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Gina Bessetti-Reyes

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WOMEN AND THE AMERICAN WILDERNESS:  
RESPONSES TO LANDSCAPE AND MYTH

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Gina Marie Bessetti-Reyes

May 2014

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Gina Marie Bessetti-Reyes

2014

WOMEN AND THE AMERICAN WILDERNESS:  
RESPONSES TO LANDSCAPE AND MYTH

By

Gina Marie Bessetti-Reyes

Approved March 10, 2014

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Thomas Kinnahan, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of English  
(Committee Chair)

---

Linda Kinnahan, Ph.D.  
Professor of English  
(Committee Member)

---

Kathy Glass, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English  
(Committee Member)

---

James Swindal, Ph.D.  
Dean, McNulty College and Graduate  
School of Liberal Arts  
Professor of Philosophy

---

Dr. Greg Barnhisel, Ph.D.  
Chair, English Department  
Associate Professor of English

ABSTRACT

WOMEN AND THE AMERICAN WILDERNESS:  
RESPONSES TO LANDSCAPE AND MYTH

By

Gina Marie Bessetti-Reyes

May 2014

Dissertation supervised by Thomas Kinnahan, Ph.D.

“Women and the American Wilderness” explores three, middle to upper-class white women's responses to wilderness from texts published between 1823 and 1939. Through an exploration of James Fenimore Cooper's heroine Elizabeth Temple in the novel *The Pioneers* (1823), Isabella Bird's published letters entitled *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1873), and Muriel Rukeyser's reaction to the Gauley Bridge Tragedy of the 1930s in her book of poems *The Book of the Dead* (1939), I show that women's responses to the American wilderness not only included a reaction to the physical terrain but also to the developing or established masculine myth of the American wilderness and concept of Manifest Destiny. In chapter one of my study, I show that Elizabeth Temple counters the developing masculine myth of the wilderness through her active engagement with the outdoors and challenges the passive, home-bound femininity being espoused in the 1820s. Despite her challenge to hegemonic gender norms, however, she does not challenge the established patriarchal power hierarchy but utilizes her class

privilege within it to gain her own desires, thereby often reinforcing the racism and classism of her time. As I argue in chapter two, the real life Isabella Bird had to carefully negotiate between her own desires for wilderness adventure and socially-sanctioned standards of femininity. In order to maintain a respectable front, Bird capitalized on doctor-prescribed travel as her mode of escape from a home-bound life, and her careful self-representation and depictions of others along her route reinforces her feminine respectability as she climbs a mountain, takes long, solitary horseback riding excursions, and embraces solitude. Yet in her text Bird also does not challenge the masculine paradigm of the wilderness myth but uses her femininity to protect her character and justify her wilderness travels, thereby garnering the freedom associated with the wilderness for herself. As I argue in chapter three, however, Muriel Rukeyser's depiction of the historical American wilderness undermines the masculine myth by highlighting the role of the "other" in America's development. I also show how her text links the historical racism and classism undergirding the myth of the wilderness and concept of Manifest Destiny to the exploitation of lower-class workers, especially migrant African-American workers, who died from work-induced silicosis at Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, during the 1930s. Together, Cooper's novel, Bird's letters, and Rukeyser's sequence of poems highlight the complexities that race, class, and gender bring to women's reaction to wilderness and help us to begin to explore the multi-layered responses that women had to the American wilderness and wilderness myth in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

## DEDICATION

To my husband, Roberto Reyes, Jr.,  
and to my parents,  
the people I love most in this life  
and without whose constant love and support  
this dissertation may not have been written.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee for the time that they spent carefully reading, discussing, and responding to my work. I would also like to thank the English Department for the gift of my education, including the privilege to teach for many years as I pursued my M.A. and Ph.D. I am also indebted to my parents, who instilled in me a strong work ethic necessary for independent study, and to my husband, whose prayers and confidence in my abilities gave me the strength I needed to continue in my work during the lonely times. Finally, last but not least, I would like to thank to my fellow Ph.D. candidate and friend Rebecca Cepek, who willingly shared in both my misery and triumphs throughout the dissertation process and spent countless hours working alongside me at Starbucks.



