, is forced to live a precarious life on a cultural border that is vigilantly patrolled and violently defended—often by very real political figures—against subversives and radicals.

Outside of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck’s nonfiction writings of the 1950s and 1960s contain his most pointed condemnations of American culture. In these pieces, Steinbeck offers his most strident arguments that American culture is a hegemonic construct that is tightly regulated by a group of “leaders” who “are surely screwballs” and resist “any reform movement” by deploying familiar charges of political monstrosity against any emergent source of radicalism (*America and Americans* 364). “The stalking horror” of the moment, Steinbeck writes, is “‘Communism,’ with its thread of confiscation of private wealth, and ‘Socialism,’ which implies that they might be forced to share their wealth with less fortunate citizens” (*A and A* 364). In 1954, Steinbeck was
so frustrated with the cultural situation of the United States that he declared, in an essay entitled “I am a Revolutionary,” that

The so-called masses are more lumpen now than ever. Any semblance of the emergence of the individual is instantly crushed and the doctrine of party and state above everything has taken the place of the theory of liberated men.

The victim of this savagely applied system is the individual. Individuality must be destroyed because it is dangerous to all reactionary plans because the individual is creative and creativeness outside the narrow pattern of the status quo cannot be tolerated. (90)

**Steinbeck’s Monstrous Ecology**

Steinbeck may have issued his most compact critique of American land ethics in *Travels with Charley* and *America and Americans*, but a much earlier text, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, offers the clearest vision of how his environmentalist impulses were controlled by his vision of a threatening American culture. The Log is the record of an ecological expedition that Steinbeck undertook with Ed Ricketts in 1940. It records the events of the expedition, but record-keeping is not its primary function. More than anything, it is an extended attempt to justify ecology to an American culture that is more of a “lumpen mass” and more likely to deploy monstrosity against a radical science than it is in any of Steinbeck’s writings outside of “I am a Revolutionary.”

In the Log, Steinbeck establishes a fundamental critique of American culture that he transfers onto Mexicans and Native Americans throughout much of his narrative; he refuses to articulate the ecological and preservationist purpose of the expedition; and he ultimately illustrates exactly how he understood American culture to control ecological radicalism through the threat of monstrosity. Before he ever reaches Mexican waters—in incidents that occur in Monterey as he tries to charter a boat and in San Diego as the expedition makes its final stop in a U. S. port–Steinbeck mounts an implicit argument that American culture is deeply opposed to ecology and capable of extreme violence. He
has tremendous trouble chartering a vessel because all of the charter boat captains in Monterey considered him and his shipmates “suspicious,” “crazy,” and “ridiculous” because any expedition that did not involve sardine fishing, much less an ecological exploration, was “nonsense” (7–8). When he finally reaches San Diego, he finds the place stockpiled with military equipment, overrun with robotic soldiers, and managed by “military mind[s]” who think neither about the massive power of their weapons nor the people who will be destroyed by them (35).

Steinbeck writes that after the *Western Flyer* left San Diego, “the great world dropped away very quickly. We lost the fear and fierceness and contagion of war and economic uncertainty” (173). The narrative that he offers, however, tells quite another story. The rest of the text is haunted by Steinbeck’s experience in Monterey, by the images of war and violence that he took away from San Diego, and by the more general antipathy toward ecology that he sensed from mainstream U. S. culture.

Long before Steinbeck reaches Mexico, in fact, he begins projecting his anxieties about the United States onto Mexico. He fears that he will encounter a repressive military regime that will consider “the work we intended to do” as “suspicious” because “it would seem *ridiculous* to the *military mind* to travel fifteen hundred miles for the purpose of turning over rocks on the seashore and picking up small animals, very few of which were edible; and doing all this without shooting at anyone” (23, emphasis added). Steinbeck had already been called “ridiculous” in Monterey, and he had already experienced a “military mind” in San Diego that, upon his return, would assess the value of the “thousands of pickled animals” that his crew had collected over the course of six weeks and 4,000 miles at “five dollars” (84).
As soon as Steinbeck enters a Mexican port, he stops projecting the U. S. military mind onto Mexico, but in his first port-of-call, Cape San Lucas, he turns an interaction between “Mexicans” and cormorants into a drama about the relationship between ecology, radical politics, and the regulatory practices of a hegemonic culture—clearly issues that he brought with him from the United States. Steinbeck describes fishermen on the coast shooting cormorants that are dispersing baitfish that have been drawn conveniently close to the shore (for the fishermen) by a tuna cannery’s discarded “entrails and cuttings” (48).  In Steinbeck’s dramatization of this situation, the birds are disrupting an established situation: they are “considered interlopers, radicals, subversive forces against the perfect and God-set balance on Cape San Lucas, and they are rightly slaughtered, as all radicals should be” (48).  At the same time, the fishermen become more than what they are: they are men who do not understand ecological principles, who cannot see beyond their economic self-interests to the larger, interconnected whole of the situation, and who become cultural Brahmins preserving the order of their world by murdering the deviant.  It is a scene takes place in Mexico and involves Mexicans, but it deploys the same rhetoric that Steinbeck uses in his nonfiction to excoriate political “screwballs” and in his fiction to describe the precarious positions of his numerous outcasts that live on the fringes of society.

As much as Steinbeck feared encountering a militaristic regime in Mexico, he dreaded the task of explaining his expedition to an underclass of “Indians” that he knew would be primarily concerned issues of subsistence.  Before any biological collecting ever takes place, Steinbeck writes that “we had known that sooner or later we must develop an explanation for what we were doing which would be short and convincing.  It
couldn’t be the truth because that wouldn’t be convincing at all . . . [so] we developed our story and stuck to it thereafter. We were collecting curios, we said” (83–84). When the men finally begin their collecting, they do indeed hear the “embarrassing question” that they anticipated: “‘what do you search for?’” (92). Steinbeck considers a range of answers but eventually settles on the prepared lie:

We search for something that will seem like truth to us; we search for understanding. We search for that principle which keys us deeply into the pattern of all life; we search for the relations of things, one to another, as this young man searches for a warm light in his wife’s eyes and that one for the hot warmth of fighting. These little boys and young men on the tide flat do not even know that they search for such things too. We say to them, “we are looking for curios, for certain small animals.” (92)

While he is genuinely sensitive to their situations, even these “Indians” gradually point Steinbeck back to problems in the United States. Instead of thinking about how he could explain himself to the people in front of him, Steinbeck quickly asks a question that returns him to problems in the United States: “How can you say to a people who are preoccupied with getting enough food and enough children that you have come to pick up useless little animals so that perhaps your world picture will be enlarged?” (84). Out of context, this passage appears to speak directly to the Mexicans involved in the biological collecting, but two elements of this comment–its nebulous appeal to “a people” and its emphasis on food and subsistence–link it to comments about conditions in the United States that Steinbeck offers ten pages earlier when he writes that “Some time ago a Congress of honest men refused an appropriation of several hundreds of millions of dollars to feed our people,” meaning by “our people,” of course, U. S. citizens (74). Subsistence, in Steinbeck’s mind, is a problem that is not exclusive to Mexico. He knows that the United States struggles to feed its own people and obliquely suggests that the
problem of presenting ecology and environmentalism to audiences in the United States is at least as problematic as presenting these concepts to audiences in Mexico.

Steinbeck never achieves any satisfactory answer to the purpose of the Gulf expedition and at the end of the *Log* ultimately abandons any attempt to explain its real value when he writes, in a tone of resignation, “Here was no service to science, no naming of unknown animals, but rather—we simply liked it. We liked it very much. The brown Indians and the gardens of the sea, and the beer and the work, they were all one thing and we were that one thing too” (224). Despite Steinbeck’s inability to describe it, the voyage of the Western Flyer does seem to have a very distinct purpose, even if it is unspeakable. In the Log’s introduction, Steinbeck writes that the intent of the voyage was to “collect and preserve” the animals “of the littoral”—a very succinct statement of intent—but he also reveals that simultaneous to their acts of preservation, “Fifty miles away the Japanese shrimpboats [were] dredging with overlapping scoops, bringing up tons of shrimp, rapidly destroying the species so that it may never come back, and with the species destroying the ecological balance of the whole region” (2, 3). The destructiveness of this shrimping fleet looms over the whole of the Log. It is important enough in Steinbeck’s recollection of the expedition to appear in his introduction but then it disappears only to resurface two hundred pages later as a “large destructive machine . . . committing a true crime against nature and against the immediate welfare of Mexico and the eventual welfare of the whole human species” (206–7). The positioning of the destructive Japanese fishing fleet at the beginning of the work and near its end casts its net over the whole text and suggests that the purpose of Steinbeck’s expedition, though
he cannot say it, is to see and preserve the Gulf of California before it is thoroughly
destroyed through this type of exploitation.

The voyage of the *Western Flyer* is a type of environmentalist intervention in the
wrecking of the natural world that does not expose its participants to the charge of
monstrosity because it refuses to explain what it is doing or why it is doing it. Steinbeck
seems to have known that this type of environmentalist intervention would not
fundamentally change the American culture that he knew to be the root of the problem,
but he contemplated it at length—and remained committed to it—in a number of texts that
he wrote between the 1940s and 1960s. In *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*, the two
novels that convert Ed Ricketts into a character named Doc who owns a biological supply
company in Monterey, Steinbeck tries to believe that science can solve the ecological
crises of the twentieth century. Although he hardly discusses it at all in either of these
novels, Cannery Row is a tremendous industrial machine that exploited and exhausted the
California sardine population in the mid-1940s (Shillinglaw "Introduction" vii).
Essentially under the eaves of Cannery Row Doc plods among tidal pools searching for
starfish and other marine animals that he can preserve and sell to Eastern universities.

Steinbeck does not articulate it as such, but Doc’s preservative work is a hedge
against the very process of environmental exploitation that the title of *Cannery
Row* implies. When he kills his specimens, inserts dye into their veins, and ships them to
students who will study them, Doc nominates species for induction into a transcendental
scientific mind where they will have eternal life irregardless of the mortal fate of the
species. It is the same notion of preservation that was practiced in the natural science
museums that were spawned by European imperialism beginning in the sixteenth century,
the same notion of preservation that was fueling the development of the African Hall exhibit in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City in the first half of the twentieth century.21

Bottling specimens of animal life so that they could be preserved for science offered Steinbeck some interesting possibilities, but he ultimately recognized its deficiencies. In *Cannery Row*, this mode of preservation allows Steinbeck to imaginatively sever the barrier that divides the sphere of the human from the inhuman. This binary dissolves in the storeroom of Doc’s laboratory, where “little unborn humans, . . . whole and . . . sliced thin and mounted on slides” are situated amongst “rattlesnakes, and rats, and honey bees and gila monsters,” and it disintegrates when Doc happens upon the body of a dead girl suspended lifeless but immaculate in a tide pool during a collecting mission (27).

When Doc encounters this body in the tide pool, the entire episode bears the marks of sublime experience. As might be expected, Doc breaks out in goose bumps, he begins shivering, his eyes fill with tears, and he feels that the image of the girls face has been “burned” on his mind (105). It is not the moment of abject horror or disgust that it could have been, however. He hears music, he recognizes that the girl is “pretty,” even “beautiful,” and that she is an image of “comfort and rest” (105). For all of the shock involved, however, the most interesting aspect of this scene is the way that Steinbeck constructs the sublime. Here, the sublime does not signal the sudden presence of God, nor is it necessarily triggered by the presence of death—that the girl is dead is less important to the sublime effect of the scene than the fact that she is an image of humanity fully and beautifully incorporated into nature. She is entirely enclosed—as if in one of
Doc’s specimen bottles—within a crevice of rock and a bed of algae (which seems like kelp in Steinbeck’s description), and the transcendent beauty and peace of her face is the result of her submerged state: “Just under water it was and the clear water made it very beautiful” (105).

Within the whole scope of his work, the collection of specimens for scientific preservation is the only hedge against environmental destruction that does not carry the threat of monstrosity (this fact alone may account for Steinbeck’s sustained commitment to this form of preservation), and it is the only way that Steinbeck can imagine a total integration of the human and the natural. In the end, however, it is an attenuated type of preservation—its goals depend upon an idealized scientific mind that might be able to grant a sense of immortality to a biological species, but which is necessarily isolated from the problematic American culture Steinbeck blames for the environmental crises of the twentieth century. Even beyond its lack of cultural agency, though, this scientific mode of preservation cannot accomplish any of its goals—whether the preservation of species or the creation of a new human orientation toward the environment—outside of death.

Steinbeck remained committed to non-radical forms of environmentalist intervention until the very end of his career. Just two years before his death, he submitted an open letter to Popular Science asking the public to continue funding ocean research. He wrote the letter as the official historian of a deep ocean drilling program that lasted from 1961–1966, but his financial plea is based upon a very broad claim that oceanic exploration might be able to alleviate the problem of global overpopulation. In this letter, which is entitled “Lets Go After the Neglected Treasures Beneath the Seas: A plea for equal effort on ‘inner space’ exploration,” Steinbeck suggests that humanity should
pursue “improving” fish species so that they will be more useful to humans, cultivating “the huge agriculture of the seas,” and, in what is really his magic bullet, finding a way to make plankton, “this boundless bank of protein,” “available for our bellies” (86).

The whole body of Steinbeck’s work—even “Let’s Go After the Neglected Treasures Beneath the Seas,” when it speaks of modern, North American *homo sapiens* as a wasteful species that un-naturally “raids” the earth of its resources and kills more than it needs to consume—reveals that Steinbeck recognized all kinds of environmental abuse, understood its human and ecological ramifications, and recognized that the problem was a cultural predilection toward irresponsible and wasteful over-consumption fueled by twentieth century corporate capitalism. Despite what his writings reveal, however, Steinbeck never says anything to suggest that waste should be reduced, that ecological damage should be stopped, or that patterns of consumption should be changed. As his *Popular Science* article illustrates, his primary inclination was to look for solutions to environmental problems in science rather than social activism.

