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Place Matters: An Evolutionary Approach to Annie Proulx's "The Half-Skinned Steer" and
"Wamsutter Wolf"

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

by

Erin Walker

B.A. DePaul University, 2006

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Dedication

To my friends and loved ones: Thank you for your receptive ears, kind words and commiseration. I would like to especially thank Michael Pitre for living with me throughout this process and still wanting to marry me.

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I would like to acknowledge my thesis advisor, Dr. Nancy Easterlin, for making me a better scholar. She pushed me to be a better writer and researcher. I would like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Steeby for asking tough questions. Also, I would like to thank Dr. Kris Lackey for supporting an interdisciplinary approach to literature.

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Abstract

In Annie Proulx's interview with Charlie Rose, she states that her stories come "from place." Ecocriticism has been the predominant lens with which to understand Proulx's work; however, ecocriticism's nebulous tenets and theoretical deficiencies perpetuate sentimental pastoralism of geographical determinism. The shaping impact of Wyoming's environment in Proulx's work lends itself to an evolutionary perspective. Proulx's fiction, like evolutionary theory, examines humanity's unique, reciprocal relationship with nature. The evolutionary approach provides readers with a framework to understand the human relationship to our environment, a theme Proulx's work examines. This approach also augments current criticism that notes the importance of place but does not utilize the relevant framework of evolution. Current evolutionary theory provides the theoretical framework necessary to shed light on the relationship between Proulx's colorful characters and the environment that shapes them. Utilizing this evolutionary framework and textual analysis, I examine two short stories, "The Half-Skinned Steer" and "Wamsutter Wolf."

Key Words: Proulx, Annie; Darwinian theory; Male-male competition; "Wyoming Stories"

In the seminal work *Evolution and Literary Theory*, Joseph Carroll writes, “[the] most important biological concept is the relationship between the organism and its environment” (2). Annie Proulx, whose collection *Wyoming Stories* explores this very relationship, has argued that, “Geography, geology, climate, weather, the deep past, immediate events, shape the characters and partly determine what happens to them” (Rood 11). Through her three short story collections, the reader discovers how environment shapes Proulx’s characters physically, emotionally, economically, and socially. Proulx exposes communities on the edge of our so-called civilization. In her distant, ironic tone, she deconstructs notions of nature as nourishing, as well as the human-nature binary which separates humans from the natural world.

The evolutionary approach provides readers with a framework to understand the human relationship to our environment, a theme Proulx’s work examines. This approach also augments current criticism that notes the importance of place but does not utilize the relevant framework of evolution. Current evolutionary theory provides the theoretical framework necessary to shed light on the relationship between Proulx’s colorful characters and the environment that shapes them. Utilizing this evolutionary framework and close textual analysis, I will analyze two short stories, “The Half-Skinned Steer” and “Wamsutter Wolf.”

In the slim body of criticism available, critics generally attempt to fit Proulx’s work into conventional Americanist categories; she is deemed a local color writer, modernist or postmodernist, or neo-regionalist (Hunt, Johnson, Rood, Scanlon). Alex Hunt labels Proulx a postmodern writer because she “addresses postmodern skepticism toward the contemporary viability of place and region in a provocative fashion, taking readers to what Cornell West

described as “the ragged edges of the Real” (1). Karen L. Rood describes Proulx’s fiction “as part of a late twentieth-century trend toward a new regionalism” (37) and compares her to contemporaries like Cormac McCarthy and Barbara Kingsolver. All critics acknowledge the shaping impact of the environment in Proulx’s stories, even though many disagree about how to identify Proulx and her work. Many critics, especially ecocritics, note Proulx’s attention to landscape and classify her as an ecofiction writer.

For the past two decades, ecocriticism has been a predominant lens with which some critics use to examine Proulx’s work. While this approach is valuable, ecocritics cannot agree on a cohesive definition of what “nature” is, so a great deal of the criticism involves re-defining what location, place and/or nature signify to each critic. In *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture and Literature in America*, Dana Phillips recognizes and grapples with ecocriticism’s shortcomings. Phillips critiques ecocriticism for its nebulous tenets and exposes how ecocritics have “had a difficult time comprehending phenomena like instability and constant motion” (77). Phenomena, like mutability and evolution, are integral to human understanding of environment and our relationship to it. According to evolutionary geneticists Richard Levins and R.C. Lewontin, “A commitment to the evolutionary world view is a commitment to a belief in the instability and constant motion of a system in the past, present and future; such motion is assumed to be their essential characteristic” (qtd in Phillips, 78). Although Phillips does not discuss Proulx, he does note the persistent ignorance to certain aspects of nature apparent in ecocriticism.

Phillips exposes ecocriticism’s theoretical deficiencies, specifically, how ecocritics do not have a clear, informed definition of nature. Along those lines, Nancy Easterlin points out that many ecocritics believe “nature” or the “environment” is separate from humanity: “the binary

opposition of humans over and against a non-human environment remains not only a feature but also the central organizing principle of the field” (7). This constructed binary is untenable; in fact, evolutionary primatologist Frans de Waal declares, “Human nature simply cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of nature” (templeton.org/evolution).

An evolutionary approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of humanity’s relationship as part of nature. Evolutionary biology fills in the theoretical blanks left by ecocriticism’s unsatisfactory tenets; “studying literature without reference to the natural conditions of the world and the basic ecological principles that underlie all life seems increasingly shortsighted, incongruous” (Love, 16). The human-nature binary, prevalent in most ecocriticism, creates a lack of critical perspective. The result is a blind reverence for nature, a sentimental pastoralism, or an excessively negative perspective, geographical determinism. This binary is untenable. Evolutionary theory is compatible with Proulx’s fiction because neither severs humanity from the physical world but makes it a part of the ecosystem.

Due to this human-nature binary, many ecocritics revere nature, and this is exactly what Proulx does not want us to do. In fact, Karen L. Rood warns readers approaching Proulx’s work with the misapprehension that Wyoming is a safe, peaceful place will have their notions of “pastoral serenity replaced by pictures of rural poverty and varying degrees of violence” (37). Nature is not Thoreau’s Walden Pond or Annie Dillard’s peaceful forests. Proulx understands that nature is not just a pretty landscape or rural escape, but an entity or system indifferent to our serenity or unhappiness. This misguided sentimental pastoralism stems from a lack of scientific knowledge.

Conversely, what some ecocritics grapple with is a reliance on geographical or environmental determinism. For example, critic Hal Crimmel ignores Proulx’s interest in the

interstices between environment and culture. Crimmel observes how Proulx has “forced us again to think about the ways in which the physical environment, with its climatic patterns, natural resources, and disease organisms, have profoundly shaped individual cultures and individuals alike” (63). Ignoring the reciprocal relationship between human culture and the environment, he categorizes Proulx as a geographical determinist or environmental determinist. Geographical determinism is not the same as biological determinism, which disregards or denies the effects of the environment on human behavior and character. Geographical or environmental determinism, at its most extreme, posits that geographical, climatic, or environmental factors *alone* are responsible for human behavior and culture, and holds that social conditions have little or no impact on cultural development. Determinists view human behavior as entirely controlled by the environment.