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## Women and the American Wilderness: An Introduction

Since the beginning of European exploration of the New World, the wilderness has maintained a stronghold on the imagination so that the wilderness eventually became and has maintained its status as a defining feature of America's nationhood. The real and imagined American wilderness has also birthed and shaped some of America's most interesting characters and real-life adventurers, such as Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Natty Bumppo, Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed, Henry David Thoreau, and John Wesley Powell, among others. Although a few women connected to wilderness are well known, like Sacajawea for her role in Lewis and Clark's expedition, Pocahontas for her connection to John Smith, or Calamity Jane and Annie Oakley for their exploits in the West, when one thinks of the trapper, the sojourner, and the adventurer of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rarely does a woman come to mind because few individual women, real or imaginary, are associated with the wilderness, west, and frontier in American history or popular and literary culture. Women in general are too often overlooked in historical studies, leaving many unanswered questions about women's specific roles and everyday lives in the American wilderness, such as how women fared with their families when they traveled westward to claim land in the 1800s, what influence they had in the changing landscape or attitudes toward wilderness from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, or how their identities were influenced by their interactions with the land.

The general question, therefore, of how women responded to wilderness prompted this study, in which I explore women's responses to the American wilderness in James Fenimore Cooper's 1823 *The Pioneers*, Isabella Bird's 1879 *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, and Muriel Rukeyser's 1938 *The Book of the Dead*. These texts highlight differing responses to both the physical landscape and a growing or established masculine myth of the wilderness,

deepening our understanding of the role of the American wilderness and wilderness myth in the creation of women's identities as well as in the racism, sexism, and classism undergirding the concept of Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

### Uncovering History of Women in the Wilderness

Historians and other scholars since the second wave feminist movement have also asked how women responded to the American wilderness and have discovered a wealth of texts, such as overland travel journals, diaries, letters, and books, which have been overlooked by critics and have instead frequented the storage units of various libraries for decades. According to Armitage, "In the discipline of history as a whole, women were not considered historical subjects until women's history challenged that omission in the 1970s" ("Are We There Yet?" 71). Literary critics challenged that omission as well. Annette Kolodny's 1975 seminal work, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, broke new ground in literary studies, highlighting the gendered representation of the land as virgin and mother and its role in America's colonization. In her 1984 work *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers*, Kolodny transitions from her previous focus on men's response to a feminized landscape to a focus on women's responses to landscape, thereby broadening our understanding of women's roles in the wilderness, their acculturation or rejection of cultural myths, and their contributions to America's development. *The Land Before Her* especially provides a critical foundation for my own study. Kolodny argues that "English-speaking [white] women who are the subject of [her] study struggled to find some alternate set of images" (3) to those of men who envisioned the land as feminine, fecund virgin, or mother and whose fantasies

of the land excluded women.<sup>1</sup> Women responded from 1800- 1860, she argues, by turning to the American prairies and the cultivated garden as their source of inspiration and connection with the land, and, through the prairie, women were able to carve out an identity as the American Eve to the already solidified American Adam, which was created through a previous decade of storytelling and myth making about male adventurers in the American forests. Her study, although illuminating how women in the nineteenth century respond to the prairies, appeared to me to generally overlook the responses of women like those in my study who reveled in the wooded wilderness that men claimed for themselves. Through my study I thus seek to fill in some of the other ways that middle to upper-class women responded to the American wilderness and the masculine myth of the wilderness.

More recent literary scholars and historians have also been adding the diversity of women's experiences into a history in which women are overwhelmingly overlooked so that a fuller, truer history of America's development, especially as it pertains to the western frontier, may be articulated. Lillian Schlissel's 1988 *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives*, for instance, focuses on not only Anglo-Saxon but also Native American and Mexican-American women in order to illustrate the multicultural milieu of the West. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson's 1987 *The Women's West*, moreover, provides an antidote to the perceived notion that women were largely absent from the settling of the West; essays in the book explore different historical documents, such as journals, reports of Mexican-American women, and accounts of waitresses and homesteaders, to show that women of all races and classes were more than

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<sup>1</sup> The women Kolodny studies were overwhelmingly both middle-class and white, and she explains why in detail. She notes, "Because the analyses here depend on a written record, the fantasies in question are largely those of relatively privileged, if not always wealthy, middle-class women. From the illiterate, the unschooled, as from those who could never afford time away from their labors for diaries and correspondence, we hear nothing direct in these pages" (xiii). Also, she notes that she was unable to "locate adequate or relevant materials composed by Afro-American women on the frontier during the period covered" in her study (xiv). Writings by African-American women on the frontier, she adds, did not readily become available until after 1870 (xv).

passive followers to the frontier but often traveled alone or inspired their families to settle. Also, editors Taylor and Moore published the first anthology concerning African-American women and the West in 2003, entitled *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000*. This work especially explores women's roles as community builders, activists, and workers in the West. These and the work of Vera Norwood, Annette Kolodny, Krista Comer, and others more recently, including Leckie and Parezo, Jameson and McManus, and Woodworth-Ney, add to the growing list of scholarship concerning women and the wilderness, frontier, or west.<sup>2</sup>