If Steinbeck had ever pursued an environmentalist social agenda, he would have had to adopt a type of public voice that he associates with monstrosity in *To a God Unknown* and *Sweet Thursday*. In these novels Steinbeck clearly suggests that radicalism only becomes monstrosity when it finds public expression. Joseph Wayne, the protagonist of *To a God Unknown*, senses a spiritual connection to the earth, considers himself a part of the land, and ultimately comes to regard the health of the land as more important than his own. When the parish priest learns of all this, he articulates the relationship between voice, radicalism, and monstrosity that guides Steinbeck’s politics: “‘Thank God this man has no message. Thank God he has no will to be remembered, to
be believed in.’ And, in sudden heresy, ‘Else there might be a new Christ here in the
West’” (177). Joseph Wayne would only become dangerous if his radicalism became a
“message,” which is also the case with “the Seer” in Sweet Thursday. This character
refuses to participate in what he recognizes as the mainstream and materialistic culture of
the United States and accordingly lives on the beach as a hermit. In a conversation with
the seer, Doc comments that he is “surprised they don’t lock you up” because it is “a
crime to be happy without . . . a whole hell of a lot of stuff,” and reaffirms the connection
between voice and monstrosity that Steinbeck initially defined in Sweet Thursday when
he tells the seer that “You may not be preaching it, but you’re living treason” (61). For
each of these figures, becoming a “new Christ” would bear the same old price. As it
always is with Steinbeck, to live treasonously is one thing, but to articulate a radical
position is to risk monstrosity.

By the end of Steinbeck’s career, environmental politics were doubly impossible
within the literary field. The canon that was well defined by the 1960s held no place for
it, and it was prohibited within the field of American culture. Rachel Carson, Silent
Spring, and the resurgence of environmental activism that they initiated would eventually
change all of this, but not before Carson and her work were assaulted from multiple
directions (which is the very fate that Steinbeck predicted for any figure who voiced
environmentalist radicalism) and tacitly shuffled into a quickly developing sub-field of
nature or environmental writing that would keep her out of the main line of “Literature,”
American or otherwise. Alternative orientations toward the environment were only
available to those like Carson who were willing to take the risks involved with public
activism, and to those like Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer, who wrote outside of
the dominant U. S. literary traditions and cultures.

Notes

1 A version of this chapter has been previously published in the Journal of American Culture as “Why Isn’t He So Green?: John Steinbeck’s Monstrous Ecology.” It appears here with the permission of the Journal of American Culture and Blackwell Publishing.

2 Throughout this project I have worked to separate environmentalism from ecology, but Cather and Steinbeck are particularly important figures in the history of American literature’s environmental politics because they could speak in the very scientific register that would come to dominate environmental discourse through the last half of the twentieth century.

3 Claims of Cather’s “radical ambivalence” have become commonplace in recent scholarship. Janis Stout, for instance, senses “a deep ambivalence of response to a shifting, increasingly uncertain modern world” in Cather’s writing (and in My Ántonia in particular) while Melissa Ryan recognizes “a radical ambivalence at the center of Cather’s frontier hagiography” and Sarah Wilson writes that The Professor’s House contains a palpable sense of “discomfort with, and ambivalence about, the colonial gaze at work in the building of national histories” (Stout 145, Ryan 276, Wilson 578).

4 Rosowski explains that Besey “revolutionized botany by directing attention away from other people’s taxonomies and toward the field, where might study nature” (37). Rosowski also argues that Besey entirely dominated the intellectual life of the university and that his influence was felt in every quarter: “the University was akin to a small town where everybody knew everybody—and where everybody looked to Besey as their ‘model of excellence,’ the one ‘who set the pace.’ His ‘influence was everywhere, in all the departments—in the English and the language departments (where A. H. Edgren called himself a linguistic scientist) and in the history department (where F. M. Fling advocated conducting historical research by scientific principles) and, of course, in the sciences’” (38).

Several of Cather’s classmates became the type of “brilliant naturalist” that she had thought she might become herself. Clements is famous as the ecologist who “formulated . . . the facilitation hypothesis,” and he married Edith Schwartz, another of Cather’s classmates, who would earn a Ph.D. in botany and co-author texts with Clements (37). Roscoe Pound also attended Nebraska with Cather. As Rosowski explains, Pound was the brother of Louise Pound, Cather’s close friend, he possessed a “genius” that “inspired those around him to explore the philosophical issues most relevant to biology,” and he “was to receive his Ph.D. in botany and to head the state’s survey of Nebraska flora before moving on to Harvard, where he became Dean of the Law College” (37-8).
For a detailed discussion of this frenzy of federal conservation in the context of Cather’s work, see Urgo’s “My Ántonia and the National Parks Movement.”

Muir did indeed publish *Scribner’s* and *The Century*, but these publications are essentially the same. *Scribner’s* became *The Century* in 1881.


Eliot was the president of Harvard College from 1869 to 1909, Olmstead was the prominent urban planner who designed New York City’s Central Park, Ethan Hitchcock was the Secretary of the Interior under Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt from 1899 to 1907, Mills was a wilderness protection advocate, Glasgow was a novelist and an acquaintance of Cather’s, Watterson was the editor the Louisville *Courier-Journal* from 1869-1919 who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1918 for editorials supporting the U. S. entrance into World War I, and Henry Fairfield Osborn was a paleontologist and eventual president of the American Museum of Natural History. It is unclear how well Cather knew Glasgow, but the two authors would have been aware of each other. Elizabeth Sargent writes that she “never heard [Cather] mention” Glasgow, but Glasgow attended the 1933 Pulitzer Prize banquet where Cather delivered a public address that was broadcast on NBC Radio (198). For a list of attendees and two slightly different transcripts of the speech, see Brent Bohlke’s *Willa Cather in Person* (168-170) and the online Willa Cather Archive, which also offers a audio recording of the speech under the title “Cather’s 1933 Radio Speech.”

Downs makes these claims throughout *Becoming Modern*, but they are the focus of the fifth chapter, where she also explains exactly how Cather came to re-write (and how we now know that she did re-write) *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy*, which had never been attributed to Cather before the early 1980s. As further evidence of just how engaged Cather was with her work in journalism, Downs argues that her experience at *McClure’s*–and particularly her experience with S. S. McClure himself–drastically influenced her writing style.

Cather was offering these comments during the later years of her career when she felt embattled against the newer generation of (largely modernist) writers and critics. It would be easy to claim that her disavowal of politics is simply the function of her mood during these years, but she claims, at least, that she held these opinions much earlier in her career as she was writing her most enduring novels. While she argues in “Escapism” that the novel is the wrong medium for social activism, she also poses a secondary argument that reformers would be better served if they would “follow the method of the pamphleteers” (970). “Only by that method,” she argues, “can these subjects be seriously
and fairly discussed. And the people who are able to do anything toward improving such conditions will read only such a discussion” (970).

11 Granville Hicks, of course, is only one of many critics who engaged Cather in the early twentieth century. As several critics have noted, his tendency to attack Cather on the grounds of gender (the “Miss Cather” in the passage that I have quoted is a refrain throughout “The Case against Willa Cather”) was a typical response to her work during 1930s. For discussions of Cather’s critics that reach beyond the scope of Cather’s standard biographies, see Deborah Carlin’s *Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading* and Joan Acocella’s *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*.

12 It is in these sections of the novel that Alexandra often elevates the present into the realm of epic history and offers her most blatant erasure of the imperialist activity that predicated her own Westward movement. Both of these nostalgic moves are quite obvious in her declaration that

For the first time, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman (42).

13 The impact of the prairie on Cather’s sense of self has been discussed at length. See, for instance, Sharon O’Brien’s *Willa Cather*, especially the third chapter, “Transplanting.” For Cather’s own description of the “erasure of personality” that she experienced upon entering the “country as bare as a piece of sheet iron,” see “Willa Cather Talks of Work.”

14 With these lines, Cather is explicitly describing Carl Linstrum’s view of the place as a boy, but she seems to be speaking on a much more general level. She echoes the idea of the prairie as “the great fact” several pages later in a description of another character–John Bergson. Here, as he lays dying and thinking about the land that he has died trying to bring to order, he ends his reverie thinking, “and then the grass,” essentially repeating the phrase that Cather attributes to Carl earlier–that prairie or the grass is “the great fact” or the enigmatic essence of the place (14).

15 It is in rapturous moments like these that Cather–blurring the lines between her control of the narrative and the emotions running through Alexandra–creates the most imperialist moment of the novel, which I have quoted in note 11.

16 Cather wrote a different introduction for the 1926 edition of *My Ántonia* that does not directly undercut Jim Burden’s authority. The primary reason for the change was to grant the novel a greater degree of subtlety. For a fuller discussion of the introduction, see Jean Schwind’s “The Benda Illustrations to *My Ántonia*: Cather’s ‘Silent’ Supplement to Jim Burden’s Narrative.”
The fact that the grass in this gravesite has never been cut is so important to Jim that he repeats it, almost verbatim, much later in the narrative. Upon another visit to the place, he writes that he and Antonia “sat down outside the sagging wire fence that shut Mr. Shimerda’s plot off from the rest of the world. The tall red grass had never been cut there. It has died down in winter and come up in the spring until it was as thick and shrubby as some tropical garden-grass” (239, emphasis added).

The standard source of information about Steinbeck’s scientific lineage is Richard Astro’s John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist. James C. Kelley’s “John Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts: Understanding Life in the Great Tide Pool,” however, offers a very helpful update to Astro’s work.

Steinbeck published Sea of Cortez with Ed Ricketts in 1941. The text included a narrative of the ecological expedition that they made into the Gulf of California in addition to a catalog of the area’s marine life. The narrative portion of Sea of Cortez was republished without the scientific apparatus as The Log from the Sea of Cortez in 1951. From this point forward, I will only refer to the Log because it is still in print and it contains the narrative portion of the original project that interests me.

Ingebretsen’s “Monster-Making” offers incredibly concise theory of monstrosity that he develops further in At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear in Public Culture. For other scholars who follow Ingebretsen’s course, see Fred Botting’s Making Monstrous: Frankenstein, Criticism, Theory, Jeffrey Cohen’s Monster Theory: Reading Culture, Judith Halberstam’s Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Horror, Marie-Hélène Huet’s Monstrous Imagination, and Karyn Michele Valerius’s Misconceptions: Monstrosity and the Politics of Interpretation in American Culture from the Antinomian Controversy to Biotechnology.

For more on the spread of natural science museums, see the first chapter of Looking Away and the resources I mention there in addition to Susan Sheets-Pyenson’s Cathedrals of Science: The Development of Colonial Natural History Museums during the Late Nineteenth Century. The process of scientific/taxidermic preservation that Doc pursues in Cannery Row and Sweet Thursday is precisely the type of preservation that went into the African Hall exhibit in the American Museum of Natural History that opened in 1936. In large part, African Hall was made possible by the technologically innovative taxidermist, Carl Akeley, who killed the animals that would eventually be displayed in the hall during the 1920s. As Donna Haraway tells the story in “Teddy Bear Patriarchy,” Akeley was driven, almost monomaniacally, to kill and preserve the silverback gorillas that would become the centerpiece of African Hall because he “feared the gorilla would be driven to extinction before it was adequately known to science” (Haraway 34). In Haraway’s language, Akeley regarded taxidermy as a type of “scientific knowledge” that “canceled death; only death before knowledge was final, an abortive act in the natural history of progress” (34). When taxidermied specimens made it onto display, moreover, they became cultural agents that Akeley and his contemporaries believed could heal the ills of the modern world. As Haraway states it, the American Museum of Natural History, African Hall, and Akeley’s specimens were
intended to function as “a medical technology, a hygienic intervention” against decadence (55). Both Steinbeck and Akeley understood that this form of preservation was an inadequate response to the destruction of biological life. Akeley, as Mariana Torgovnick puts it, was “an active gorilla conservationist” and he worked to create the Virtunga Wildlife preserve in Africa (58). Penelope Bodry-Sanders’s Carl Akeley: Africa’s Collector, Africa’s Savior offers a more sympathetic reading of Akeley, and Torgovnick offers her own interpretation of the man’s life as she reviews Bodry-Sanders’s book in “Stuffed Animals.” For more elaborate descriptions of events at the American Museum of Natural History, see Stephen T. Asma’s Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums, Joseph Wallace’s A Gathering of Wonders: Behind the Scenes at The American Museum of Natural History, and Douglas J. Preston’s Dinosaurs in the Attic: An Excursion into the American Museum of Natural History.

In this letter Steinbeck is expressing the same Malthusian overpopulation thesis that is featured in Fairfield Osborn’s Our Plundered Planet and William Vogt’s Road to Survival, both of which were published in 1948, well before this essay. While Hedgpeth recognizes the similarities of Osborn’s and Vogt’s texts to passages in Travels with Charley, no hard evidence exists, in Robert J. DeMott’s Steinbeck’s Reading or elsewhere, that he had read these books. As Hedgpeth recognizes, Road to Survival was a Book of the Month Club book and the likelihood of Steinbeck’s at least casual contact with it is highly probable (Hedgpeth, “John Steinbeck: Late-Blooming Environmentalist” 304).

Steinbeck’s critique of capitalism appears throughout the body of his work, but it is nowhere more evident or strident than it is in The Grapes of Wrath, in which anonymous banks and corporate interests are blamed for the dislocation of the Joad family.

Although scholars have constantly suggested that Steinbeck knew nothing of Rachel Carson, he does allude to “uninhibited spraying” in America and Americans, which seems a rather direct echo of Carson’s work (377). It is a fleeting moment, though, and no other evidence exists to suggest that Steinbeck was particularly engaged with Carson even though Silent Spring was being published serially in the New Yorker in 1961 while Steinbeck was writing Travels with Charley and published as a book in 1962, well before he wrote America and Americans. In her synopsis of the attacks that were launched against Carson, Linda Lear writes that Carson was defamed as “a hysterical woman whose alarming view of the future could be ignored . . . a ‘bird and bunny lover,’ a woman who kept cats and was therefore clearly suspect . . . a romantic ‘spinster’ who was simply overwrought about genetics . . . in short, a woman out of control” (xvii).
CHAPTER 6
RECLAIMING BLACKSPACE: ZORA NEALE HURSTON, THE POWER OF HARLEM, AND THE PROMISE OF FLORIDA

Willa Cather and John Steinbeck were hardly the only authors to register environmental loss in the early twentieth century, but their canonically modulated methods of repressing environmental anxiety are largely representative. William Faulkner, for instance, was equally aware of widespread environmental destruction, and a range of scholars have recently demonstrated that much of his work reflects a keen understanding of Mississippi’s environmental history. While Cather and Steinbeck tended to grant the natural world intrinsic or ecological value, Faulkner found nature important as a place where boys could become men and where the threatened masculinities of grown men could be rejuvenated. When he and his fictional characters confronted nature’s ultimate end, however, they depended on the same metonyms of environmental health that sustained Emerson, Cather, and Steinbeck. As Ike McCaslin does in Go Down, Moses, Faulkner silenced any environmental lamentation that he could have offered and instead insisted that the immortal essence of his privileged wilderness, Mississippi’s “Big Bottom,” would always remain virgin and indomitable even when reduced by sawmills and expanding cotton operations to a final, pubic, and metonymic “\(\nabla\)-shaped section of earth between hills and River” (GDM 327). ¹

As Faulkner watched the deterioration of Mississippi’s natural world and began adopting ways to remain disconnected from the increasingly unavoidable problem, Zora
Neale Hurston was becoming frustrated with the politics and patronage of Harlem and preparing to carve out a new liberatory, regenerative, and utopian blackspace in the Southern United States. Hurston had arrived in Harlem in 1925 and experienced a short period of incredible success—her short stories were published in (and won a prize from) *Opportunity*, she founded and co-edited *Fire!!* with Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman, and she fashioned herself, for a short while, into the central spectacle of the Harlem Renaissance. As time passed, though, she found herself caught between a manipulative white community that supported her financially and a group of powerful African American leaders that conspired to control her. Hurston’s ultimate response to this situation—which has been criticized since the early twentieth century as an escape into nostalgia and an abandonment of liberatory racial politics—was to create an alternate zone of black autonomy in the South, the very region that many African Americans had fled during the Great Migration.