Proulx considers herself “something of a geographical determinist, believing that regional landscapes, climate and topography dictate cultural traditions and kinds of work;” however, Proulx acknowledges what Crimmel does not: “that whatever the claims of determinism, the relationships between a people and a place are reciprocal; land works on us even as we work the land, and neither emerges unscathed” (Hunt 5). Proulx’s work, like evolutionary theory, examines humanity’s unique, reciprocal relationship with nature. Nature, although a powerful shaping force, is not alone in shaping her characters as some ecocritics would suggest.

The application of evolutionary theory to fields like psychology, art and literature has met with resistance because of fears that it promotes determinism; however, evolutionary theory simply provides a framework with which to understand human behavior, not to justify an ideology. As William Irons maintains, “The central tenet of modern evolutionary theory is that no argument about the naturalness of behavior can be used as a moral justification of that

behavior” (Irons et al. 7). Evolutionary theory provides a clearer account of nature. In the field of human behavioral ecology, scientists study evolution and “problems unique to the species they study, including culture” (Irons et al. 15-16). Culture, a set of learned and shared behaviors, is the product of our species, and therefore a part of nature.

Evolutionary theory, like a great piece of fiction or art, can also illuminate humanity’s behaviors and relationship to the world around us. Annie Proulx’s view of the environment parallels those of evolutionary theory. In an interview with the *High Country News*, Proulx declares: “Place comes first -- what is this place, what makes it this way, what is the geology, what is the prevailing climate, what's the weather like, how do people make a living, what grows here, what animals are here. All of this stuff I do first, and then the stories just are there because the place dictates what happens” (Brown 2009). Cultures emerge from their local environments. Like an anthropologist, Proulx approaches her stories through place in order to dissect the Wyoming culture. Noted evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson describes how culture and nature intersect: “We are only beginning to appreciate the fact that human cultural diversity is fundamentally like biological diversity. Humanity is more like a multi-species ecosystem than a single biological species. A culture, like a species, has a historical phylogeny (that is, a sequence of events in its evolutionary trajectory) and is adapted to its local environment” (templeton.org/evolution). Proulx acknowledges that geology and climate, as well as human endeavors, affect the lives of her characters. In the same vein, evolutionary theory illuminates how human mating strategies and other behaviors are affected by environment.

Unlike many ecocritics, Proulx is uninterested in representing nature as a restorative haven from the “real world” problems. In an interview with the *High Country News*, Proulx states: “I don't see nature as a healing force...I'm probably more objective than that” (Brown

2009). Proulx is not interested in romanticizing Wyoming. Her narrative point of view does not glorify the dusty cowboy or noble rancher; she does not paint pretty pictures of big skies. In the same article, Brown explains, “That people should be so caught up in prettiness and myth is a kind of ignorance, and it maddens her; she traffics in Wyoming-the-reality -- "full of poor, hardworking transients," as she writes in her second of three volumes of Wyoming short stories, “Tough as nails and restless, going where the dollars grew” (2009). This realistic, unrelenting depiction contributes to Proulx’s objective narrative technique.

The third-person omniscient and limited narrative point of views employed in most of her stories also distances readers from the characters while emphasizing place. This voice may partly stem from her training as a historian. Her education at the French Annales School focused on the minutiae of everyday living—death and birth certificates, journals and receipts. When she decides to write about a place, she visits libraries, listens to people talking in bars and grocery stores; she reads everything imaginable about the landscape (Rood xix). She explores her characters’ ability to adapt to the unstable conditions around them, and this exploration directly correlates to adaptive theory. The motivating forces for her characters are accumulating land and resources and finding a mate amidst difficult conditions.

Proulx documents characters’ lives in relationship to their environment, much like an anthropologist writes ethnography. Proulx inhabits a participant-observer role in her stories. Proulx’s narrative voice is objective, distant and often ironic. There is an emphasis on how her characters live: where they eat, how they work, and their roles in the community. But readers do not often identify with her characters: “There are no giants in her earth, only pygmies; landforms and weather, *not people*, embody the heroic” (Weltzein 100, italics mine). Proulx’s foregrounding of place emphasizes humanity’s need to constantly adapt to its surroundings in

order to survive, and she also deconstructs the notion that our environment needs humanity to act as a shepherd. Proulx's outlook compliments sociobiologist E.O. Wilson's famous assertion: "If all mankind were to disappear, the world would regenerate back to the rich state of equilibrium that existed ten thousand years ago. If insects were to vanish, the environment would collapse into chaos" (1). Proulx's moral ambiguity about humanity's place within nature is equally unsettling: "From on high, it seemed human geometry had barely scratched the land... Was this what Mitchell saw when he went on those long drives, the diminution of self, a physical reduction to a single gnat isolated from the greater swarms of gnats?" (*Fine Just the Way It Is*, 124). What is clear in her fiction is that nature is indifferent to human desires, and Proulx's narrative voice reflects this indifference.

The distance between the characters that people her stories and the reader have elicited complaints from critics that she writes caricature. First, her use of outrageous names is Dickensian: Rase Wham, Creel Zmundinski, Jack Twist, etc. The names are alienating, and many could exist in a science fiction novel. O. Alan Weltzein contends that Proulx's use of caricature "distances viewer from subject and is premised upon a condition of inequality in which the former mocks the latter," but "landscape is never belittled; people are" (103). Proulx's characters usually make the wrong decision or refuse to decide anything. In a world where humans are belittled, what values do characters adhere to?

Proulx creates an alternate value system. For example, the Wyoming ranchers, who are often depicted in literature as noble, sympathetic, simple victims of encroaching change, Proulx depicts as complex, often stubborn, selfish and xenophobic. Her characters are often agents of their own misfortune. However, they are often better than outsiders, who exploit the land and glorify the romanticized myth of the West. But even outsiders, like Mitch in "Man Crawling Out

of Trees,” can be redeemed, though this happens rarely. Proulx presents a complex moral system as a participant-observer: not quite a part of the culture, but an educated documenter. She is rarely the moral arbiter. People’s odd, sometimes terrifying deaths seem to occasionally administer some justice to people (the out-of-state poachers in “The Hellhole”), but death is most often portrayed as just a consequence of living a hard life in a harsh environment, not a punishment. Adapting to one’s environment is what yields survival for Proulx’s characters, and evolutionary theory’s main concern is adaptation.