Although the 1970s spurred a critical surge in scholarship, historical and especially literary scholarship of women's writing about the wilderness, west, or frontier has not caught up to the number of works available for study. Women's writing about the West was prominent and popular in America, for example, especially starting in the 1860s. Nina Baym indicates that there were “more than 328 women publishing western-themed books by 1928,” whose “number of books exceeds 630” (63). Despite these numbers, few major studies in literature focus on women's response to landscape. Moreover, few of the authors that Baym mentions in her history of American women's books about the West, except perhaps Mary Austin, Geraldine Bonner, and Helen Hunt Jackson, are known or discussed extensively in criticism. Baym's compilation of texts and authors, however, indicates the wealth of information available to one who desires further study of women's writing about the West, wilderness, or frontier.

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<sup>2</sup> See Vera Norwood, *Made From This Earth: American Women and Nature* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1993); Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984); Krista Comer, *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1999); Shirley Leckie and Nancy Parezo, eds, *Their Own Frontier: Women Intellectuals Re-visioning the American West* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2008); Elizabeth Jameson and Sheila McManus, eds, *One Step Over the Line: Toward a History of Women in the North American Wests* (Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2008); and Laura Woodworth-Ney, *Women in the American West* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2008).

## Defining Terms: Wilderness, West, and Frontier

It's important to be mindful of the connections and distinctions among the terms “west,” “wilderness,” and “frontier.” Each of these individual terms has been discussed and debated within scholarship and therefore has varying definitions and cultural meanings for different writers and audiences. Even the most well-known definition of wilderness provided by the Wilderness Act of 1964, “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (121), is highly contested and problematic given the removal of Native American and mountain people from their homelands in order to establish parks in the “wilderness.”<sup>3</sup> Some even take this concept of wilderness to a further degree, believing that wilderness is only wild space that has been untouched by man. This definition, however, is even more problematic in its logic because, as soon as an area is discovered and explored, it is touched and therefore can no longer be wilderness. What the critical discussions clearly show, however, is that differing degrees of wilderness exist, and just how “wild” an area must be in order to be labeled “wilderness” will always be debated.<sup>4</sup> In general, wilderness is accepted to be a location that maintains a certain amount of wildness, or a certain lack of civilization,<sup>5</sup> and the degrees of those elements may vary. The term “wilderness,” moreover, can refer to a wild space within any landscape, not just a wooded area. When I speak of wilderness, I refer to an area of land that may or may not be occupied but that consists of enough unoccupied or undeveloped space to cause people to view it as still having a wild or

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<sup>3</sup> See Susan R Schrepfer, *Nature's Alters: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: U P of Kansas, 2005) and Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) for more discussion on removal and loss of use rights in the establishment of parks.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, eds, *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1998), for an overview of the arguments about the definitions and meanings of wilderness.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout my dissertation, I use the term “civilization” without a modifier to denote “populated or urban areas in general” (“Civilization”). If I use it with a modifier, as in the phrase “European civilization,” I use it to mean “the culture, society, and way of life of a particular country, region, epoch, or group” (“Civilization”).

untamed character. And although the prairies and deserts are also wilderness spaces, I chose to narrow the texts in my study to the wooded wilderness.

America's geographical west as we know it today refers to the western portion of the United States, usually noted to be those states including and west of the Rocky Mountains and Mississippi River, but the physical delineation of what is considered the American west is contingent upon the historical time period. For my study, the west includes New York state in the 1700s in Cooper's text, West Virginia in the early 1800s in Rukeyser's text as she writes about the early exploration of the country, and Colorado, Wyoming, and California in the 1870s as they are explored in Isabella Bird's letters. It also just so happens that all of these western areas contained the wilderness and were considered at their specific points in history to be the frontier. In my study, the west, the wilderness, and the frontier are contained in the same physical space, although they refer to different cultural or historical aspects of that space.

The terms “wilderness,” “west,” and “frontier” are all a part of the mythos of the American westward expansion and therefore denote not only physical spaces but cultural ideologies that still hold sway over people's imaginations and understanding of America and its history. The word “frontier,” therefore, also has multiple and contested meanings throughout cultural and literary studies because the frontier is both a physical entity as well as a concept that has come to denote several American ideologies. Although, as Patricia A. Ross states, the frontier “is usually viewed as a distinct entity from wilderness” (2), the frontier can contain the wilderness, and, depending on the particular point in history, the edge of a physical wooded wilderness can be the frontier, as is the case with the frontier and wilderness in my chosen texts. Also, although today people may not think of land east of the Mississippi River as a “frontier,” in the nineteenth century the prevailing notion was that the absence of European settlements and

civilization on the land marked the beginning of a savage, untamed land, and this dividing line was labeled the frontier. The frontier, therefore, continually moved geographically westward as the wilderness was “conquered.”