For Hurston, the South—and Florida in particular—was a space that could accommodate a vibrant black community outside of Harlem, where both white and black power brokers controlled the work of a younger generation of artists. Although she had lived through some of the South’s most frightening racial violence in Florida, Hurston still believed the place to be a haven for African Americans in general and African American artists in particular, and her writings enact a project of spatial reclamation, in the most hostile region of the United States for African Americans. She performs this spatial reclamation, moreover, by entirely eliding the white tradition of environmental experience, with all of its longing for originary environmental purity and its corresponding fears of environmental destruction, and offering in its place a vision of
enmeshment within an immanently physical natural world that carried particular racial and cultural significance.

**Hurston, Harlem, and Power**

When Hurston arrived in Harlem in 1925, she was already involved in the network of intellectuals that was producing the New Negro movement. She had attracted the attention of Alain Locke while she was a student at Howard University (she was a member of Stylus, the Howard literary club that Locke himself helped found in 1915), and in 1924 Locke had recommended Hurston to Charles S. Johnson, the editor of the *Opportunity*. On the basis of Locke’s recommendation, Johnson solicited a story from Hurston. She gave him “Drenched in Light,” he published it, and he urged her to move to Harlem. Thus, before she had ever been to New York, Hurston already had personal relationships with Alain Locke and Charles S. Johnson—by all accounts, two of the most powerful men of the Harlem Renaissance. Less than six months after her arrival in New York, Hurston would turn a literary contest staged by Johnson and his *Opportunity* into veritable coming-out party—she won more awards than anyone, including second-place awards in fiction and drama, and two honorable mention awards in the same categories.³

Describing Hurston’s initial response to Harlem, Valerie Boyd writes that “Harlem in 1925 was a place where being black was not a burden but an act of beauty, not a liability but a state of grace” that “fully restored” the sense of community and the sense of “me-ness that Zora had felt so profoundly as a child in Eatonville” (94). For all of the optimism that Harlem engendered, though, being an artist and black was a problem indeed, and one that Hurston could not avoid. Both Boyd and Robert Hemenway report that Hurston arrived in Harlem with “a dollar and fifty cents in her purse,” and that Harlem was a place with high rents and low salaries (Boyd 93).⁴
The *Opportunity’s* awards banquet marked Hurston’s full entrance into Harlem’s social life, but it also marked her entrance into Harlem’s system of patronage. Immediately after the banquet, Hurston was approached by the first of her three major female patrons, Annie Nathan Meyer, the founder and longtime trustee of Barnard College, who offered her enrollment in Barnard. During the banquet, Fanny Hurst, the woman who would become Hurston’s second major patron and who had served as a judge in Charles Johnson’s literary contest, had presented Hurston with the second place prize that she won for “Spunk” (Boyd 104–105). Although Meyer was successful in getting her into Barnard, she had to struggle to fund Hurston’s education. The college would not grant Hurston a scholarship on the basis of the academic record that she brought from Howard, and Meyer cast about soliciting money from those whom Virginia Gildersleeve, the dean of Barnard College, called “‘outside persons interested in the Negro race’” (Boyd 101).

Meyer’s efforts were mostly successful, but they left Hurston in financial straits nonetheless. She could still not pay all of her fees and she was burdened by the seemingly endless small expenses that attended the Barnard experience. In an October 12, 1925 letter to Meyer, for instance, Hurston concedes that her first semester at Barnard will have to be her last because she has had to spend “so much money for necessities—books, gym outfit, shoes, stockings, maps, tennis raquet, . . . a bathing suit, gloves and if I am here in the Spring, I will need a golf outfit” (Kaplan 66). Five days later, in another letter to Meyer, Hurston wrote, “Today I have 11 cents—all that is left of my savings, so you can see there is some justification for my doubts as to whether I can remain there [at Barnard]. I must somehow pay my room-rent and I must have food” (Kaplan 67).
Hurston remained nearly penniless until Meyer approached Fannie Hurst with Hurston’s situation. Hurst was already becoming involved with Hurston when Meyer approached her about the money problem—well after the *Opportunity* banquet she had procured Hurston’s address from Carl Van Vetchen and invited her to her home—and she immediately interceded by making Hurston her personal secretary. Hurston lived with Fanny Hurst for a month, and her secretarial stint was short, but her relationship with the famous novelist endured. They shared a sense of style, they made public outings together, and Hurston’s attachment to Hurst improved her standing at Barnard among both her classmates and the college’s administration, which found a scholarship for her in 1926.

By all accounts, Annie Nathan Meyer and Fannie Hurst genuinely *liked* Hurston and they wanted to help her; and Hurston, for her part, liked them and appreciated their support. Even in the best circumstances, though, the relationships were uneven and sometimes—deliberately or not—humiliating. Of all the support Hurston gained, Meyer’s came with the fewest strings attached. Having helped found Barnard in the late 1880s, she served on its board of trustees until her death in 1851 and constantly worked to recruit students to the college. Hurston would be Barnard’s only black student at the time, but recruiting students for the college was essentially what Meyer did. The language that Hurston uses in her letters to Meyer, however, reflects a sense of abjection—even if it is feigned abjection. In the first letters she sends to Meyer, Hurston emphasizes her indebtedness when she writes, “I must not let you be disappointed in me,” and she accentuates the stark racial and class differences between herself and Meyer by
frequently referring to herself as “your little pickaninny” and “your most humble and obedient servant” (Kaplan 62–69).

Hurston would develop a closer bond to Hurst than Meyer. They lived together for a time, after all; they shared a sense of fashion, and they both enjoyed a good time. For all their common interest, though, the two authors never played on an even field. As much as Hurst promoted Hurston’s writings, clearly treated her differently than her other friends; and by announcing her as “‘Princess Zora’” in social situations she clearly used Hurston as a social novelty in ways that Hurston would certainly have understood (Patterson 166). Beyond the uneven terms of their friendship, Hurston never achieved her patron’s financial success or publishing advances despite the fact that they enjoyed similar levels of acclaim as writers.

By the time that Hurston met her third major patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, she had largely succeeded at Barnard. She had discovered anthropology and become comfortable in the company of Melville Herskovits, Ruth Benedict, and Gladys Reichard; she had forged a lasting bond with Franz Boas, and she had already conducted her first anthropological fieldwork in Florida—a six-month project that was funded, at Boas’s urging, by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and the American Folklore Society (Boyd 142). When Hurston finally did meet Mason in September of 1927, the elderly white woman was already supporting Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and numerous other renaissance figures.

As with Meyer and Hurst, Hurston’s relationship with Mason was mixed. Hurston felt—or at least reported feeling—that she was destined to meet Mason. She reported having had dreams of the moment from her childhood, in fact, and she professed
feeling a psychic and even telepathic connection to the elderly white woman whom she called “Godmother.” Mason supported Hurston financially from 1927 to 1937, and as Genevieve West has recognized, Hurston must have seen her as “the only source of funding available” (46). She wanted to continue her anthropological research and, lacking any advanced degrees, “she could hardly have expected continuing financial support from foundations or scientific societies” (West 46).

In the words of Cheryl Wall, the deal that Hurston struck with Mason was “a Faustian compact” (Women 155). It required that Mason retain the rights to all of the anthropological materials that Hurston collected in her field work, and it subjected Hurston to much more severe forms of humiliation than she experienced in her relationships with any of her other patrons. Patterson writes, for instance, that “‘Godmother’ liked to hold court from a throne-like chair while the godchildren occupied low stools at her feet. Part of this ritual called for lush cascades of flattery and self-deprecation from her Negroes” (171). Even when Hurston was not in New York to perform in Mason’s court, she still worked under the long shadow of her patron. Hurston reports in Dust Tracks on a Road that Mason could read her mind even “at a distance” and that she would receive letters from Godmother out of the blue while she was working in “Alabama, Florida, or in the Bahama Islands” that chastised her “for what I was thinking” (128). Whether this psychic connection was “real” or not is secondary to the fact that before her ultimate break from her, Hurston could not escape Mason’s grip regardless of where she went or what she did. She depended upon her patron for all of her material needs, and while she was working in the field she had to itemize everything she bought, including—a detail that appears in every description of the Hurston-Mason
relationship—“everything from dues to professional organizations to Kotex” (Wall *Women* 154).

With her financial patrons, Hurston was forced to negotiate the tenuous boundary between friendship and servitude—for the most part, she liked her patrons and she certainly needed them, but she rarely trusted them and knew that their relationships were often mutually exploitative. Her relationship with the period’s race leaders, particularly with Alain Locke, was equally strained. Huston knew all of the black leaders of the early twentieth century, and she strained against the influence of them all. She knew W. E. B. Du Bois, for instance—she participated in his Krigwa Players, she helped establish the group’s Little Negro Theatre, and she provided several of the plays that the Theatre performed in 1925—but she, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman all rebelled against Du Bois’s aesthetic system (and the power with which he promoted it) when they compiled the first and only edition of their deliberately scandalous journal, *Fire!!* (Boyd 117–118).  

Although she knew Du Bois and although she had an extended and sometimes fiery relationship with Walter White (the civil rights worker who was executive director of the NAACP from 1931 until his death in 1955), Alain Locke was Hurston’s most intimate link to the power brokers of the Harlem Renaissance. Without Locke, Hurston may have never met Charles S. Johnson or Charlotte Osgood Mason. She may have never gone to Harlem at all. Locke was absolutely central to Hurston’s success. She knew it, she was comfortable with it, and she thanked him repeatedly for everything that he had done for her.
At the same time, though, Locke was a burden. As early as 1929, Hurston was imagining him as a wheedling, scheming fraud. In a letter to Langston Hughes, she writes that “the trouble with Locke is that he is intellectually dishonest. He is too eager to be with the winner, if you get what I mean. He wants to autograph all success, but is afraid to risk an opinion first hand” (Kaplan 144). Whatever Hurston thought of Locke, he was not a person that she could dismiss. As Carla Kaplan has put it, “Locke was a well-connected gatekeeper” tied to “most of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance,” but he was also connected to Charlotte Osgood Mason—connected, in fact, much more closely than Hurston (44). When Hurston’s play, *From Sun to Sun* turned into a financial disaster in 1932, Mason discussed Hurston with Locke. According to both Hemenway and Boyd, Mason confessed her misgivings about Hurston to Locke, and he added fuel to the fire. Mason “felt that Zora lacked leadership skills—and that other people . . . were actually exploiting her to get ideas for their own work” while Locke, joining in the spirit of the moment, “wondered aloud how Zora could afford the rent on her New York apartment and questioned why Godmother was continuing to give her a monthly allowance ‘with nothing to show for it’” (Boyd 233).

Locke was “Godmother’s chief advisor on all things Negro” and he often acted as Mason’s agent (he had been keeping an eye on the development of *From Sun to Sun* for Mason from the beginning—a fact that prompts Boyd to call him “a theatrical spy of sorts”) (Boyd 228, 229). It was therefore nothing new when he went to Hurston’s apartment to inform her of Godmother’s state of mind. He told her, according to Hemenway, “that she could no longer expect money from Godmother. He pointed out, like a professor to a student, that her apartment was far too expensive for her reduced
income, and that she should be writing to black colleges about employment” (183). Both Hemenway and Boyd recognize that the end of the relationship between Hurston and Mason was partially determined by economics—the U. S. was mired in the Great Depression in 1932—, but only Boyd admits that Locke’s behavior amounted to an act of base “meddling” and self preservation (234). He was working to “protect Godmother’s [financial] interests (and his own); if Hurston went off the books, there was a greater chance that he would remain on them” (Boyd 233).

Despite the boldness of Locke’s confrontation, Hurston essentially acquiesced to the news he delivered. She understood that she was a financial burden to Mason and that she was being judged all along on her monetary success. In the years following that fateful meeting, Hurston remained in contact and on fairly congenial terms with Locke. In 1938, though, he issued such a biting review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that Hurston attempted to make public the fundamental criticism of Locke that she expressed to Langston Hughes in 1929. Those original sentiments run throughout a letter that she sent in February of 1938 to James Weldon Johnson as a letter and to *Opportunity* as “The Chick with One Hen” (which the magazine never printed):

> I get tired of the envious picking on me. And if you will admit the truth you know that Alain Leroy Locke is a malicious, spiteful little snot that thinks he ought to be the leading Negro because of his degrees. Foiled in that, he spends his time trying to cut the ground from under everybody else. So far as the young writers are concerned, he runs a mental pawnshop. He lends out his patronage and takes in ideas which he soon passes off as his own. And God help you if you get on without letting him ‘represent’ you! (Kaplan 413)

**Creating a Floridian Blackspace**

At the critical moment in 1932 when *From Sun to Sun* failed to turn a profit and Alain Locke told her that she was dead weight Godmother could not continue to bear, Hurston viewed Harlem itself—particularly its economies of patronage and power—as
part of her problem. Harlem simply would not allow her to conduct her artistic and anthropological work. Her immediate response to this situation was to return to Florida. From 1932 on, Hurston made Florida her home (she traveled frequently to New York, other parts of the South, and the Caribbean Islands, but she was rooted in Florida), and she worked to re-envision the South as a viable space for the practice of African American life and art.