Every organism on earth is interdependent on the environment. This is the most basic tenet of science. In all environments, organisms interact with one another, and relationships among organisms may be competitive, harmful, or beneficial. The evolutionary definition of environment is not just “the physical world, or the physical world and the animals in it, but is highly variable and susceptible to change; thus, environment and nature include member’s of one’s own species as well as other species” (Easterlin 8). While the environment shapes all organisms, organisms shape the environment, too. Since the Industrial Revolution, humanity has contributed to vast resource depletion, global climate change and deforestation. Annie Proulx’s work examines the most fundamental, basic relationship of existence: humanity’s reciprocal relationship with the physical environment. Darwinian Theory elucidates how resources, material and sexual relationships, to both our and other species, are interdependent on the environment.

The most important tenets of Charles Darwin’s theory are natural and sexual selection. Natural selection, and by extension, sexual selection are the motivating forces behind adaptation. Organisms, in order to survive, need to adapt to their environment. Natural selection selects the fittest (most adapted) genes for reproduction, so our survival and mating strategies are ecologically sensitive.

As many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive; and as, consequently, there is a frequently recurring struggle for existence, it follows that any being, if it vary however slightly in any manner profitable to itself, under the complex and sometimes varying conditions of life, will have a better chance of surviving, and thus

be naturally selected. From the strong principle of inheritance, any selected variety will tend to propagate its new and modified form. (Darwin 22)

The arrival of genetics, years after Darwin's theories were published, supports his claims. The struggle for existence is constant, and because the environment is in a constant flux, all living creatures are, in essence, running to stand still. There is no getting ahead of our environment—those most adaptable to the world will survive and reproduce.

Natural selection, however, does not explain a variety of adaptations. Darwin explains that there is another selective force that alters reproductive and, therefore, adaptive success—sexual selection. In Darwin's book *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), he proposes that particular inherited traits are more sexually successful than others. "Sexual selection of a trait can...be viewed as a shorthand phrase for differences in reproductive success, caused by competition over mates, and related to the expression of the trait (Andersson 7). For example, a peacock has an enormous, colorful tail that actually hinders the bird, making it more likely to be eaten by a predator. This behavior should doom the bird to death (and in some cases does); sexual selection explains this risky behavior. Male competition and female sexual selection (and the inverse) play an important role in reproductive success, as well as natural selection. While the research on sexual selection is widely accepted, there is criticism for adopting evolutionary approaches to sexual strategies. Critics claim "they [evolutionary biologists] consign the sexes to stereotypical, simplistic, and fundamentally conflicting behaviors" (Pillsworth & Haselton 89), but one simply has to do the research to understand that what evolutionary scientists, anthropologists, psychologists and ecologists are finding is fluidity, plurality and exceptions to each rule.

There are two approaches to explaining phenomena in nature: proximate and ultimate causation. According to Peter Corning, “The former refers the causes that are effective in a given ecological, biological and behavioral context (which is roughly analogous to what preoccupies most social scientists), while the latter refers to the causes that produce differential survival and reproduction (natural selection)” (291). The ecological conditions Proulx’s characters inhabit affect their mating strategies and choices. Proulx’s Wyoming stories are filled with men engaging in various forms of competition for both resources and mates. In *Male, Female: The Evolution of Human Sex Difference*, David Geary provides a cross-cultural, comprehensive look at differential mating strategies. His research helps elucidate Proulx’s understanding of Wyoming men and choices they make. According to Geary, there are four central factors to human sexual selection: 1) female-female competition; 2) male choice; 3) male-male competition; and 4) female choice (45). Proulx elucidates the environmental impact on male-male competition and female choice.

Proulx presents readers with a harsh, resource-scarce Wyoming. Wyoming’s landscape has been mined for its resources; ranchers no longer make a living wage, and many men are forced lead nomadic lives to make money. Proulx chose Wyoming because of its precarious situation. In an interview with *The Missouri Review*, Proulx stated, “The failure of the limited economic base for a region, often the very thing that gave the region its distinctive character and social ways, is interesting to me. I frequently focus on the period when everything—the traditional economic base, the culture, the family and the clan links—begins to unravel.” Proulx examines collapsing cultures, and the subsequent changes in human behavior.

Proulx’s stories, full of ranchers, hunters, and rodeo riders, lay bare Wyoming’s working men and the subsequent behaviors associated with this reality. According to Geary, intense male-

male competition is more common in horticultural or agricultural societies because of a limited amount of resources and the hardships associated with subsisting on the land. Although her stories are set in a contemporary setting, mating strategies in rural Wyoming differ from those in other contemporary environments, such as urban centers. Geary discusses the reproductive strategies of humans and articulates the ecological sensitivity of these dynamics. Geary explains, “Sexual selection [is] influenced by a host of ecological and social factors...individual preferences are almost always constrained, to some extent, by such factors” (123). One effect of living in a difficult environment is that it tends to be less populated; therefore, mate choice is diminished.

Geary explains that the operational sex ratio (OSR) affects mating behavior. The OSR is the number of sexually active males to the number of receptive females. In an environment with more women than men, the mating systems differ from an environment with more viable men than viable women. For example, female-female competition increases when there are a limited number of desirable males: “When the OSR is male biased, available men outnumber available women and the enhanced power of female choice increases the level of male social status and resource provisioning potential necessary for obtaining partners (Pederson 1991). In these populations, men with lower socio-economic status have an especially difficult time getting married (Pollet and Nettle 2007). The degree of male bias in a population may be directly related to the intensity of male competition for social status, resources, and reproductive partners” (Kruger 198). In this environment, female choice is intensified.

Proulx’s female characters do not adhere to cultural conventions or typical mating strategies. They are sexually aggressive, unsavory and surrounded by men. The environment has something to do with these seemingly unusual mating patterns. Most evolutionary theory states

that women tend to be more monogamous than men; however, Darwinian feminists question this assertion (Borgerhoff-Mulder, Vandermassen). Women's mating behaviors, like men's, are affected by cultural and ecological conditions. Behavioral ecologist Monique Borgerhoff-Mulder uses recent data to debunk many commonly accepted beliefs about human mating strategies, most famously supported by Bateman-Trivers (women as only seeking parental investment) research. For example, "[s]erial monogamy has almost always been viewed as favourable to male fitness and unfavourable to women's fitness" (131). By studying a horticultural population in Western Tanzania, she finds some women actually benefit more than men from multiple marriages (mates).

Like women in Wyoming, the Pimbwe live in an agricultural, rural Christian community under conditions of resource-scarcity. Pimbwe women are active serial monogamists; they have more choice in partners. For example, if a woman lives with a man who does not work or has an alcohol problem, they attach themselves to a better mate. Borgerhoff-Mulder employs behavioral ecology to revise the "Triversian assumptions" that choice and competition are not mutually exclusive. She also contends that "choosiness is not simply a function of operational sex ratio, with the limiting sex enjoying the luxury of choice" (132). Choosiness correlates to the ecological conditions with which a community lives. The study concludes that in the Pimbwe environment, females benefit more than males by engaging in multiple mates. Women are more fertile and have more access to resources. These findings reject conventional beliefs, and she asks that we think of "serial monogamy as a form of not just polygyny but also of polyandry" (145). In this male-biased and harsh environment, female polyandry benefits them.