Frederick Jackson Turner was one of the first to articulate the importance of the physical frontier and the west on the American imagination and became the biggest influence on frontier studies.<sup>6</sup> Through his 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Turner pieced together many of the ideas that were being formed concerning the meaning of the frontier in America. He defines the frontier as “the outer edge of the wave [of emigration] – the meeting point between savagery and civilization”<sup>7</sup> (19). To even further clarify, Turner explains America’s frontier in relation to Europe’s: “The American frontier is sharply distinguished from the European frontier – a fortified boundary line running through dense populations” (19). America’s frontier is located at the “hither edge of free land,” and was, according to Turner, treated in census reports “as the margin of that settlement which has a density of two or more to the square mile,” although the term itself, he asserts, is “elastic” and “does not need sharp definition” for his work’s purposes (20).

Turner set a precedent in looking at the frontier as a place where the “civilized” and the “savage” come into contact. He solidified the binary in the American imagination that posited the American man or pioneer against the wilderness, including the animals and people associated

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<sup>6</sup> There are numerous studies based off of Turner’s thesis, both supporting and dismantling Turner’s work. See the following small sample of texts, for instance, inspired by Turner’s thesis: Ray Allen Billington, ed, *The Frontier Thesis: Valid Interpretation of American History?* (Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger, 1977); Richard Hofstadter and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds, *Turner and the Sociology of the Frontier* (New York: Basic Books, 1968); and Richard W. Etulian, *Does the Frontier Experience Make America Exceptional?* (Boston: St. Martin’s, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Turner meant European civilization when he uses this term. According to Cynthia Stokes Brown, “The word ‘civilization’ apparently first appeared in a French book in the mid-eighteenth century (*L’Ami des hommes* (1756) by Victor de Riqueti . . .). Since then, it has had close associations with the West[ern world’s] sense of its own superiority” (“What is a Civilization, Anyway?”). Although in the early nineteenth century the term also came to denote cities or populated areas in general, Turner, like many of his time period, views civilization as something that the Native American people did not have. He and his contemporaries therefore use the term to refer to European culture, which they believed included more cultivated people, better government and art, etc., than the Native American or other non-European societies.



with the land, and his beliefs became commonly accepted by the American culture. Believing that the influence of the American frontier on the American character had been overlooked, he sought to explore and articulate its influence. The American that Turner believed the frontier experience created encompasses what we today still associate with rugged individualism and Manifest Destiny. According to Turner, the wildness of the frontier first caused the pioneer to revert back to a more primitive existence; however, pioneers created pockets of European civilization through hard work, perseverance, and the power to subdue and conquer nature. Those who followed settled into farming and other exploits that continued to overcome the inherent wildness of the frontier (20). Furthermore, because people had fewer resources and had to rely on themselves for securing basic needs, people became more resourceful and self-reliant, developing a can-do attitude and enterprising spirit that translated into an ability to tame the wilderness and carve out a place for themselves.<sup>8</sup> In Turner's words,

...to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; the dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom – these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (39-40)

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<sup>8</sup> The concept of rugged individualism rather than mutual cooperation still reigns supreme in the American mind even though historians have highlighted the communal efforts of pioneers and therefore show that Turner's ideas about frontier individualism are exaggerated. Mody C. Boatright, for instance, discusses the "principle of mutuality" on the frontier, which can especially be seen in the "pattern of western settlement," in which groups joined to secure their safety (45). Even after there were fewer dangers from raids, Boatright argues, group migration still was prominent, as sometimes even whole communities would migrate together in order to "enjoy a corporate life," which including "cooperative labor" to erect buildings, plow fields, and other activities to build a community (46-7).

Turner spurred on a mythology of America that still holds the American imagination. People like Herbert Hoover, who, in 1922, proclaimed that the American frontier was “the epic expression” of “rugged individualism” continued to use and propel the myth into future generations (qtd. in Boatright 44). Everett S. Lee points out, furthermore, that even though Turner's thesis, full of “meager” proof, now seems “too simple an explanation for such complexities as American democracy and American character,” the thesis still generates such “great intuitive appeal” that “few are willing to abandon it entirely” (66). Because the thesis promotes a can-do attitude and idea of limitless individual capability and incites other imaginative, although often exploitative, possibilities, the ideas of rugged individualism and Manifest Destiny continue to reign in American mythology and ideology in connection to wilderness and, today, often without that connection.<sup>9</sup> As Ross states, “There can never be a 'complete victory' over the American wilderness because it remains too much a part of the American imagination, too present in the continual formation of the American character. The idea of wilderness is too much a part of the American mythos to ever be fully conquered” (1). One only need think about car advertising today to see the continuance of the wilderness or frontier myth: the car, a main symbol of American freedom and potential, is unhindered by America's rugged landscape as it climbs and eventually rests upon the pinnacle of the mountain, and the explorer relishes in his ability to conquer wild nature as well as defy his supposed limits.