In one of the most important late twentieth-century critiques of Hurston’s entire body of work, Hazel Carby poses a series of claims that recapitulate some of the concerns that Richard Wright and Alain Locke expressed upon the initial publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Immediately upon the heels of the novel’s publication (in the review that elicited the fiery response that Hurston sent to James Weldon Johnson and *Opportunity*), Locke suggested that Hurston needed to “get over oversimplification” and “come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction” while Wright, in a separate review, accused Hurston of minstrelsy and pandering to “a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy” (18, 17). In her much more recent essay, Carby argues that Hurston ignored the northward and urban movement of black Americans during the early twentieth century; that her “representation of African American culture as primarily rural and oral” is a “particular [and flawed] response to the dramatic transformations within black culture;” and that each of these tendencies (to ignore both the spatial and cultural changes that African Americans were experiencing in the early twentieth century) amount to an overarching “discursive displacement of contemporary social crises in her writing” (121).
Hurston’s explanations of her return to the South seem to support Carby’s claims. When she first informed Charlotte Osgood Mason of her desire to return to the South in an April 1832 letter, Hurston lays out “several good reasons”: “1. atmosphere to work. 2. Escape New York. 3. Health 4. Chance of self-support” (Kaplan 250). And, several years later, when she explains the same relocation to Thomas E. Jones (the president of Fisk University), she writes that “I returned to my native village for quiet, atmosphere and economical existence in addition to my love of the place” (Kaplan 316). In each instance—in more or less overt ways—Hurston portrays her return to the South as an escape and, with references to “my native village,” quietude, and a “love for a place,” as a retreat into what may be construed as a socially disengaged nostalgia.

Despite what these letters may suggest about a nostalgic outlook and an abandonment of politics, though, Hurston knew the situation she was re-entering in the South and she knew her return—and what she planned to do there—was a political intervention in its own right. When Hurston moved from Jacksonville, Florida to Memphis, Tennessee in 1915 (eventually to land in Baltimore Maryland in 1917), she was participating—albeit with different motivations than many—in the Great Migration that carried scores of African Americans northward in the early twentieth century and abandoning the South in the middle of the 50-year period that witnessed the lynching of nearly 2,500 African Americans (Tolnay and Beck ix). Of the Southern states, Hurston’s Florida had been an even more dangerous place for African-Americans than any other state in the region—more dangerous, in fact, than the “Deep South” states of Mississippi, Georgia, Louisiana, Alabama, and South Carolina—from 1882 to 1930. The most recent definitive data shows that during this period Florida experienced nearly 80
black victims of lynchings per 100,000 African-Americans, which is nearly thirty more victims per 100,000 than the next state, Mississippi, which had approximately 53 (Tolnay and Beck 38).

When Hurston returned to the South in the late 1920s to carry out anthropological field research and in the 1930s to settle more or less permanently in Florida, she was returning to a region that was still witnessing prolific mob violence despite the fact that lynching (in the form of vigilante kidnapping, torture, and murder rather than the “legal lynchings” that were becoming more common) was on the decline throughout the South. When she returned for her first anthropological expedition in 1927, two of the state’s most notorious lynchings had taken place in regions of the state that she had known in her childhood and adolescence.

In 1920, while Hurston was earning her associates degree from Howard University in Washington, D. C., a mob of whites, incensed by blacks who were attempting to vote, traveled three miles from Winter Park, Florida to Ocoee (just thirteen miles from Eatonville) and killed seven people including the prosperous black landowner, July Perry. In the aftermath of the incident, which included continued white violence toward the all-black town, Ocoee was entirely abandoned. Three years later, while Hurston was still at Howard, one of the nation’s most dramatic lynchings occurred in Rosewood, Florida. In this instance, which David R. Colburn is careful to point out was just “one incident in an era of extraordinary racial anxiety and conflict,” at least eight African-Americans were killed and the all-black community of Rosewood was burned to the ground by a mob acting on a white woman’s unfounded accusation of rape (176).
Even in the 1930s—when the worst of the South’s lynching was over and when Hurston was back in Florida—thirteen more people were lynched in the state. Of the 1930s lynchings, two attracted intense national attention because they were singularly brutal events at a moment when lynching had become rare enough to once again attract attention and because one of them involved the lynching of a white man who had not been accused of a crime (22). In the first of these events, which happened in Greenwood, Florida (roughly seventy miles northwest of Tallahassee or 35 miles southeast of Dothan, Alabama) in 1934, Claude Neal was arrested as a suspect in the murder of an 18 year-old white girl, Lola Cannidy, stolen from police custody, and tortured before being killed, mutilated, and partially dismembered. Before the lynching ever happened, members of the mob had announced their plans to media outlets in Dothan and the news eventually reached the Associated Press and became a national story shortly before Neal was killed.

The second of these two lynchings occurred in Tampa, Florida in 1935 when Joseph Shoemaker was whipped and beaten nearly to death and left to die, which he did several days later after being discovered and unsuccessfully treated for his massive wounds. Shoemaker and the two other men who were attacked along with him (they survived the incident) “were guilty only of being socialists and activists” (Howard 81).\(^\text{12}\) Neal’s lynching, publicized as it was even before it took place, “galvanized antilynching forces,” became the centerpiece of Water White’s push for stronger federal antilynching laws, and even polarized the White House (Howard 64–65).\(^\text{13}\) The Shoemaker lynching drew the ire of The Socialist Party of America and the American Civil Liberties Union, Florida newspapers, and scores of smaller organizations and individuals (Howard 83).
Although Eatonville was peaceful and relatively isolated during Hurston’s early life, Florida was riddled with racial violence throughout her childhood and adolescence, it was violent while she was largely out of the state in the first half of the 1920s, and it was still violent when she returned to conduct research later in the decade and to essentially settled in the state in 1932. None of this was lost on Hurston. While on an anthropological expedition in Florida in March of 1927, she wrote to Lawrence Jordan that “crackers” were not bothering her and that she hoped “they don’t begin [to] as I go farther down state” (Kaplan 94). On the same expedition she began carrying a gun—ostensibly, by Hemenway’s telling, for the purpose of defending herself in the rough-and-tumble African-American labor communities that she was trying to mine for folktales, but such a measure of self-defense would have been prudent in the context of the state’s pervasive racial violence (Hemenway 111). In 1938, while she was working for the Federal Writer’s Project in Florida, Hurston wrote an essay entitled “The Ocoee Riot” that she planned to include in a collection of essays entitled “The Florida Negro.” The project was never completed and “The Ocoee Riot” was never published in Hurston’s lifetime, but the essay, a gritty journalistic description of the Ocoee incident that would have satisfied Locke’s and Wright’s demands for overtly political writing, stands as powerful evidence that Hurston was deeply affected by the state’s still vital tradition of racial violence.

For all of its violence, Florida was still the only state in the South to experience positive migration in the early twentieth century. While scores of African-Americans were fleeing the South between 1900 and 1930, Florida’s black population grew by nearly 100,000 with a gain of more than 54,000 African-Americans in the 1920s (Tolnay
and Beck 214). Hurston, of course, was one of those 54,000, and she returned, in part, because she knew that a unique situation was brewing in Florida. In her introduction to *Mules and Men*, Hurston recalls telling Frans Boas that “Florida is a place that draws people—white people from all over the world, and Negroes from every Southern state surely and from some of the North and West” (1). In Florida, she “knew that it was possible . . . to get a cross section of the Negro South in the one state;” the state was still a haven of blackness and Hurston’s immersion in it amounted to a bold and defiant attempt to create a better environment for the practice of everyday black life and art than the one she found in Harlem.

As early as 1929, Hurston had envisioned a community of black artists in Florida that would match Harlem’s solidarity and celebration of black life without its strictures and humiliations. In May 1929, she wrote Langston Hughes telling him that “I have a chance to buy a beautiful tract of land slap on the Indian River, which as you probably know, passes for the most beautiful river in the world” (Kaplan 145). She imagines a “dandy club house right on the water” and the entire parcel of land turned into “A Negro art colony. You, and Wallie [Wallace Thurman], and Aaron Douglas and Bruce [Nugent] and me and all our crowd. . . . a little town of our own. . . . we could have lots of fun and a lovely place to retire and write on occasion . . . a neat little colony of kindred souls” (145–6). She tells Hughes that no one had ever sold land on the Indian river to an African American but that the city council had already held a meeting and not only granted Hurston the right buy but also the right to “sell to any of my friends so long as they belong to my social caste” (145).
Hurston’s plan did not materialize—at least in part because she, Hughes, and her other friends were just as “dead broke” as she perceived the people in Florida to be—but she was quite serious about the possibility of developing a black art community in the state (Kaplan 145). Beyond pushing the Indian River land issue to the point of city council meetings, she repeatedly discussed the possibility of developing a black art community in Florida with her friends over the better part of the next ten years.

Despite the fact that her plans never came to fruition, after she left Harlem in 1932 Florida became the place where Hurston would conduct all of her serious artistic work throughout the rest of her career; it was her psychic and (usually) her literal home, where she would go when she needed to “polish off” a book without distractions or economic strictures (Kaplan 404). At the same time, though, Hurston never envisioned her return to Florida as a retreat from the black art community or even necessarily as an abandonment of racial politics. Even more than a personal artistic haven, Hurston always thought of Florida as a site that was perfect for the development of an artistic community like the one she tried to develop on the Indian River.

As soon as Hurston arrived in Florida in 1932, fresh off the heels of the pivotal talk with Alain Locke that apprised her of her standing with Charlotte Osgood Mason, she began trying to enact the vision of a black art community that had inspired the Indian River idea in 1929. This time, rather than trying to form what may best be called a personal refuge or commune, Hurston focused on founding a viable black theatre, which she attempted to accomplish in association with Rollins College and Bethune-Cookman College, and on founding schools of African-American art.
In all of these endeavors, Hurston exuded optimism and felt that she was fulfilling dreams that she had shared for years with Mason and Locke. As she presented it to Osgood Grover, her attempt to found a theatre in the Eatonville area with the backing of Rollins College was an attempt to establish a “real Negro theatre” which she believed had still not developed in Harlem or anywhere else in the United States (Kaplan 259, emphasis added). It would be an opportunity, she wrote to Locke 1933, to build “not just the [theatre’s] building but the heart, the reason for the building to be;” and all of this meant that she would be “doing some of the things that we used to dream of” (Kaplan 281).

As ambitious as Hurston’s plans for a new theater were in their own right, they are all the more interesting because they are founded on a desire to create a type of counter-Harlem in Florida. In a 1933 letter to Mason, which insists, just as her letter to Locke does, that she is doing what “you and I have dreamed of doing for so long,” Hurston suggests that this particular project is more likely to succeed because she is no longer battling what she calls “the handicap of Harlem” (Kaplan 276). Thus unfettered, she believes that “if we can give real creative urge a push forward here, the world will see a New Negro and justify our efforts. (Kaplan 276).

Karla Kaplan points out that although the phrase “‘New Negro’ was much in use among Harlem literati,” Hurston used the phrase very rarely (276). In the context of the plans she is outlining in this letter to Mason, it is an intentional replication of the naming project that Alain Locke initiated with *The New Negro*—just as Locke’s book called the Harlem Renaissance into being, Hurston co-opts his phrase to call into existence her own spatialized black renaissance in the heart of Florida. She believes that her theater at
Rollins College will “surpass by far . . . what has been done by Paul Green et al [in African-American drama] at the University of North Carolina”; she writes that in addition to its “special stress on music and drama” this particular place encourages “painting, carving, sculpture—all forms of art” (Kaplan 276). Further developing her sense of central Florida as a new center of black art, she insists in a letter to Locke that “we can build here a theatre that will be talked of around the world,” and she asks Locke to imagine what could happen if the type of community she wants were to ever develop: “if we had Bruce Nugent and one or two others. Lawd, Lawd!” (Kaplan 282).

Hurston had some success with drama at Rollins College and in and around Eatonville, but it ultimately proved grueling, unsustainable, and irregular work. Hurston made another concerted effort at establishing a genuine black theater in 1934 after being invited to Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach. As she wrote to Carl Van Vetchen in January of 1934, the president of the college, Mary McCleod Bethune had recruited Hurston “to establish a school of dramatic arts based on pure Negro expression at her school in Daytona Beach” (288). Although Hurston wrote in that letter that “she is after my own heart,” her relationship with Bethune quickly soured and, as she explained to Thomas E. Jones when she was pursing a job at Fisk University, she shortly “decided to abandon the farce of Bethune-Cookman’s Drama Department” (Kaplan 288, 318). 16

Despite being consistently disappointed by the institutions that supported her, Hurston continued to imagine the development of a black art community outside of Harlem. In 1937, when the Guggenheim Foundation’s Henry Allen Moe asked Hurston to identify causes that the his organization could support, she gave him the names of two black artists (“Iven Tate, painter and elevator boy at Orange General Hospital, Orlando,
Florida,” and Ollie Stewart, a Baltimore-based writer) and suggested that that the foundation fund “a school of music and dancing for all the Negroes” (Kaplan 405). Although she does not specify where such a place should be built, the school that she envisions is still faithful to her original vision of a black art communes on the Indian River and at Rollins College: it would “formalize and make respectable Negro musical methods. . . . [its] professors would be the people who make the songs and dances. It could be something more dynamic than most people would realize at first glance. It could support itself by concerts and tuition fees. [written in margin:] Imagine, Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, Louis Armstrong as guest professors! Ethel Waters, Bill Robinson, etc.” (405, “[written in margin]” is Kaplan’s editorial note.).

To some degree frustrated with her adventures in drama, Hurston turned to writing fiction. And in returning to this medium (she had not written fiction for years) Hurston launched a spatial project that was related to all of her plans for a black art communities in Florida. Rather than calling other black artists to a new place that she found more liberating than Harlem, Hurston began reterritorializing Florida in the very sense that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use the term. Her narratives, with all of the cultural agency that Michel De Certeau grants to stories, reclaim what was a racially violent and volatile space for the practice of a vibrant African American everyday life that is deeply rooted and invested in the space it occupies.

As Melvin Dixon explains in *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* “nature” and “wilderness” have held central places in African American expression from the very beginning. In the earliest slave stories and songs, Dixon explains, nature and wilderness were both spiritual and physical locations of
tribulation and salvation—spaces, whether real or imaginary, outside of slavery that often had to be traversed at great peril in the process of gaining freedom. By the early twentieth century, though, African American thinkers like Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Jean Toomer were all rethinking “nature” in different ways. Hurston departed from them all.