Evolutionary thinking provides hypotheses about what women want specifically to increase reproductive success. Most women look for the following: "selecting a mate who is (1)

able to invest resources in her and her children (parental investment), (2) is willing to invest resources in her and her children, (3) is able to physically protect her and her children, (4) is willing to physically protect her and her children, (5) will show good parenting skills, (6) will be sufficiently compatible in goals and values to enable strategic alignment without inflicting too many costs on her and her children” (Buss 50). In unstable environments, like rural Wyoming, it is difficult for “women to predict the investment of potential mates; therefore, short-term mating strategies are employed more readily” (Pillsworth & Haselton 70).

Proulx recognizes the relationship between resource scarcity, culture and mating strategies. “The personal isolation and emptiness of the Western landscape permeates most of Proulx’s descriptions...In their attempts to replicate the lives of their ancestors, many of her rancher characters find that the core identity they hold in common with those who lived before them comes crashing down as the land does not provide, does not support” (Johnson 28). Proulx performed extensive demographic research before writing the *Wyoming Stories* collection. For example, she “politicizes the concept that Wyoming has the “highest suicide rate [among] elderly single men,” indicating the potential isolation, containment and threat that exist there for unattached males” (Pullen 156). Wyoming’s small population and male-female ratio shape her characters. Wyoming has suffered from land exploitation, so the culture has suffered. The lack of resources and women creates a hostile environment for her characters who have to negotiate community, kin, resource retrieval, mate security with a dying economy and exploited terrain.

Difficult living conditions contribute to lower mating success, which incites fierce male-male competition, “[M]ale-on-male aggression—whether one-on-one or coalition-based—is related to the establishment and the maintenance of social dominance, the acquisition of the resources needed to support reproduction” (Geary 140). Critic O. Alan Weltzein explains how

Proulx's characters' fates are often constricted by their environment: "Whether through sexual desire, the terrain, or the weather they are controlled more than they control, and usually do not live as they wish" (Weltzein 106). Social dominance is present in all male-male competition but in a harsh environment it is more intense. Male-male competition takes the form of economic gain, blood revenge, female capture, personal prestige (Geary 147). Evolutionary psychologist Daniel Kruger elucidates Darwin's theories; "Males of most species allocate less effort to parental investment than females. Females are more discriminating in mate choice because of their greater costs in reproduction. Thus, male reproductive success is strongly related to the ability to compete for mating opportunities, whether by winning fights with other males, competing for social status or territory, or by presenting displays preferred by females (Geary 195).

In *Wyoming Stories*, men struggle to preserve their land, their livelihoods, and violence and aggression is always just below the surface. In Western cultures, men from one town do not pillage the next town over for resources and women, at least not that directly; "Male-male competition often takes the form of the acquisition of those skills and resources that define success within the wider culture" (Geary 139). Due to cultural evolution which instituted law, there tend to be less female capture and blood revenge, and more of a focus on cultural indicators of success to attract females. The scarcity of women in this environment instigates competition between men, and it expresses itself through the desire for economic gain, prestige and violence, risky behaviors.

It is widely recognized that men commit more violent crimes than women. Two Canadian psychology professors, Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, reviewed murder records, specifically examining cases involving members of the same sex, over a wide historical range, from around

the world, and concluded, "The difference between the sexes is immense, and it is universal. There is no known human society in which the level of lethal violence among women even begins to approach that among men" (qtd. in Barash). While there is no single cause, the operational sex ratio of a society contributes to male violence: "Perhaps the strongest indicator of violence in a society is its operational sex ratio, especially the ratio of available young men to young women. Over the last thirty years researchers have shown that the more the sex ratio favors males in a society, the more violent they will be" (Gottschall 121). Using comparative anthropological and sociological data as well as current male violence statistics from East Asia, countries with highly male-favored OSR, Gottschall notes that "the paucity of marriageable females reliably led to high rates of violence and high levels of adult male mortality" (130).

The normal ratio between men and women favors women; however, certain factors contribute to a male-favored OSR: female infanticide or abortion, war and/or harsh living conditions, and/or neglect. Wyoming residents are not pre-industrial warring tribes nor are they participating in socially sanctioned female infanticide. In many ranching and farming communities, however, male children are thought to provide more of a "pay-back" for parental investment than women. In *Wyoming Stories*, Proulx explores the male's "favored status" in those communities, and the subsequent dangers. In the last story, "Tits Up In A Ditch," from *Fine Just the Way It Is*, Proulx addresses the dangers of the environment for men:

She realized that every ranch she passed had lost a boy, lost them early and late, boys smiling, sure in their risks, healthy, tipped out of the current of life by liquor and acceleration, rodeo smashups, bad horses, deep irrigation ditches, high trestles, tractor rollovers and "unloaded" guns. Her boy, too. This was the waiting darkness that

surrounded ranch boys, the dangerous growing up that canceled their favored status. The trip along this road was a roll call of grief. (214)

If the boys did not die from toiling the land, they died from risky behavior or “unloaded” guns aimed at themselves or others. Donald Grayson, who studies the American west, found men are more likely to take risks, but also more likely to endanger themselves and others (Blum 24).

The connection between the environment and violence is tangible in Proulx’s depiction of these rural communities. Proulx deconstructs the notion that small, rural communities are homogenous and safe. For example, in “Man Crawling Out of Trees,” Mitch, an outsider who recently moved to Wyoming comments on the violence of the country; “Everything seemed to end with blood” (110). In her collections, teenage boys torture pronghorns, die in ranching accidents, and murder one another. Wyoming is “riddled with economic failure, natural disaster, poor health care, accidental death, few cultural opportunities, narrow worldviews, a feeling of being separated from the larger society” (Proulx *The Missouri Review*). In the stories “The Half-Skinned Steer” and “Wamsutter Wolf,” Proulx illustrates the destructive forces in both humans and the landscape.

In “The Half-Skinned Steer” and “Wamsutter Wolf,” the protagonists attempt to thrive in the harsh, resource-scarce physical environment, and both men must leave Wyoming as young men. The exodus of Proulx’s male characters from the state or through death speaks to the difficult life men and women lead in Wyoming. In “The Half-Skinned Steer,” the protagonist, Mero Corn, describes his former Wyoming home as “strange ground” more “suited to lions” than humans (33). The narrative is told retrospectively, jumping around in time from Mero’s childhood and young adulthood in Wyoming, to his present day existence in Massachusetts and journey home. The structure articulates Mero’s psychic attachment to place. *Place* is different than environment, although there is a physical component. Place is the human-constructed meaning attached to an environment. Although he leaves Wyoming as a young man, sixty years before his journey home, his vivid recollections of the landscape and people there indicate that Mero may have left the *environment* of Wyoming, but he has never left the *place*.