Washington, Du Bois, and Toomer, though they encounter nature in significantly different ways, all take for granted that Southern space—including both its “natural” and “built” environments—is essentially white space, or space under the absolute control of an oppressive white regime. Beginning with *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, however, Hurston begins to challenge this assumption of white control. In this novel, she follows a cast of central characters as they travel from Southern Alabama to the Florida panhandle and then into Eatonville and Central Florida. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, however, pursues a program of spatial politics that is much more deliberate: she maps out a particular space for the practice of a vibrant black life and depicts an absolute physical, psychic, and spiritual immersion into the place that constitutes an entirely different method of discussing the environment than the white tradition that grew from Emerson.

Before Hurston began her writing career, several ideas of “nature” and even a particularly Southern “nature,” were circulating amongst African American intellectuals. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Booker T. Washington was perfectly capable of slipping into a highly Emersonian rhetoric of nature as a recuperative retreat. In the middle of *Up From Slavery* (1901), for instance, he writes that next to time spent reading and telling stories with his family in his home, his favorite leisure activity is taking his family “into the woods, where we can live for a while near the heart of nature, where no one can disturb
or vex us, surrounded by pure air, the trees, the shrubbery, the flowers, and the sweet fragrance that springs from a hundred plants, enjoying the chip of the crickets and the songs of the birds” (173). He calls this “solid rest” and adds that when he has the time, a half-hour in his garden at Tuskegee provides similar solace: “When I can leave my office in time so that I can spend thirty or forty minutes in spading the ground, in planting seeds, in digging about the plants, I feel that I am coming into contact with something that is giving me strength for the many duties and hard places that await me out in the big world. I pity the man or woman who has never learned to enjoy nature and to get strength and inspiration out of it” (173).

Writing specifically about Dougherty County, Georgia, but describing a situation typical of the entire Black Belt, W. E. B. Du Bois abruptly states in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that “there is no leisure class” of African-Americans in the American South (94). It is a phrase that sets Washington’s description of trips to the woods and dabbling in his garden in stark relief. The folk that Du Bois concerns himself with obviously do not spend their spare time “in spading the ground, in planting seeds, in digging about the plants” for fun. Their contact with the organic is a grinding struggle against soil and a tenant farming system that exhausts tenants and soil alike. They experience “toil, like all farm toil,” that “is monotonous” with the added impediment that “there are little machinery and few tools to relieve its burdensome drudgery” while the land that they work “groans with its birth-pains, and brings forth scarcely a hundred pounds of cotton to the acre, where fifty years ago it yielded eight times as much” (94, 85). For African Americans in the South, Du Bois argues, nature—writ “soil”—was oppressive field that could not even be freely navigated because “the free movement of agricultural laborers is
hindered by the migration-agent laws” and the more general “peonage system of white patronage [that] exists over large areas” (98, 99).17

Published later but still two years before Hurston arrived in Harlem, Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) cast Southern space in different terms than either Washington or Du Bois. Toomer described it as a traversable space—a space that could be penetrated and exited—and found the place’s lush organic environment evocative of African origins. In the novel that made Toomer the darling of the Harlem Renaissance, the South is a region of sawmills and cotton factories that he gives to his readers in the glow of hazy afternoons and after the work-whistles have blown, in “the sawdust glow” and “the velvet pine-smoke air” of dusk; a place where men still “go singing” with “race memories of king and caravan, / High-priests, an ostrich, and a juju-man” (12–13). It is a place where, as in “Carma,” a dusty road under the right conditions (when “the sun is hammered into a band of gold,” when “pine-needles, like mazda, are brilliantly aglow,” when “no rain has come to take the rustle from the falling sweet-gum leaves,”) can cause a woman to return imaginatively to her ethnic origins—to “a goat path in Africa” (10).

Over the course of three books, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, *Afro-American Poetics*, and *Workings of the Spirit*, Houston Baker recognizes that Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston were both engaged in spatial projects, but his work consistently takes for granted that *Cane* was both the catalyst for and, ironically, the *a priori* fulfillment of the Harlem Renaissance, while subtly suggesting that Alain Locke and Richard Wright were correct when they condemned Hurston’s work for what they recognized as its abandonment of racial politics. *Cane*, Baker argues, fills the critical gap between Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* and Locke’s *The New Negro*. It fulfills Du
Bois’s vision for a “cultural sound” of blackness while performing the pathbreaking “deformation of mastery” (Baker’s term that in this case suggests the blending of an Anglo-American modernist aesthetic project with “the fluid and multiform mask of African ancestry”) that makes the Harlem Renaissance possible (*Modernism* 56, 57). For Baker, the novel is the “breakthrough” into unmediated racial awareness that would carry Locke, *The New Negro*, and the Harlem Renaissance in general toward a new sense of black nationalism in the nineteen-twenties (*Afro-American* 101). It is an aesthetically masterful text that carries the universal appeal of a “journey of an artistic soul toward creative fulfillment” while also being “unsparing in its criticism of the imimical aspects of black American heritage and resonant in its praise of the spiritual beauty to be discovered there” (17-18).

As he reanimates the centrality that *Cane* held in the Harlem Renaissance, Baker reasserts the aesthetic system that was deployed against Hurston, particularly when she published *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. *Cane*, for Baker as it was for Locke and Wright, is what black literature was supposed to be in the first decades of the twentieth century—aesthetically modernist, immanently black, and undeniably cognizant of interracial conflict. The novel is surely valuable for what it says about the worst aspects of “black American heritage,” but it would not be recognized as the comprehensive expression of the moment if it had not included the lynchings of Tom Burwell and Mame Lamkins. These two incidents, portrayed as vividly in Toomer’s text as lynchings often are in late twentieth century histories of lynching, connect the novel to what Baker calls the “disfranchisement, lynchings, crop failures, and general miseries” that defined
the South during the period—the very things that Locke, Wright, and, most recently, Hazel Carby, have all accused Hurston of abandoning (*Modernism* 76). 18

Thus, for Baker, Toomer is a figure who found his artistic breakthrough by navigating the space—“the valleys and lowlands”—“of Blackness” itself while simultaneously working to construct a second “ordered” space or “framework that will contain the black American’s complex existence, offer supportive values, and act as a guide for the perspective soul’s journey from amorphous experience to a finished work of art” (101, 25). In a third book, *The Workings of the Spirit*, Baker acknowledges—just as I am doing here—that Zora Neale Hurston, too, engaged in spatial work. And while his intent is clearly to redeem Hurston through a discussion of her spatial project, Baker still reasserts her secondary status just as he re-establishes Toomer’s centrality in both *Modernism and The Harlem Renaissance* and *Afro-American Poetics*. In the argument that stretches over these three works, Toomer is foundational to the early twentieth century’s emerging sense of an African American race spirit, to Harlem’s artistic movement, and to the new sense of a black nation that emerged out of Harlem. Hurston, on the other hand, is credited with creating an image space for black female creativity—certainly an important project, but a provincial one in comparison to that of Toomer, which Baker defines as national and racial in scope. Her “*Mules and Men* (1935) is” itself “a *locus classicus* for black women’s creativity” because it accomplishes the “instantiation (a word that marks time and suggests place) of the conjure woman as peculiar, imagistic, Afro-American space” (282). Hurston’s work, Baker recognizes, included “seek[ing] a habitation beyond alienation and ancient disharmonies in a land where Africans have been scarred and battered, shackled in long rows on toilsome
levees,” and he argues that all of this “cultural work” (oddly, it is this term that Baker uses to describe Hurston’s art) is performed within the space of conjure—“the Spirit House of black women’s creativity” (304).

Hurston’s spatial project, while it does define the conjure woman as a space of healing, was much more ambitious than has been suggested by Baker or any other scholar of Hurston and the Harlem Renaissance. To return the language that Baker used to describe Toomer’s mission, Hurston was interested in instantiating a livable rather than a particularly “ordered” space for the practice of everyday black life; she was deeply critical of any kind of “framework” designed to “contain the black American’s complex existence;” she was dubious of attempts to “guide” souls toward any particular point, and she was even conflicted over what the term “art” should mean. Hurston had experienced framing, containing, and guiding in Harlem—in her relationships with Fannie Hurst, Annie Nathan Meyer, Charlotte Osgood Mason, Alain Locke, and even Franz Boas—and her return to Florida was in large part a response against it. The spatial project that she posed in novels like *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, moreover, turned in the opposite direction: it strove to recapture a space that whites had tried (with considerable success) to strip away from African Americans through several decades of violence; to overcome the difficulties of centralized power and enforced homogeneity that attended the idea of black nationality just as they attend nationality in general; and to portray a spatial enmeshment that runs entirely counter to the dominant traditions of white environmental experience that I have discussed through the first five chapters of *Looking Away*. 
In the myriad vignettes of African-American life that Toomer presents in *Cane*, nothing—or no one—moves. Dusty roads, like the one that Fern spends her days watching, often extend into the distance but no one travels them. When people do move, they go no place in particular, like Carma whom we find guiding a mule down the Dixie Pike; or they circulate on the fringes of the cane fields and firelight as Bob Stone is when he hears of his lover’s infidelity; or they move from a sight of initial violence, as the people of “Blood-Burning Moon” do, to a site more appropriate for a lynching. For those, like Kabnis, who enter the South from the outside, the road into the South seems to be the only road, and it only goes back from whence it came.

*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by contrast, include characters who traverse relatively broad expanses of space in what are essentially—in the scope of the novels, in the context of her strained relationship with the cultural center of Harlem, and in the context of the spatial project that she sketches in her letters—acts of mapping and spatial reclamation that work to call Florida into being as a space where a vibrant African American life can be practiced. This all begins in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* as Hurston moves her protagonist, John Pearson, from Macon County, in the east central portion of Alabama, into the Florida panhandle and eventually into the heart of Central Florida where he moves freely between Wildwood, Sanford, Maitland, Eatonville, Oviedo, Orlando, and finally Plant City. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* amplifies the spatial project Hurston had begun in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* by offering a female rather than a male protagonist, by extending the project of spatial control to involve a struggle for the control of the (black) (female) self, and by converting the type of spatial navigation that John Pearson performs into a navigation of blackness (not just a navigation of space) so
that the space under reclamation in the novel becomes *blackspace*—a space where blackness can be freely lived and embraced.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, like *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, moves first along the Florida panhandle, beginning in West Florida somewhere near Lake City, and then moves east to Green Cove Springs after Janie meets Joe Starks before diving into the heart of Central Florida: to Maitland and Eatonville and surrounding towns like Apopka, Ocala, Altamonte Springs, and Sanford. Eventually, after Janie meets Tea Cake, the novel moves to Jacksonville and then to the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee, Clewiston, Belle Glade, Palm Beach, Fort Meyers, and Fort Lauderdale. Similar to the process of walking in cities that he describes in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Janie’s navigation of Florida is what Michel de Certeau calls “a process of *appropriation* of the topographical system” (97). As Hurston moves Janie across the panhandle and down into the bowels of the state, she is using her character’s movements to delimit the borders of a new space and, at the same time, “found,” “authorize,” or “open” a “legitimate theater for practical actions” (de Certeau 123–25). The “practical actions” that Hurston enacts in this “theater” of Janie’s creation are best described as acts of “reterritorialization”—the term that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use to describe the seizure of, or the enmeshment within, all of the “milieus and rhythms” of a particular location (*Thousand Plateaus* 314).

For Deleuze and Guattari, space becomes a territory when a social body gains control of, and inhabits, the space’s “milieus and rhythms,” which is another way of describing what Henri Lefebvre calls the “unlimited multiplicity or uncountable set of social spaces which we refer to generically as ‘social space’” (86). For Deleuze and Guattari, just as for Lefebvre, space is multi-layered and historical. It begins with a
bedrock physical or ecological space upon which layer after layer of social spaces (in Lefebvre’s terms) or milieus (in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms)—racial space, economic space, national space, etc.—have been stacked. The South from the antebellum period to the early twentieth century, was an tightly controlled territory of white power within which African Americans had virtually no spatial agency. They could neither take possession of Southern space nor traverse it without the threat of violence; and, as it goes without saying, they were often lacked even the ability to control their own bodily space.

It is in the process of appropriating and reterritorializing Floridian space that Hurston imagines a new relationship with nature that breaks entirely from the white literary tradition—with all of its tendencies toward abstraction, destruction, and disengagement—that extends from Emerson into the twentieth century. Hurston reveals in the opening sections of Their Eyes Were Watching God that the space Janie inhabits has been coded as a site of violence and domination since at least the mid-nineteenth century—the period of her grandmother’s youth. During the Civil War, Janie’s grandmother sought refuge from her master’s wife in a swamp; Janie’s mother, Leafy, was raped by her schoolteacher (presumably a white man) in the woods. Whether a refuge or a site of violence, Hurston’s nature was part of a very violent milieu. Its rhythms involved desperate flights, rapes, and (although they never actually take place in Jonah’s Gourd Vine or Their Eyes) lynchings like the ones that Toomer describes in Cane.

Within the new territory that Hurston marks out for Janie, though, the natural world is coded differently. No longer a site of violence, it is rather, the objective correlative for Janie’s personal development, an omnipresent reminder of African
spirituality, and a link to the most authentic forms of blackness. Janie lives her life trying to achieve the level of ecstasy that she sees in the world around her from the moment that she comes of age “under a blossoming pear tree” watching “a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight” (10–11). Each of Janie’s relationships—with Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Vergible Woods—is initiated as an attempt to fulfill his vision of ideal marriage. In the end, only Vergible Woods, Tea Cake, “could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring;” beyond fulfilling this vision of her youth, though, Tea Cake transports Janie to the Everglades, a place that Hurston portrays as the highly organic epicenter of all she believed Florida to be (106).

In the Everglades, Janie lives alongside “blacks from all over the South and the Caribbean as well” in what is an unmistakably “Pan-African community,” and she finds herself both awash in and central to a welter of explicitly black expression (Wall 189). In “de muck,” Hurston writes, “jooks clanged and clamored;” there were “pianos living three lifetimes in one;” there was “dancing fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing love every hour (128, 131). Eventually Janie and Tea Cake’s home “was full of people every night. That is, all around the doorstep was full. Some were there to hear Tea Cake pick the box; some came to talk and tell stories, but most of them came to get into whatever game was going on or might go on” (133).

The scene that Hurston describes is Harlem without patronage and race leadership and with some measure of financial self-sufficiency. It is black expression unbound, run amuck, and surprisingly democratic. Here, for the first time, Janie could present
herself however she wanted—even in the “blue denim overalls and heavy shoes” that she
would return to Eatonville wearing—and she “could listen and laugh and even talk some
herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the
rest” (134).

As she moves Janie and Tea Cake into the black community that they find in the
Everglades, Hurston fashions their descent into “the muck” as an immersion in an organic
blackness. Here in the muck, nature is big, fertile, and black. It is unruly like the place’s
distinctively black culture, but even more so—it is always at least potentially out of
control, it is always essentially uncontrollable, and it is powerful enough to overthrow the
systems of exploitation that work to control it. The muck is defined by its “big beans, big
cane, big weeds, big everything,” and all of its bigness is credited to “dirt so rich and
black that a half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheatfield” (129 emphasis
added). This dirt is physical in a way that surpasses anything in Emerson’s oeuvre. It
adds its own blackness to the black bodies that work in it so that always, as they “work
all day for money, fight all night for love,” there is “the rich black earth clinging to
bodies and biting the skin like ants” (131).

Janie and Tea Cake are ultimately driven from the Everglades—and Tea Cake
eventually dies—when a hurricane hits the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee breaches the
dykes and levees that contain it. As tragic as they are, though, the hurricane and the flood
are the fulfillment of everything that Janie and Tea Cake had loved about the Everglades.
As Philip Joseph writes, “unruliness is of course part of the point of the place for Tea
Cake and Janie,” and these two catastrophic events bring everything that had always been
there in the muck—the power, the unruliness, the recklessness, the elemental force—to
its fullest expression (471). For all of the human suffering that ensues, Hurston describes the hurricane and the subsequent flood as the triumph of this nature, which she identifies as an immanently black nature throughout the novel, over white bondage. With the hurricane coming, Okechobee becomes a restless “monster” that “began to roll and complain” behind “the seawalls” that were used “to chain the senseless monster in his bed” (158). At the height of the hurricane, Hurston writes of the lake that “the monstropolous beast had left its bed. He seized hold of his dikes and ran forward until he met the quarters; uprooted them like grass and rushed on after his supposed-to-be conquerors, rolling the dikes, rolling the houses, rolling the people in the houses along with other timbers. The sea was walking the earth with a heavy heel” (161–62).

After the hurricane, Hurston’s project of spatial reterritorialization is essentially complete. When the hurricane ends, Tea Cake is forced to participate—at gunpoint—in the collection and burial of the bodies of storm victims (with the whites receiving proper burials and the blacks receiving mass graves) in Palm Beach; Tea Cake and Janie eventually escape back to the Everglades where Janie ultimately has to kill Tea Cake while he is in a state of rabid insanity; Janie is acquitted of her crime by an all-white judge and jury while she is condemned for her actions in the court of black public opinion; and Janie returns to Eatonville alone.

Although the novel confesses the enduring presence of white power in the Palm Beach episode, and although it offers a puzzling and harsh critique of Janie’s black community as Janie sits in the judgment of a white judge and jury that acquit her of murdering Tea Cake and a black community that wants her to be found guilty, the first two-thirds of Their Eyes Were Watching God conjure into being just what Hurston had
wanted since she announced her plan to buy land on the Indian River in 1929: a space where black life could be lived—and where art could be created—outside of the humiliating patronage systems of Harlem. Hurston was never able to secure the type of permanent institutional support that would allow her to actually create a spatially-specific artistic renaissance in the South, but her stories, it must not be forgotten, work to accomplish the same purpose. They are, in the words of de Certeau, “‘culturally creative act[s]’ that “authorize, or more exactly, . . . found. . . . legitimate theater[s] for practical actions” (123–125). And in the end, the space that Hurston founds is not an abstract space—in the Emersonian mode—that allows for the exploitation and destruction of the physical world, but rather an organic and immanently physical space within which a rich and vibrant African-American life can be practiced without fear, humiliation, or apology.

Notes

1 For recent examinations of Faulkner’s understanding of the environment and his engagement with environmental problems, see Lawrence Buell’s “Faulkner and the Claims of the Natural World,” Wiley C. Prewitt, Jr.’s “Return of the Big Woods: Hunting and Habitat in Yoknapatawpha,” Bart Welling’s “A Meeting with Old Ben: Seeing and Writing Nature in Faulkner’s Go Down, Moses” and Judith Bryant Wittenberg’s “Go Down, Moses and the Discourse of Environmentalism.” For all of these critics, Go Down, Moses is Faulkner’s most important discussion of the environment, but other—and earlier texts—also engage the problem of the natural world. Faulkner establishes that the natural world is very important to his idea of masculinity in his 1929 novel Sartoris (Sartoris was heavily edited before its original publication, and it was reissued in 1973 in its original form as Flags in the Dust), and he offers several important comments on nature in lectures that he delivered at the University of Virginia (which are collected in Faulkner in the University) and in an essay entitled “Mississippi” (which is included in his Essays, Speeches and Public Letters).

2 Fire!! was primarily the work of Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman, but a much larger circle of artists that had some bearing on the ultimate shape of the short-lived journal (only one issue was ever printed). This larger group, which Hurston and her friends called the “Niggerati” included Bruce Nugent, Aaron Douglas, John P. Davis, Helene Johnson, Dorothy West, Gwendolyn Bennett, Augusta Savage, Countee Cullen, Harold Jackman, and Dorothy Peterson (Hemenway 43).
Here and throughout this chapter I rely on Robert Hemenway’s *Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* and Valerie Boyd’s *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* for information about Hurston’s life. Where I rely specifically on a particular biography, or where they differ, I will be specific about the source of my information.

Boyd offers a concise description of the rent and salary situation that Hurston would have faced in Harlem: “Harlem’s rents were twelve to thirty dollars a month higher than in other areas of the city, although black New Yorkers earned lower salaries than their white counterparts. In the mid-1920s, thirty dollars was a significant chunk of money, equal to about $300 today. Still, a 1924 Urban League study found that Negroes paid from 40 percent to 60 percent higher rents than white people for the same class of apartments—and segregated housing practices did not give black folks the option to just move out of Harlem and into more affordable New York neighborhoods. As a result, the average Harlem resident spent an astonishing 40 percent of his or her income on rent.” (94-95)

Hurston understood, perhaps better than anyone else involved in the Harlem Renaissance, that the patronage system required performances of dependence, and the type of abjection that I am identifying here is precisely the type of sentiment that Hurston knew she could manipulate in order to get what she wanted—funding. The degree to which Hurston was in control of her own situation has been a subject of debate for more than thirty years. In *Harlem Renaissance* (1971), for instance, Nathan Huggins acknowledges that in the opinion of Louise Thompson (a close friend of Hurston’s and a fellow employee of Charlotte Osgood Mason), Hurston was actively manipulating her patrons (130). Basing his judgment largely on Thompson’s opinion, Huggins suggests that Hurston’s relationship with her primary patron was the expression of a flaw in Hurston’s character. She had, Huggins believed, an innate “dependency” that made it easy for her to be “the exuberant pagan that pleased her white friends” (130). More recent critics, like Tiffany Ruby Patterson, Ralph D. Story, and M. Genevieve West, though, insist that what Huggins perceives as pandering was in fact Hurston’s canny ability to manage the people she needed to manage so that she could perform her artistic and anthropological work at a time when no other means of self-support were available to black female artists (or non-Ph.D. holding anthropologists, for that matter).

Boas was disappointed with the end results of Hurston’s first anthropological mission and Hurston stood before him even more humiliated because of all that he had done to make the trip possible in the first place.

Hurston describes this psychic connection in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, where she states that “both Max Eastman and Richmond Barthe” also shared a similar connection with Mason (128). Cheryl Wall adds that Alain “Locke and Hall Johnson” also “testified to psychic experiences with their benefactor,” but, perhaps most important of all, Wall also recognizes that “Whatever other powers she possessed, and Charlotte Mason
believed devoutly that they were telepathic, the power to write checks was paramount” (154).

8 Du Bois believed that African-American art should be propagandistic and fundamentally disagreed with Alain Locke’s “idea that ‘Beauty rather than Propaganda should be the object of Negro literature and art’” (Lorini 160). His quarrel, of course, was not with Locke alone—he resisted the entirety of what Barbara Foley calls the “culturalist” turn of Black art in the early twentieth century, which included much of the art that was produced during the Harlem Renaissance. For a full treatment of Du Bois’s aesthetic, see Alessandra Lorini’s “The Spell of Africa is Upon Me’: W. E. B. Du Bois’s Notion of Art at Propaganda.” For a much broader discussion of early twentieth century African American race politics and the ways that aesthetic arguments involved politics, see Barbara Foley’s Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro.

9 Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck’s A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930 is currently the definitive record of Southern lynching and I rely heavily upon it throughout the next several pages. Other texts that have proven invaluable to my understanding of lynching in the South include Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America by Allen, Als, Lewis, and Litwack, At the Hands of Persons Unknown by Philip Dray, Lynchings: Extralegal Violence in Florida during the 1930s by Walter T. Howard, “‘Whitewash’ in Florida: The Lynching of Jesse James Payne and Its Aftermath” by Jack E. Davis, “Rosewood and America in the Early Twentieth Century” by David R. Colburn, and “Booker T. Washington’s Tour of the Sunshine State, March 1912” by David H. Jackson.

10 The most well-known example of “legal lynching” is the Scottsboro case that took place in Alabama between 1931 and 1937. As Leon T. Howard summarizes this case, “In 1931 white southerners in Alabama convicted nine black youths of raping two white women, and sentenced eight of them to death. Although, as events proved, the evidence and facts clearly indicated innocence, white authorities carried out a series of ‘legal lynchings’ by repeatedly convicting and sentencing these victimized young men (even though higher courts of appeal kept overturning these convictions)” (22).

11 For a fuller account of the Ocoee riot, see Patterson.

12 Shoemaker may have been a socialist, but the political projects that he was pursuing in Tampa were not radically socialist. As Howard explains, he was a New Deal democrat who found himself in life-threatening trouble because he was simultaneously challenging the city’s corruption and making ill-advised statements that overstated his socialism. According to Howard, his most “serious error in judgement was reflected I his bold, provocative statement that ‘the biggest cooperative enterprise in the United States is the post office. Is this communism? If so, we want more of it’” (81). In response to Tampa’s corrupt municipal politics, Shoemaker “organized the Modern Democrats, a left wing party, that prepared to run a slate of candidates in the November general election. This new party reflected the views of its founder, who was a moderate social democrat
who sympathized with FDR’s New Deal policies and the outlook of the liberal wing of
the Democratic Party. Moreover, the Modern Democrats were committed to the classical
socialist principal that production should be for human use rather than profit. Shoemaker
fearlessly argued his case in a series of letters that appeared in the editorial pages of the
*Tampa Tribune*. He advocated such innovations as ‘public ownership of utilities, free
hospital care for the needy, monthly investigations of city departments, an effective
referendum law, and a system whereby the unemployed could produce goods for their
use’” (Howard 81).

13 Walter White exchanged letters with Elanor Roosevelt on a fairly regular basis
and according to Howard, he “exerted great pressure on the White House over the Neale
incident . . . largely through Elanor” (65). White asked Elanor and President Roosevelt
to “make a public statement denouncing lynchings in light of the recent horrible instance
‘involving Neal’” (65). According to a note that she sent to the president, Elanor was in
favor of the idea, but the president found the subject to volatile and went no further than
pledging support for anti-lynching legislation.

14 Kaplan also discusses Hurston’s gun. As is my own inclination, Kaplan is less
concerned than Hemenway that Hurston got the gun after having a knife drawn on her
while she was working and collecting stories at the Everglades Cypress Lumber
Company, which was near Loughman, Florida. Kaplan rightly suggests that Hurston
must have felt exposed to any number of dangers because of the sheer oddity of her
situation: she was “traveling in blistering heat, sleeping in her car when ‘colored’ hotel
rooms couldn’t be had, defending herself against jealous women, putting up with
bedbugs, lack of sanitation, and poor food in some of the turpentine camps, sawmills, and
phosphate mines she visited. Evidently, she cut an unusual figure: a single, black
woman, driving her own car, toting a gun, sometimes passing for a bootlegger, offering
prize money for the best stories and ‘lies’” (52).

15 Hurston’s letters suggest that this sense of Florida as a personal artistic haven was
particularly strong in the late 1930s. In an August 1937 letter to Henry Allen Moe, for
instance, Hurston wrote, from Haiti, that “as soon as I land in New York and talk to you
and Lippincott I shall head for Florida to polish off this volume. . . . I cant do so well here
because now the material is engulfing me” (Kaplan 404). Projecting a stronger sense of
the economic factors that sent Hurston to work in the South, she wrote to Carl Van
Vetchen in February of 1938, from Matiland, Florida, that she had “ducked off down here
for two reasons. One reason was that I just had to come, and the other was that I wanted
to. I had to come because I could not stay in New York until I had made some more
money. And I knew that I could get some as soon as I hand in the script for the book on
Haiti. Then too, I wanted to come and get it out of the way so that I could get back to
work on FAN THE LADY. Having the tail end of the book hanging over my head was
ruining my entire life. I could not work very fast in New York so I rand down here to
finish it quick” (Kaplan 412-413).
Hurston’s letter to Jones offers her fullest explanation of exactly what went wrong at Bethune-Cookman. She explains that “I found it impossible to do anything worthwhile for (A) student body of only 226 and the same students wee needed for all the Choral groups, Major athletics, social groups, various dramatic groups at the same time” (317). Beyond the difficulties posed by the student body, Hurston reports that President Bethune placed ridiculous demands upon her while refusing to offer her any administrative support when she needed it and that her work was constantly underfunded (Kaplan 317-18).

In her recent “Shades of Darkness: Race and Environmental History,” Carolyn Merchant declares that the field of environmental history has come to recognize that “slavery and soil degradation are interlinked systems of exploitation, and deep-seated connections exist between the enslavement of human bodies and the enslavement of the land” (37).

In Cane, the lynchings of Tom Burwell and Mame Lamkins occur in “Blood-Burning Moon” and “Kabnis,” respectively. In the first story, Bob Stone attacks Tom Burwell and is eventually killed by him, and then Tom is attacked by a mob, dragged to an abandoned factory where he is tied to a stake and burned alive. Toomer offers the scene in gruesome detail: “Now Tom could be seen within the flames. Only his head, erect, lean, like a blackened stone. Stench of burning flesh soaked the air. Tom’s eyes popped. His head settled downward. The mob yelled” (34). Mame Lamkins is killed in the street for attempting to hide her husband when the mob was hunting for him. As with the earlier lynching, Toomer offers this one in grim detail: “They killed her in th street, an some white man seein th risin in her stomach as she lay thee soppy in her blood like any cow, took an ripped her belly open, an th kid fell out. It was living; but a nigger baby aint supposed t live. So he jabbed his knife in it an stuck it t a tree. An then they all went away” (90).