The story examines the dearth of choice available to Mero and his family in a degraded environment, “as though its severe physical landscape precludes any sustained economic survival, let alone success” (Weltzein 103). In her descriptions of the physical landscape, Proulx employs the adjectives “corroded,” “dirty,” “empty,” but also “beautiful.” The weather has agency; it “blots,” “hits,” “rocks” and “slaps.” According to Mero, the ranch had once been viable; a place to make a living, but it became so tough and dried up, ranching became untenable:

They called it a ranch and it had been, but one day the old man said cows couldn't be run in such tough country, where they fell off cliffs, disappeared into sinkholes, gave up large

numbers of calves to marauding lions; where hay couldn't grow but leafy spurge and Canada thistle thrived, and the wind packed enough sand to scour windshields opaque.

(21)

Both sons were willing to fight for the ranch because of their attachment to its history and the sense of identity it provided them. But the ranch was depleted of resources, and Rollo and Mero resented their father for giving it up, and even they could not “pull the place taut” (22) as they wished.

Proulx's Wyoming is at its best indifferent to humanity, and at its worse seems antagonistic. For example, Rollo's own death is ironic and represents death as some form of justice. Rollo sells the ranch off to various corporations, so not only is the ranch not workable, it meets the fate of many ranches and becomes a tourist destination. When Mero leaves Wyoming to seek his own fortune, Rollo sells the land to the Girl Scouts and gives it up when a girl scout was “dragged off by a lion” (21). In these little morbid details, Proulx repeatedly draws attention to the landscape as dangerous and unsympathetic, even to Girl Scouts. After selling the ranch to an Australian tourist company called “Wyoming Down Under,” Rollo is clawed to death by an emu. Mero, however, is a successful businessman and politician with more wives than he can remember. By staying in the degraded environment, Rollo is forced to sell out, then is killed by an exotic animal.

The environment propels Mero from Wyoming as a young man. Although Mero does not fully understand his motivations at the time, later he learns from TV that to be successful, monetarily and sexually, he needed to find his own resources: “... he'd learned from television nature programs that it had been time for him to find his own territory and own woman” (33). The irony is that Mero does not learn this from lived experience; he does not understand until

watching a nature program that he, like animals on a nature program, seeks resources and sex. Mero justifies his impetus to leave as a part of the natural course of things. Ironically, Mero does not see his eventual death as a part of the natural course of things. However, the real irony of the story lies in Mero's inability to sever ties to Wyoming.

Mero left Wyoming physically, but in his assessment of his successes and the consistent comparison he makes between himself and his father and brother, the reader understands that Mero has not developed emotionally, and he is still the same Mero who left to find his "own woman" sixty years previously. Through the accumulation of wealth, women and physical health, he sees himself as the winner of his own story; he is the fittest brother. Even though Mero has left Wyoming, he still measures himself against his brother. For example, when Mero contemplates his brother's death, he compares his "success" to Rollo's failure. Unlike Rollo, Mero has had many wives and conquests, and he is an "excellent driver" who at eighty-three can easily drive alone across the country for his brother's funeral while his brother battled prostate cancer and emus. As Mero travels back to Wyoming, his success story unravels. He is still haunted by his failed ranch and the people he left behind.

As mentioned previously, the operational sex ratio (OSR) in Wyoming is male-biased, and "the proportion of young men in the population, the ecology within which the social group lives, and cultural ideology appear particularly important influences on reproductive strategies" (Geary 152). Neither Mero or his father or brother had the resources or cultural indicators of success which would make them the most attractive mates. The land did not provide for them, and a woman who chose to live on it would lead a difficult life. As evolutionary theory predicts, Wyoming's degraded landscape affects human mating behavior. The male-male competition increases with a lack of women to choose from, while female choice is only enhanced. Mero

claims he left Wyoming because “he’d wanted a woman of his own without scrounging the old man’s leftovers” (25). Like a secondary wolf in a wolf pack, in order to find a “woman of his own,” Mero needed to find a place where he could be successful, gather resources and not have to compete with his own family for a mate.

The only woman present in “The Half-skinned Steer” narrates the story of the half-skinned steer, and she has a powerful effect on Mero; in fact, all three Corn men are interested in her. As the sole woman in the story, the old man’s girlfriend has her choice of Rollo, Mero and their father. Mero resents her position of power as the only woman in their lives; he suspects that she is “playing them all” with her sexuality and “convincing liar’s voice” (10). From Mero’s point of view, the old man’s girlfriend understands her position as a scarce resource and uses it to her advantage. In an environment where women are in demand, the middle-aged, grey-haired woman has more power in her mate choice. Although she is not beautiful, her sexuality and her story impact Mero so much he flees the state: “Sexuality is expressed through landscape archetype or fable (told by a brood mare/quasi-woman), forcing Mero to hurry away for a wife and future” (Weltzein 103). The old man’s girlfriend’s appeal is her extreme sexuality, but also her connection to the land, neither of which he can possess.

Even though Mero has physically left Wyoming, his treatment of women is colored by the old man’s girlfriend and her frightening story about mortality. He marries repeatedly but has a difficult time remembering how many times; none of the wives is mentioned in the narrative. Women are like renewable resources, easily used up and replaced. His inability to remember how many wives he had, but to remember in detail the old man’s girlfriend’s “low, twangy voice” speaks to her power over him, the power derived from her position as the woman he wanted but could not have. The fact that he cannot remember her name is not important. She was

not his to name; she was the old man's, and that was his impetus for departure. Karen L. Rood summarizes: "the alluring sexuality of his father's girlfriend and her gruesome story have become permanently linked in his mind, creating a simultaneous attraction and aversion to the opposite sex" (156).

Mero's connection to *place*, the woman and the land, haunts him throughout the story. Sex and landscape are so intertwined for Mero that after being shown cave paintings of vulvas when he was twelve, Mero could not see any woman as flesh: "...no fleshly examples ever conquered his belief in the subterranean stony structure of female genitalia, the pubic bone a proof, *except for the old man's girlfriend*, whom he imagined down on all fours, entered from behind and whinnying like a mare, a thing not of geology but of flesh" (28, italics mine). All other women are stone to Mero, inanimate, without agency. The old man's girlfriend is flesh, which further demonstrates her powerful hold on him as representative of sexuality and the land.