Although it is fairly easy to deconstruct the situation that Janie and Tea Cake find in the Everglades (after all, they are performing seasonal work, they are living in company housing, and they are essentially migrant workers), the wages that workers like Janie and Tea Cake would have received were perceived as fairly lucrative by such prominent figures as Bishop Henry McNeal Turner. David H. Jackson writes that Turner “believed that Florida was a ‘paradise’ for blacks and a place where they could make a lot of money,” ostensibly doing precisely the type of work that Janie and Tea Cake perform in Their Eyes Were Watching God.
CHAPTER 7  
THERE WILL ALWAYS BE A “LAST GOOD COUNTRY,” OR ERNEST HEMINGWAY AND AMERICAN LITERATURE’S LEGACY OF ENVIRONMENTAL DISENGAGEMENT

In the end, American Literature’s environmental legacy is a chronicle of disengagement theorized by Emerson, promoted by Thoreau, and privileged by critics from Fuller and Twain to Santayana, Brooks, and Fiedler. In the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, Cather and Steinbeck both knew—much as Cooper did early in the nineteenth century—that the United States was rapidly wrecking the North American continent. They criticized the national culture of environmental destruction and they retreated into Emersonian modes of environmental abstraction to preserve their positions within the field of the literary and escape the dangers of public activism. As the case of Zora Neale Hurston demonstrates, it was possible to escape the Emersonian tradition of environmental abstraction, but the alternative environmental image space that she cleared in the 1930s would remain largely unpopulated for several more decades until writers like Henry Beston and Rachel Carson began shedding the mantle of Emersonian abstraction and anthropomorphism and Edward Abbey began to remake Emerson and Thoreau into the forebears of a new and radical environmentalism.

By the middle of the twentieth century, it was not Cather, Steinbeck, or Hurston who best represented American Literature’s evasive environmental politics—they, after all, had worked in various ways and with varying degrees of success to abandon the field’s long tradition of abstraction, avoidance and disengagement. Perhaps more than
any other author, it was Ernest Hemingway who unabashedly carried the Emersonian
tradition of environmental evasion into the twentieth century and ultimately granted it its
fullest expression. Hemingway was raised to believe in Theodore Roosevelt’s program
of vigorous outdoor activity and to appreciate nature in the respective spiritual and
scientific modes of John Burroughs and Louis Agassiz. His writings—from the beginning
to the end of his career—contain such an aptitude for naturalistic observation that critics
still agree with Alfred Kazin’s judgment that “no nature writer in all American literature
save Thoreau has had Hemingway’s sensitiveness to color, to climate, to the knowledge
of physical energy under heat or cold, that knowledge of the body thinking and moving
through a landscape” (334). ¹

What I wish to offer as I bring *Looking Away* to a close is obviously a contrarian
view of Hemingway’s relationship with the environment. Despite his commitment to
observation and his penchant for naturalistic description, Hemingway practiced a politics
of environmental evasion that is remarkable because of the lengths it goes in *In Our Time*
(1925) and *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) to preserve an idea of a perpetually virgin and
perpetually available natural world. ² Even acknowledging the global patterns of
environmental destruction that threaten the natural spaces that he loves, Hemingway fixes
his gaze on a metonym of environmental openness that he casts into perpetuity within the
complex form of *In Our Time*, and he suggests in *Green Hills of Africa* that “good
country” or “virgin land” will always be available somewhere in the world for those who
are willing to pursue a Thoreauvean plan of environmental imperialism.
The Circular Trajectory of Environmental Openness in *In Our Time*

For Hemingway and his characters, nature *needs* to survive for the same reasons that Emerson, Thoreau, and Faulkner all needed it to endure: it is a place where masculinity can be earned, practiced, and reasserted; where those who have been emasculated by the cramp and confinement (and war) of urban (or modern) life can be regenerated; where origins can be experienced; where white fantasies of conquest and dominance can be re-lived. The natural world serves all of these functions in the stories of *In Our Time*. In “Indian Camp,” Nick Adams walks down logging roads and into a camp of Native American lumber workers to undergo an initiation into gendered violence that simultaneously reasserts his father’s medical skill and capacity for brutality on the body of a Native American woman. In “The End of Something” Nick breaks up with his first girlfriend while surrounded by second-growth forest and the ruins of an abandoned sawmill, in “Three-Day Blow” he experiments with a form of adult masculinity by getting drunk and re-entering the “second-growth forest” with a gun, and in “Cross Country Snow,” Nick uses the natural world as a retreat from domesticity and a pregnant girlfriend. Finally, in “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick retreats into an isolated and approximately virginal riverbank to recover, presumably, from the trauma of World War I.

As Susan F. Beegel has argued, Hemingway’s descriptions of nature throughout *In Our Time* display a naturalist’s observational aptitude and scientific perspective. Despite the fact that he can *describe* nature, though, Hemingway consistently refuses to engage environmental loss in the psychological and ethical terms that drove Cather to her dark critique of Jim Burden’s conflicted form of nature loving and Steinbeck to all of his (and his characters’) attenuated means of environmental preservation. In fact, although
he was particularly equipped to see, record, and understand the consequences of the types of environmental destruction that he and his works witness, Hemingway works quite explicitly against any admission of environmental fragility, destructibility, or limitability. He accomplishes this in *In Our Time* primarily by constricting his (and Nick’s) narrative gaze in “Big Two-Hearted River” and by then casting this story’s contrived sense of perpetual environmental openness into both a historical loop that is contained within the stories of *In Our Time* and into an unknowable future, both of which are implied by *In Our Time*’s terminal vignette—“L’Envoi.”

In her 1926 review of *In Our Time*, Ruth Suckow calls “Big Two-Hearted River” one of the book’s best stories. And she attributes its greatness to the fact that it “is an embodiment in prose” of a very real event of the period—young men going “‘back to nature’” in an effort to slough off the typical “disillusion of youth after the war” (26). The short story itself says nothing explicitly about the war, but as Kenneth S. Lynn recognizes in “The Troubled Fisherman,” this has not prevented a powerful body of scholarship from keeping Suckow’s interpretation alive. In his 1932 “Ernest Hemingway: Bourdon Gauge of Morale,” for instance, Edmund Wilson asserts without any equivocation that “Big Two-Hearted River” expresses a post-World War I malaise and that Hemingway “was the archetypal representative of a war-scarred ‘lost generation’” (Lynn 151). Twelve years later, in his introduction to Viking’s 1944 *Portable Hemingway*, Malcolm Cowley refreshed the old interpretation by again implying “that Hemingway’s fisherman, like Hemingway himself, was a war veteran who was trying to block out fear-ridden recollections of being wounded” by returning to the bosom of nature (Lynn 152). The only significant change in the critical reception of this particular
short story since the foundational interpretations of Suckow, Wilson, and Cowley has been a mild de-emphasis of World War I. Even within this slight interpretive shift, though, the story remains “a return to origins,” a return “to the eternal verities” of a very simplistic and idealized “nature” that offers “harmony and regeneration” (Strychacz 82).

What interests me most with “Big Two-Hearted River,” though, are the lengths to which Hemingway and Nick Adams have to go in order to construct an approximately virgin space out of a larger area that bears all of the markings of human destruction and to imagine that this virgin nature will always remain in its current unpeneetrated state—particularly considering everything that In Our Time itself says about the modern world’s particular knack for destructibility of nature. “Big Two-Hearted River,” after all, begins with Nick stepping off of a train into a ravaged landscape. Where the town of Seney had once stood, there was “no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country” (133). Nick dismisses the grim fate of the town by thinking that it “was burned, the country was burned over and changed, but it did not matter. It could not all be burned” (134-35). He then walks until he passes out of the burned zone, into a pine forest, and eventually into the area immediately surrounding the part of the river that he wants to fish.

Nick’s ultimate destination is a place on the river that bears no physical reminders of the natural world’s finitude and fragility or of its particularly precarious status in the twentieth century. Once there, in the bosom of what is, for all appearances, a “virgin nature,” Nick works to “choke” his mind whenever it starts to “work,” which includes an effort to suppress his memory of the “years before when he had fished crowded streams, with fly fishermen ahead of him and behind him” where “again and again” he had come
upon “dead trout, furry with white fungus, drifted against a rock, or floating belly up in some pool” (142, 149).

Isolated in this patch of river, totally unconcerned with what lies on the fringes of the space he has cordoned off for himself or what his memory may foretell for the river he is enjoying at the moment, Nick moves steadily toward a dark an inscrutable swamp that contains all that he and Hemingway want the natural world to be: a dark, threateningly virginic, and dangerous space that is penetrable to anyone with the requisite skill and desire but suspended in a state of defiant openness. In the final gesture of the story, which closes “Big Two-Hearted River” and the entire sequence of conventional short stories that span *In Our Time*, Nick reflects that “there were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp” (156).

By all conventional standards, this is a fairly unproblematic end for both “Big Two-Hearted River” and *In Our Time*’s sequence of major stories, but it is neither such a simple ending nor the end of the book. The end of “Big Two-Hearted River” formally encloses and thereby preserves the state of ecological openness and availability that brought Nick Adams to the river in the first place. Hemingway leaves the iconic swamp suspended in an unpenetrated state of availability and sends its availability forward into an ahistorical future that by the end of the story is clearly being imagined without any thought to the scene around Seney, Nick’s memory of ruined rivers, or the patterns of environmental destruction that slip into the earlier stories of *In Our Time*.

The preservation of ecological openness that Hemingway accomplishes with the end of “Big Two-Hearted River” is amplified by the vignette that immediately follows it, “L’Envoi,” which is *In Our Time*’s final story of any sort. Filling less than one page like
all of the vignettes but bearing a title like only “On the Quai at Smyrna,” the terminal
story is written in the voice of a Western journalist and describes a deposed Greek king
working in his garden as he awaits the judgment of a victorious “revolutionary
committee” (157). The vignette ends with the narrator commenting that “Like all
Greeks” the king “wanted to go to America” (157). Predictably, “L’Envoi” has been
interpreted as a closing gesture that recommends American democracy as the solution to
the revolutions that appear throughout In Our Time, but even when politics are excluded
from the hermeneutic frame, the story has been generally understood as a relatively
conventional act of closure. For David J. Leigh, “L’Envoi” “throws an ironic shadow
over the entire movement of Nick Adams’s education into disillusionment,” for Strychacz
it constitutes an acquiescence to “the inversions and chaotic displacements” that riddle
the entire book, and for Linda W. Wagner it “completes the emptiness of the collection”
by universalizing Nick Adams’s limitations and disillusionment (134, 84, 123–24).

Any claim of closure, however, ignores the openness and motion that are implied
in very title of “L’Envoi.” As Alan Bass has explained in the process of translating
Jacques Derrida’s The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond, envoi is one
form of the Frech verb, envoyer, “to send,” which is “derived from the Latin inviare, to
send on the way,” and that as a noun envoi means “the action of sending,” “something
that is sent (especially in the sense of message, missive, or dispatch),” and “the
concluding stanza of a ballad that typically serves as a dedication” (xx–xxi). To invoke
such a word is to throw everything into what Derrida describes in The Post Card as a
postal system of knowledge where all knowledge is always moving, always dynamic, and
only available for interpretation at momentary posts, or stopping points in their activity of
circulation. To invoke the *envoi* is to subject the message of this text to the terrors of loss and interception, to all of the potentialities of linguistic, historical, and interpretive play, and to the extension of the text beyond itself, its own history, and its author. At the very least, and in the face of all these risks, invoking the *envoi* constitutes an opening-up rather than narrative closure or an insular hermeneutic system.4

By its very title, then, “L’Envoi” evokes several key questions: if *In Our Time* is to be sent off, where is Hemingway sending it, and what, precisely, is this text that he is sending into the system of knowledge that Derrida calls the “Great Telematic Network” (Derrida 27)? To answer the first question first, “L’Envoi” forces *In Our Time* to arch backward upon itself and leap forward into an indefinite future, and the message that *In Our Time* transmits is largely a record of violence, revolution, and interpersonal turmoil within which only nature—enclosed and suspended in the state of ecological openness that Hemingway creates in “Big Two-Hearted River”—endures unchanged, unthreatened, and defended form even the idea of obliteration. Thematically, the story that “L’Envoi” tells, with its revolution and Greek king, returns to “On the Quai at Smyrna”—the book’s first story, which is also set in Greece during a climactic historical moment—, and suggests that *In Our Time*’s thematic concerns constitute a closed cycle without an end. For all of its recursive themes and narratives, however, the final vignette is still an *envoi* and it still jettisons all of *In Our Time*’s narratives of revolution, violence, and virgin nature—as cyclical as they are within the text itself—into the twentieth century.

**Bad Faith in Green Hills of Africa**

When Hemingway engages the condition of the natural world in his 1935 *Green Hills of Africa* it is as if he has entered Derrida’s network, intercepted the *envoi* that he cast into the web in *In Our Time*, and set about reconfiguring his earlier act of
environmental evasion. *In Our Time* betrays an awareness of environmental destruction, looks away from it, and creates an image of perpetually available and pristine natural space that it encloses within its generic structure and sends into the future. *Green Hills of Africa*, on the other hand, acknowledges that environmental degradation is a global phenomenon, looks it plainly in the face, and bluntly disregards it. And while *In Our Time* offers complex aesthetic hedges against the threat of environmental annihilation, *Green Hills of Africa* recommends an environmental imperialism that fulfills, in the worst possible ways, Thoreau’s command to encounter wilderness at any cost.

Thoreau writes in *Walden* that “we need the tonic of wilderness;” he argues that “we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable,” that “we must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features,” and that “We need to witness our own limits transgressed” by the natural world (298, emphasis added). As I have already explained, Thoreau suggests that we satisfy this need for nature by turning to “the unexplored forests and meadows” that surround “our village,” by exploring the wilderness of the self, and—if nothing else works—by searching for authentic wilderness experience in the four corners of the Earth (298). His call is to be “the Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clark and Frobisher” of the “streams and oceans,” the “higher latitudes,” and the “whole new continents” of the self, and to “go round the world” searching for wilderness only “till you can do better”—until, that is, you can “Explore thyself” (301–302).

The necessity of nature and the necessity of contact with wilderness are just as palpable in Hemingway’s work, but, rather than pursuing the type of inquest that Thoreau
describes, Hemingway literalizes Thoreau’s colonialist metaphors and proceeds as if Thoreau’s secondary solution—a global search for wilderness—is a legitimate, justifiable, and sustainable response to American, or Western, environmental destruction. *Green Hills of Africa* is a somber requiem for Africa.\(^5\) It appreciates the continent’s beauty, but it records—even shows Hemingway participating in—its destruction. It often speaks of Africa as a rutted, shot-out, and used-up country that the West has driven to the brink of death, but it justifies the course of Western empire and acquiesces to its environmental costs. In the space of two crucial paragraphs, Hemingway admits that he is aware of environmental destruction, that he understands environmental destruction as a symptom of Western imperialism, and that he has no fundamental problem with any of it. He writes that

> a continent ages quickly once we come. The natives live in harmony with it. But the foreigner destroys, cuts down the trees, drains the water, so that the water supply is altered and in a short time the soil, once the sod is turned over, is cropped out and, next, it starts to blow away as it has blown away in every old country and as I had seen it start to blow in Canada. (284, emphasis added)

Hemingway clearly states—and without any sense of irony—that “A country was made to be as we found it,” that “we are . . . intruders,” and that “we” are those who ruin these same countries. In the same breath, though, he argues that this “we” (presumably Americans) has the right to go “somewhere else as we had always had the right to go somewhere else and as we had always gone” (284–85, emphasis added). In his tight interweaving of imperialism and environmental destruction, Hemingway refuses to admit the environmental implications of his own text—that by the mid-twentieth century the perpetual existence of “virgin” lands (or “last good countries”) anywhere is supremely tenuous. In the face of all he has written, he simply insists that the same type of “good
places” that had “always” been available to “our people” would continue to exist into
perpetuity for those willing to seek them out (285).

As I have shown throughout Looking Away, authors from Jeremy Belknap and
James Fenimore Cooper to Willa Cather and John Steinbeck all recognized, at various
moments, that Western expansion could cause massive ecological change (Belknap,
among others, even thought that it could cause climatic change) and that “a country was
made to be as we found it.” In her description of Lake Okechobee straining to break its
bonds, Hurston had even suggested several years before Hemingway wrote Green Hills
that “the earth gets tired of being exploited.” At the same time, all of these authors
resisted wanton environmental destruction in significant ways. Cather and Steinbeck
refused to pursue courses of radical environmental politics, but they still called attention
to the absurdities and contradictions of early twentieth-century U. S. land ethics. Cooper
ultimately consigned both Native Americans and the North American environment to
destruction, but the narratives he tells are at least conflicted over the issues. Jeremy
Belknap and Timothy Dwight both delighted in seeing forests fall—they gave
instructions on how to accomplish it whenever they could—but even they excoriated the
type of wastefulness that Hemingway describes, and they were at least pursuing goals
that they believed to be just rather than capitulating, as Hemingway is, to processes that
they found regrettable.

Beyond their unparalleled acquiescence to environmental exploitation, these two
particular paragraphs are remarkable because they demonstrate just how untenable
Hemingway’s response to environmental destruction is. He concedes environmental
destruction, asserts a “right” to seize “good country” wherever in the world it may exist,
and acts as if it will always exist. He insists, that is, on the type of environmental openness that he formulates in *In Our Time*, and he preserves his faith in it by adopting an Emersonian gaze that takes the portion of the Gulf Stream that flows by Havana as a metonym of environmental health and perpetuity. The Gulf Stream comes to Hemingway in a reverie that he experiences in the process of penetrating “a new country,” and despite the fact that *Green Hills of Africa* spends three hundred pages suggesting that no pocket of wilderness is safe from the appearance of Europeans or Americas in jeeps bearing rifles, the Gulf Stream reassures Hemingway that nature is timeless, perpetual, and immutable. “This Gulf Stream,” he writes, “has moved, as it moves, since before man . . . since before Columbus,” and it “will flow, as it has flowed, after the Indians, after the Spaniards, after the British, after the Americans and after all the Cubans and all the systems of governments . . . are all gone” (150)

The Gulf Stream is for Hemingway what horizons and night skies are for Jim Burden and Alexandra Bergson: an Emersonian metonym for nature’s illimitability, perpetuity, and immunity to human destruction that is always available to neutralize any sense of anxiety over environmental destruction taking place “on the ground.” It directs Hemingway’s gaze away from the African scene, the “new country” that he is penetrating, and removes the threat of environmental destruction to another global space and an image of environmental inexorability that neutralizes the threat of any ultimate environmental destruction.

Ann Putnam argues in “Memory, Grief, and the Terrain of Desire” that *Green Hills of Africa* is “divided against itself” so that “actions that honor and respect the natural world compete with actions that would destroy it” (99). I would suggest, though,
that to whatever degree *Green Hills of Africa* is “divided,” it is also in complete control of its own dividedness. It understands the paradoxical environmental ethics that it practices, and it manages the palpable absurdity of its tacit but nonetheless constant claim (which runs entirely counter to everything he writes about Africa) that there will always “be another [virgin] country where a man could live and hunt if he had time to live and hunt” (282).

Hemingway recognizes the scope and scale of twentieth century environmental loss as well as any author in the first half of the twentieth century, yet wherever he could name the situation that he finds before him and create a new relationship between American letters and environmental ethics, he chooses another course. In his formal enclosure and linguistic continuance of environmental openness in *In Our Time* and in his strategic turn toward the Gulf Stream in *Green Hills of Africa*, he maintains the ahistorical, illimitable, and indestructible simulacrum of timeless nature that comes to him from Emerson. It was Emerson, after all, and the critical tradition that brought him into the twentieth century as the preeminent American philosopher of nature, who gave American Literature in the middle of the nineteenth century the enduring vision of abstract nature that it would use to look away from environmental crisis until the late twentieth century when literary traditions began to matter less, when “literature” itself became problematic, and when a new public sense of environmental crisis finally allowed the natural world to once again become a legitimate issue within the literary sphere.

Notes

1 Susan F. Beegel discusses Hemingway’s spiritual and scientific engagements with nature in “Hemingway as a Naturalist.” Her essay traces Hemingway’s upbringing in Oak Hall, Illinois and all of the figures—including his mother and father, Roosevelt,
Burroughs, Agassiz, Carl Akeley, and Jack London—who influenced his environmental thinking. Beegel finds Hemingway a remarkable naturalist and praises his particularly keen powers of scientific observation. Although my interpretation of Hemingway’s contributions to American Literature’s vision of the natural world is decidedly more negative than Beegel’s, her work on the origins of his environmental commitments is invaluable. Terry Tempest Williams quotes this passage from Kazin in her keynote address to the Seventh International Hemingway Conference and thoroughly agrees with his assessment of Hemingway’s aptitude as a naturalist. And although they do not state it as plainly, all of the eighteen essays that are included with Williams’s keynote address in Robert E. Fleming’s *Hemingway and the Natural World* take Hemingway’s exceptionality as a nature writer more or less for granted.

For the sake of clarity, I believe it is worth mentioning at the outset that *In Our Time* is a collection of loosely related short stories with a particularly complex history. The text as we have it today is composed of two narrative strands—one that features relatively conventional short stories, many featuring Nick Adams, and another composed of “chapters” (titled with roman numerals, printed with italicized text, and never longer than a single page) that critics often describe as “interchapters” or “vignettes” (the name that I will give them in this essay) that critics have described as a collection of short stories, a short story cycle, a “fragmentary novel,” and even a “cubist anatomy” (Brogan 31).

The publication history of the book is nearly as complex as its form. *In Our Time* appeared in essentially “final” form in 1925—and this is the year that is generally recognized as its proper date of “publication”—but it underwent several significant changes between 1923 and 1955. *In Our Time*, in its enduring 1925 guise, is composed of conventional short stories that are separated by even shorter stories that critics usually describe as interchapters or sketches or vignettes (the term I will use throughout this essay). These vignettes, which in the 1925 version are labeled as Chapters and are usually numbered with roman numerals (there are two notable exceptions that I will discuss in a moment). It is with the vignettes, though, that the historical complexities come into play. *Little Review* published the first of the vignettes in 1923 and they were all published together in Paris by Three Mountain Press in 1924 as *in our time*, with the title lacking any capitalization in the mode of e. e. cummings. For the 1925 version published by Boni and Liveright, Hemingway simply added fourteen short stories to the Three Mountain Press version, which gave the new book the heft it needed to even have a chance at success on the conventional U. S. book market. Boni and Liveright only printed 1,100 copies of *In Our Time* in 1925 and made severe editorial decisions that ranked Hemingway (they made him excise what was going to be the book’s opening story, “Up in Michigan” and forced him to make major changes to another of the book’s stories, “Mr. and Mrs. Elliot”) (Reynolds, *Hemingway: The 1930s* 42, Reynolds “A Brief Biography” 28). Because of this, and at the urging of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway switched to Scribner’s, who reissued *In Our Time* in 1930. This 1930 edition opens with an “Introduction by the Author” that would be renamed “On the Quai at Smyrna” in *The Fifth Column* and the *First Forty-Nine Stories*, which Scribner’s released in 1938 (Reynolds, “Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time*” 49). *In Our Time* would not be printed
as a stand-alone book with “On the Quai at Smyrna” as its first story until 1955, when Scribner’s again reissued the book. For another account of the history of In Our Time outside of the three Reynolds texts that I have mentioned, see Peter A. Smith’s Hemingway’s ‘On the Quai at Smyrna’ and the Universe of ‘In Our Time.’

“Indian Camp” plays a central role in the feminist backlash against Hemingway that Judith Fetterley initiated in The Resisting Reader. Fetterley’s argument, staged in the context of A Farewell to Arms but essentially about Hemingway’s oeuvre in general, holds that if “we weep at the end of” A Farewell to Arms “all our tears are ultimately for men, because in the world of A Farewell to Arms male life is what counts. And the message to women reading this classic love story . . . is clear and simple: the only good woman is a dead one, and even then there are questions” (71). While A Farewell to Arms is the primary subject of the chapter she devotes to Hemingway, Fetterley opens her argument by claiming that “Indian Camp,” with its “guilt for the attitudes men have toward women and guilt for the consequences to women of male sexuality,” is a prototype for the later novel. Hemingway scholarship has struggled to find new directions since Fetterley’s delivered what Mark Spilka calls her “devastating” and “relentless” critique (“Repossessing” 245), but this is largely because her work identified sexist and masochistic elements in Hemingway’s writings that had always been there, that everyone had always known to be there, and that therefore no one—especially those who wanted to resist Fetterley’s reading—could defend in good faith. Her brief treatment of “Indian Camp” is a case in point. In her summary of the story’s action, Fetterley writes that “a little boy watches his father perform a contemptuous and grotesque Caesarean section on an Indian woman” (46). “Contemptuous and grotesque?” Yes, Fetterley’s language is strong here as it is elsewhere in her larger argument, but it does capture exactly what happens in the story, which is surely part of the reason that her work has been difficult to move beyond. Since the early 1980s, critics have simply ignored the problems that Fetterly identifies in Hemingway’s work; rejected the guilt that Hemingway lovers feel in the face of her critique and alternately decided to “read Hemingway with guilt” (Spilka 236); recapitulated Fetterley’s critique; and, in rare instances that have produced some of the best Hemingway scholarship of the past thirty years, redeemed Hemingway through the same feminist mode of critique that Fetterley deployed in the first place. For arguments that represent the more or less overt ways that critics have struggled against Fetterley’s reading, see Robert Scholes’s Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English, which, published just five years after The Resisting Reader, operates as if Fetterley’s critique had never been uttered, and Frederick Busch’s “Reading Hemingway Without Guilt,” which simply suggests that lovers of Hemingway ignore the problems identified by Fetterley. For an example of how critics have simply maintained the terms of Fetterley’s argument alive, see Robert Scholes and Nancy Comley’s Hemingway’s Genders: Rereading the Hemingway Text, and for arguments that have work to redeem Hemingway from a feminist perspective, see Rose Marie Burwell’s Hemingway: The Postwar Years and the Posthumous Novels, Margaret D. Bauer’s “Forget the Legend and Read the Work: Teaching Two Stories by Ernest Hemingway,” Robert Spilka’s “Repossessing Papa: A Narcissistic Meditation for
As one might suspect, particularly from a book written as this one is (in a form either replicating or mimicking letters exchanged between two people, one of whom we may reasonably presume to be Derrida), Derrida formulates his notions of the *envoi* and the post over the course of *The Post Card*, and I believe that the type of reduction of his argument that I have offered here is infinitely more palatable in the scope of my larger argument than would be a more involved and specific discussion of Derrida’s text. For the purpose of my argument here, I feel that it is enough to know that Derrida’s theorization of *envoi* and post entirely shifts the metaphor of knowledge from library or static archive to “the Great Telematic Network, the *worldwide connection*” in which knowledge continually circulates in the form of *envois* that may be intercepted or misread at various posts, or stops in the circuit (Derrida 27).

Since its initial publication, critics have recognized *Green Hills of Africa* as a self-indulgent book in which Hemingway allows his masculinist posturing to run amuck, along with his disdain for his politically engaged critics like Granville Hicks and Malcolm Cowley. For a discussion of the battle with his critics that Hemingway carries out in *Green Hills*, see Robert W. Trogdon’s “‘Forms of Combat’: Hemingway, The Critics, and *Green Hills of Africa*.”
LIST OF REFERENCES


Bauer, Margaret D. “Forget the Legend and Read the Work: Teaching Two Stories by Ernest Hemingway” *College Literature* 30.3 (2003) 124–137.


Felton, C. C. “Simms’s *Stories and Reviews*. ” *North American Review* 63.2 (1846) 357–381.


Hedgpeth, Joel W. “John Steinbeck: Late-Blooming Environmentalist.” Beegel, Shillinglaw, and Tiffney 293–309


—. *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* 1937.


—. “Our Native Writers.” in Higginson 30–36


Robinson, E. Arthur. “Conservation in Cooper’s The Pioneers.” *PMLA* 82.7 (1967) 564–578.


Strauch, Carl F. “Emerson’s Sacred Science.” *PMLA* 73.3 (1958) 237–250.


Suckow, Ruth. “Short Stories of Distinction.” Register [Des Moines, Iowa], 12 September 1926. Rpt. in Reynolds, Critical Essays. 26


—. “Walking.” Walden and Other Writings 627–663.


Wilson, Sarah. “‘Fragmentary and Inconclusive’ Violence: National History and Literary Form in *The Professor’s House*.” *American Literature* 75.3 (2003) 571–599.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lloyd Elliot Willis, originally from Morehead City, North Carolina, earned his Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington in 2001, his Master of Arts in English from the University of Florida in 2003, and his Doctor of Philosophy in English from the University of Florida in 2006.