The old man's girlfriend's connection to the *place* is also expressed in the girlfriend's horse likeness: "If you admired horses, you'd go for her with her arched neck and horsy buttocks, so high and haunchy you'd want to clap her on the rear" (24). The last image Mero has before he "peeled out of the ranch" was of the woman and Rollo: "He believed it was the horse-haunched woman leaning against the chest and Rollo fixed on her" (30). Her association with a horse elicits the obvious sexual connotations of riding and dominance. For example, Mero expresses desires to clap her on her horsey butt and use her braids for reins. More importantly, horses are animals of our Western landscape and imagination. The cowboys, Indians, and ranchers all ride horses. In popular culture, we often see images of wild horses running across valleys or through the dusty Western terrain. Wild horses are captured and tamed, but the old man's girlfriend has not suffered that fate (yet). The old man's girlfriend represents not only the physical environment

of the ranch and Wyoming but also the meaning Mero attaches to those places, and neither the land nor woman was available to him.

Determined to succeed outside of Wyoming, Mero finds women, power and money, yet he is not satisfied. Although sixty years have passed, Mero's conscious attempt to maintain physical strength illustrates he still feels himself in competition with his father and brother. As Mero would glean from his "nature programs," physicality and strength are desirable qualities in attracting a mate. When he gets the phone call from his brother's daughter-in-law about Rollo, Mero is on his stationary bike. After the call, "[h]e flexed his muscular arms, bent his knees, thought he could dodge an emu" (23). Mero takes pride in his competence and youthful body, and even though he has not seen Rollo in decades and he is now dead, he still sees him as competition. Mero's appraisal of his fitness and his father and brother's continues throughout the story. Rollo and the "old man" are his sexual competitors, which is made clear as he reminisces about the "old man's girlfriend." The insistence on referring to his father as an *old* man distinguishes their respective virility and sexual prowess: "The old man's hair was falling out, Mero was 23 and Rollo twenty" (24). Mero was young, strong, and did not have a drinking problem like his father. The inclusion of his father's baldness makes it clear he wishes to distinguish the sons' youth and virility from his father's aging body, and thus renders the old man as weak competition. Present-day Mero's obsession with his physical health speaks to this constant competition between father, brother, and son.

Mero's sense of competition compels him to trek across the country as an old man. Even though the competition is dead, and the old man's girlfriend has been dead for years, Mero's psychological connection propels him across the country to fight his family and get the girl. Mero believes that he, unlike Rollo, is the fittest son and that death is not coming for him. The

old man's girlfriend's story is about the inevitability of death. Tinhead leaves unfinished business (a half-skinned steer) and reaps the consequences of it: bad luck and eventual death. Mero also leaves unfinished business when he leaves Wyoming, his brother, ranch and father without a word of warning. As Mero gets closer to Wyoming, his luck also falters. He gets in a car accident; he does not sleep or eat properly; he loses an entire day from his trip, and his ability to think clearly becomes seriously impaired by the time he gets to Wyoming. He ends up walking through a snowstorm because he believes he is on his ranch. The irony of Mero's situation is that until the very end, he believes he is still impervious to Wyoming's indifferent and dangerous ground: "This is how they sort the men out from the boys" (38). Mero believes he will win a match against a Wyoming snow storm, but more saliently that he will win the competition between his father and brother.

As he walks through a horrific snow storm, he cannot deviate from the notion that he is fit, a survivor. Even in the cold, snowy ranch he measures himself against his brother. It is not until he sees the half-skinned steer that his hubris falters: "it tossed its head and in the howling, wintry light he saw he'd been wrong again, that the half-skinned steer's red eye had been watching him all this time" (40). Mero discovers that death comes for us all, no matter how far away we move or how much money we make, or how many people we have slept with. In the end, Mero "discovers that all his efforts to stave off death through a healthy vegetarian diet and vigorous exercise are of no avail against the powerful forces of nature" (Rood 155). In the end, he is as exposed and vulnerable as Rollo, his father, and the steer. In Proulx's Wyoming, the land always prevails.

"The Half-Skinned Steer" explores how male-male competition between family members can be destructive to family groups. The ranch is sold off, the brothers do not speak for sixty

years, and Mero has a string of unsuccessful marriages and ultimately faces death back on the ranch. His death was not inevitable. Had he stayed home, he would have lived. The difficult ecological conditions and the lack of mate choice drove Mero away, but his need to compete leads to his death. Proulx picks up these themes in “Wamsutter Wolf;” however, she creates even more extreme circumstances. In Wamsutter, there is a scarcity of resources, territory and mates. In this type of environment, the competition can be fierce, and “men clearly have the capacity for intense often times deadly one-on-one, as well as coalition-based, competition” (Daly and Wilson, 139). “The Wamsutter Wolf” deals with these more violent side effects of male-male competition, and a protagonist who enters haphazardly into a fight he didn’t ask for.

Because he is more psychologically attached to place, Mero’s fate is more determined than Buddy’s in “Wamsutter Wolf.” Unlike Mero, Buddy understandably does not have the place-attachment that follows Mero. Like Mero in “The Half-Skinned Steer,” Buddy Millar contends with limited choices due to Wyoming’s harsh landscape in “The Wamsutter Wolf.” Like Mero, he explicitly states that he “wish[es] for new territory” (147), and he also wishes for autonomy. Unlike Mero, readers do not meet Buddy post-exodus. The third-person limited perspective follows Buddy from his parents’ home, an unwelcoming harsh landscape, to a decrepit, mined landscape in Wyoming. Buddy is one of Proulx’s more sympathetic characters. Buddy is not an intellectual, but he seems more aware and sensitive to his surroundings than the other characters in the story and the short story collections. Like Mero, he suffers from a run of bad luck. The story begins with Buddy reluctantly returning home to his parents’ house, unwelcome. Buddy house sits while his parents go on vacation, and during a night out, the house is robbed. His parents blame Buddy, which propels Buddy from his home.

Buddy's sense of self is not influenced by a particular place; he sees himself as a loner, a nomad. It is from this story that Proulx pulls the title for her second volume of Wyoming Stories, entitled *Bad Dirt*. The wind is "sharp" and "blustery;" the roads are "dangerous" and "dark." Buddy "seeks out back roads" (145) or "bad dirt roads" (144). He works sporadically, sometimes getting laid off or quitting. He is transient, always looking for bad dirt roads to take him somewhere "remote and difficult" (147). Where he ends up is a small, "desperate place" called Wamsutter, where there was a "methane gas boom" (147). All of the residents are transient as well, following the money, living in trailer parks: "the real Wyoming—full of poor, hard-working transients, tough as nails and restless, going where the dollars grew" (148). Buddy identifies himself as a real Wyomingian, hard-living and transient, without a home.

Some of Proulx's stories expose how human activity shapes the landscape, and the activity always has a negative effect on both the environment and the long-term economic success of Wyoming's residents. But Proulx also shows how residents, sometimes begrudgingly, partake in the commodification of Wyoming. Proulx recognizes that the "relationships between a people and a place are reciprocal; land works on us even as we work the land, and neither emerges unscathed" (Hunt 5). "Wamsutter Wolf" examines the dilapidated land left by resource extraction businesses. Businesses go into Wyoming, extract its resources and leave behind a ghost town. The people left behind are forced to lead transient lives as resources are stripped from them. Throughout the story, Buddy can hear drill rigs in the distance. When Buddy leaves Wamsutter for three days and returns, "there are already two more drills in sight" (174). In this story, human endeavor affects landscape; the reciprocal relationship between culture and land is shown in a negative light.

By exposing the revolting living conditions of Wamsutter, Proulx also attacks the romantic pioneer myth of Westward expansion. In a particularly telling scene, Buddy explores an abandoned trailer next to his, and finds a newspaper clipping of “several families who had bought land south of Wamsutter from a fly-by-night development company. In the story one of the buyers was quoted as saying, “This is our dream come true, to own our own ranch. We’re the new pioneers” (150). Buddy discovers that the “pioneers” bought bad land, and “would never make it through a single winter and no crops would grow” (150). As Christian Voie accurately asserts, “Proulx’s landscapes often appear carnivorous. Humans are chewed up and spat out” (41). The dirt is bad, but the myth continues to draw “pioneers” to towns like Wamsutter, including the trouble-prone Buddy. Buddy, however, does not include himself in the new pioneer category. To a lesser degree, Buddy, like Mero, does not equate the misfortunes of others as ominous, although Buddy’s misfortunes occur almost immediately after arriving in Wamsutter.

Finding the newspaper clipping should have been Buddy’s first cue to leave. The resource-mined, bad dirt town of Wamsutter is a dangerous place. As in a gothic tale, prey and predator imagery permeates the story; wolves even howl in the night. Readers understand before Buddy does that he needs to leave. The reasons to leave Wamsutter accumulate throughout the story. Early in his stay in Wamsutter, Buddy gets bit by a rattlesnake, and cannot work until he heals. He first encounters his former bully, Rase Wham, “wielding a bloody knife” (155), and upon closer inspection finds he has “fanged snake” tattoos all over his body (156). Rase lashes out violently at those around him, including his children. Random violent deaths are always in the background. For example, some people are killed in a major accident on the highway, in which a “semi had jackknifed and caused a chain reaction involving more than thirty vehicles”

(166). The danger on Mero's ranch seemed limited to death by animal. The danger of Wamsutter includes both man-made violence as well as attacks from nonhuman nature.

Buddy's lack of attachment to place combined with a threat to his very survival contributes to his eventual exodus out of Wyoming. The stakes are higher for Buddy. Both Mero and Buddy must leave their home state for resources and possible mates; however, Buddy's impetus to leave, to "get the hell out of Wamsutter" is more urgent. The constant violence prompts Buddy to move out-of-state. He fears for his life, which is a legitimate concern. The men die in unusual, violent ways: Rase fed to wolves, and Buddy may be their next victim. By showing the readers Wyoming as unforgiving, Proulx deconstructs nature as nurturing. Mero learns from an ethological program on TV that his impetus to leave Wyoming was simply a need for new territory and resources, so his departure somehow fit into the natural course of things. In "Wamsutter Wolf," Buddy's cousin Zane, the more successful Millar cousin, studies wolf behavior and attacks the notion of nature as balanced. In fact, Zane explains the evolutionary tenet that all organisms are constantly adapting to the environment; they are always running to stand still. Buddy's mother states:

'Zane was helping preserve the balance of nature,' and Zane had made a face and said the balance of nature was a dead dodo...Nothing is really *balanced*. Try to think of it as an ongoing poker game, say five-card draw, but everything constantly changes—the money, the card suits, the players, even the table, and every ante is affected by the weather, and you're playing in a room where the house around is being demolished (144).

The house represents Wyoming; the weather affects every move; the environment is unstable; and human and wolf alike, can only try to stay in the game. Buddy, who does not seem to appreciate this sentiment at first, comes to understand it from his experience in Wamsutter,

unlike Mero who never truly understands his motivation for leaving. Buddy leaves a dangerous state with a male-favored OSR for another, Alaska. It is telling that he immediately chooses Alaska. Zane studies wolves in Alaska, and Buddy wants to go where someone understands the ruthlessness of nature.

As in “The Half-Skinned Steer,” characters in “Wamsutter Wolf” have very superficial knowledge of animal behavior, and misapply it to their own lives, specifically wolf behavior. Wolves, like horses, also represent wilderness in our collective imagination. In *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America*, Jon T. Coleman explains that Americans have historically used wolves as a stand-in for their deep-seated fears of the wilderness and its unknowns (Hilton 1). Coleman also explores the recent romanticization of wolves as symbols of the West and wilderness. Zane, like Coleman, views wolves as neither monsters nor romantic creatures that represent freedom and strength. Graig romanticizes the wolf. Both he, and Buddy to a lesser extent, see themselves as lone-wolves. However, Buddy understands Graig’s self-identification with wolves is ridiculous: “But if I was to be a animal that’s what I want a be—a big grey Canadian-Wyoming wolf. I look at a wolf, I look at myself. *Owooh!*” (159). Even if his self-identification with wolves is laughable, Graig is still dangerous because, like Mero, he justifies his animalistic behavior despite his incomplete knowledge of nature.

Proulx uses the wolf as an interesting metaphor for human groups and mating strategies. Buddy unfortunately stumbles onto a pack, Rase is the alpha, Cheri and the children are his pack, and Graig is the beta until he usurps Rase with the help of wolves. Lone wolves are not alphas; they are would-be alphas that have been driven out by the pack because there can only be one per pack. Early on, Graig’s position in the pack seems threatening. When they walk together toward Buddy’s trailer, “there was a distant howl and then another from a different direction” (163). The

wolves are starting to circle the trailer park. Graig states: “There’s wolves in the Red Desert, getting a bead on Wamsutter” (163). The strategic placement of howls when Graig walks with Buddy out of the Wham altercation foreshadows Graig’s connection with and utilization of wolves later in the story.

Like in “The Half-skinned Steer,” three men surround one woman; the same ratio exists in “Wamsutter Wolf.” The men are low resource males operating within a male-favored OSR, so the male-male competition is intensified. However, Buddy is not a willing participant in the competition. Buddy is more of a victim of the intensified competition than a perpetrator. Unlike Mero, Buddy is uninterested in the only woman in the story, and feels only disgust and resentment toward Rase and Graig. Mero spends his life invested in competition between himself and his brother and father, and psychologically he never really leaves the locus of competition. Buddy’s predicament is more precarious as he becomes involved in a more immediate, local fight. In “Wamsutter Wolf,” Buddy is only invested in getting out of Wamsutter alive, not seeking a mate or territory.

In “The Half-Skinned Steer,” readers do not get a clear picture of Rollo, Mero’s direct competition. He seems to be more sexually attractive to the old man’s girlfriend and a hard worker, but Rollo’s real function in the story is as Mero’s foil. We can imagine that Rollo did not feel the way Mero did or even understand Mero’s departure. Rollo’s characteristics are not important; Mero’s perspective is. In “Wamsutter Wolf,” Buddy provides more information about his antagonists. Rase, Cheri’s abusive husband and the most aggressive and intimidating of the three, was Buddy’s high school bully. Rase has a history of establishing dominance. In high school, Rase smashed Buddy’s face into pavement, breaking several bones. Evolutionary psychologists suggest that even when there’s not a resource to fight over, males practice

establishing dominance in adolescence (Kruger). In adulthood, Rase continues to beat his children and verbally lashes out at Buddy for eating his food and flirting with Cheri (although Buddy finds her repulsive): “Come for the free dinner...Come to mess with that fat bitch I married?” (162). Rase is the alpha and Buddy is a threat, made clear by Rase’s accusation that Buddy came around to steal Cheri. Buddy is horrified by the accusation because he finds Cheri repulsive.

Like the old man’s girlfriend in “The Half-Skinned Steer,” Cheri exhibits knowledge that she is at an advantage as the only woman in their community. Cheri is physically disgusting: fat, smelly and unclean, yet the male-favored OSR provides her with more choice. Despite Buddy’s disgust, all three men have sex with Cheri at some point in the story. Cheri flirts with both Buddy and Graig, keeping her options open for a better mate or multiple mates. To Buddy she says, “I always had a big crush on you in school. All the girls thought you was cute” (154). While strength and physical dominance can make a male dominant (Rase), humans (and other primates) can engage in alternate mating strategies, such as protecting children and providing food, which makes them attractive mates. Cheri insinuates herself into Buddy’s trailer after Buddy takes their son Vernon Clarence to the hospital. By taking her son to the hospital, Buddy displays more signs of paternal investment than Rase.

Through his care-taking behavior and good looks, Buddy becomes a potential alternative or additional mate for Cheri, who then initiates sex with Buddy. According to anthropologist Elizabeth Cashdan, “women may try to get investment from one man while mating with another who is desirable in other respects” (3). Buddy says Cheri “kind a” rapes him while he dreams of an attractive waitress. A lack of female companionship combined with physical instinct did not prohibit him from participating in the union. He is repulsed; “[h]e wanted desperately to stop,

and tried, but it had been too long, the dream was strong and his traitorous body went for the jackpot” (168). Also, he admits the act was partly motivated to usurp Rase’s power. “Yet he knew there had been a measure of vigorous participation motivated by vengeance against Rase” (169). Although Buddy does find Cheri disgusting, the chance to cuckold Rase proves too tempting. It is clear the next morning that Cheri believes that she has claimed Buddy for, “he was beginning to guess she might be picking him to replace Rase” (170). Buddy is a passive player in her “picking” and replacing: “...she thought she now had some claim on him” (169). Short-term mating strategies may potentially benefit women who seek to exit a bad relationship (Buss 54). By having sex with Buddy, Cheri hopes to extricate herself from Rase. By having sex with Cheri, Buddy, regrettably, intensifies the competition between the three men.

The competition leads to a much more volatile environment for Buddy. Buddy fears for his life and spends his last few nights in Wamsutter afraid that Rase, the alpha, will kill him. He sleeps with a gun by his head. Buddy does not know Graig kills his competition, and assumes the alpha position, although Buddy notices early in the story that Graig is another potential mate choice for Cheri. He observes that Cheri flirts with Graig: “He’s out there at that grill long as anybody wants some meat. He’s a sweetheart” (158). Unlike Buddy, Graig actively seeks female companionship: “Only thing different between me and the old-time mountain man is I ain’t got no squaw woman. I been on the lookout for one but hell, they are all too civilized for me” (157). Cheri is definitely not civilized, and Rase is in the way.

While Cheri views both men as potential replacements for Rase, Graig is a better mate choice than Rase (and Buddy). While Rase provides some monetary support, he is verbally and physically abusive to her and the children. Graig calms Rase down when he erupts in anger, he provides meat and cooks it for the pack, and he is not abusive toward the children. Evolutionary

psychologist Daniel Kruger stresses how important paternal investment is in female choice: “Human male parental investment is relatively high amongst mammals (especially primates), and paternal investment in offspring may enhance offspring survival and reproductive success” (197). While Cheri does not live up to cultural standards of motherhood (for example, her son Vernon spends most of the story drunk), she does wish to be taken care of, which includes an invested father to help care for the children and provide. The fact that he murders Rase is not a factor in Cheri’s decision. From an evolutionary perspective, Cheri would be more concerned about her offspring, and Graig shows more paternal investment.

Unlike Mero, Buddy is not attached to Wamsutter as either a physical environment or place. Buddy’s departure is not wrought with the complex emotional meaning of Mero’s departure. At the end of the story, Buddy escapes Wamsutter for his life but must reluctantly return for his things. Buddy runs into Cheri and Graig and learns about Rase’s violent end. Vernon Clarence tells Buddy with a gleeful expression: “the wufs ate Daddy” (175). Graig has taken Rase’s wife and family as his own: “Graig is our daddy now” (176). Buddy infers that Cheri informed Graig of Buddy and Cheri’s intimacy, because Graig now views Buddy as a potential threat: “A hard, alpha stare had taken its place...Graig now saw him as a rival” (176). The last line of the story reconnects the wolf-pack imagery: “I see you got your own pack now” (176). Buddy recognizes that Graig feels there can be only one alpha, and Buddy is competition. Graig justifies murdering Rase through this self-identification with wolves, and Buddy may be next. Buddy leaves the dilapidated Wamsutter for Alaska. Unlike Graig, Zane seems to understand wolves and nature. Attaching himself to someone who has knowledge of the world around him is a smart, adaptive decision. Buddy leaves the highly competitive environment and joins his blood, his kin, and his natural pack and avoids Rase’s fate as wolf meat.

Both “The Half-Skinned Steer” and “Wamsutter Wolf” explore the relationship between the physical environment, place, and behavior. Each examines the most important conflicts of character versus nature, character versus character, and character versus self. Wyoming becomes a metaphor for all nonhuman environments but also place. Proulx reminds readers that even if we live in big cities or small towns, we are all part of an ecosystem in which we must adapt or die. Through Annie Proulx’s insistence that place shapes us, that nature is not separate from humanity, that our successes and failures are wrapped up in our ability to adapt in even the worse conditions, readers are confronted with a humbling notion—we are not as important as we think we are. “In facing the spectacle of landscape, we are admonished to take a biocentric view of the world, at least Proulx’s Wyoming, and Americans desperately require that lesson in humility” (Weltzein 110). The belief that humanity is somehow above the natural world and that humans have a special place outside of it are attacked by Proulx in the same manner evolutionary theory erodes the human-nature binary. Proulx’s *Wyoming Stories* contends nature is not something we run to when we are feeling contemplative and sad; it is the world around us at all times.

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