Turner's thesis propelled forward what one may call an American frontier or wilderness myth. These are in their essence the same myth, as both star a male, lone individual who ventures or retreats into the wilderness and exemplifies the rugged individualism that becomes a defining

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<sup>9</sup> The ideas have morphed from necessarily being connected to wilderness and frontier to simply being part and parcel of what it means to be American.

characteristic of the American (male) character.<sup>10</sup> Although the wilderness myth has taken on new meanings throughout the centuries, as Slotkin shows, it is still at its heart the first version of the frontier myth:

In American mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather they were those who . . . tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness—rogues, adventurers, and land-boomers; the Indian fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers, and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness, the settlers who came after, suffering hardship and Indian warfare for the sake of a sacred mission or a simple desire for land; and the Indians themselves, both as they were and as they appeared to the settlers, for whom they were the special demonic personification of the American wilderness. Their concerns, their hopes, their terrors, their violence, and their justifications of themselves, as expressed in literature, are the foundation stones of the mythology that informs our history. (4)

Thus although we today adhere to a “myth of the frontier,” that myth began in the earliest years of settlers seeking to conquer the wilderness—the myth of the frontier is just a newer version of the wilderness myth, as both, at their core, posit America as a space of unlimited opportunity for the rugged individual strong and brave enough to venture out and take what he wants from the

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<sup>10</sup> The main difference in the myths, according to Patricia Ross, is that the wilderness myth has morphed and is now usually understood in terms of a pastoral retreat: the wilderness is a panacea for social ills, and the sojourner makes his way to this peaceful realm to find rest and solitude (2). It makes sense that, with the “closing” of the frontier and early twentieth century’s changing focus toward land conservation and preservation, new myths pertaining to wilderness would develop—instead of a conqueror of nature, the newest player in the wilderness myth tries to expand one’s sense of self, or to conquer the self, and the “frontier” has become human ability and potential: the solitude in the wilderness rejuvenates and strengthens the individual, who can then go back into society as a better man and, subsequently, better society.

land. For my purposes, therefore, wilderness myth and frontier myth are interchangeable.<sup>11</sup>

Richard Slotkin in *Gunfighter Nation* provides a solid yet succinct definition of “myth” that is fitting with this term's usage as it pertains to this study: “Myths are stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness-- with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain” (5). He also clarifies that the “Myth of the Frontier is our oldest and most characteristic [American] myth, expressed in a body of literature, folklore, ritual, historiography, and polemics produced over a period of three centuries” (10). As aforementioned, in the wilderness myth, the individual man claims the potential and limitless opportunity associated with the American land and spurs on the creation of a nation through his exploits. American wilderness may be dangerous, but the frontiersman goes before European civilization, taming the forests and subduing the Native American in order to make the land habitable for future pioneers. Eventually known as the American Adam, the rugged individual man of the wilderness is content in a land that is as beautiful as Eden but full of danger, whether that danger come from the wild animals or the “wild” Native American inhabitants.

As Slotkin and others show, the key player in the frontier myth is the rugged individual described by Turner. For this man to conquer the evils of the forest, violence was necessary, but that violence is rarely discussed in this myth today.<sup>12</sup> Because the frontiersman destroyed both

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<sup>11</sup> I join a list of scholars who yolk together the wilderness and frontier myth, including Richard Slotkin, Annette Kolodny, William Cronin, and Marvin Henberg.

<sup>12</sup> According to Slotkin, each time period of historical development for the wilderness myth had in common the fact that “the Myth represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence*” (*Gunfighter Nation* 12). To justify the violence, another myth, “the myth of 'savage war,’” which “blames Native Americans as instigators of a war of extermination,” was developed, which made the Native American people a “scapegoat” for that which was morally reprehensible in the dominant culture (12-13). The dominant culture displaced their issues with class onto the Native American people, thus making it appear that class struggle was unnecessary once all of the land and resources were out of the Native Americans' possession, and they also used this myth within a myth to justify genocide or removal of and war and discrimination against the Native

the Native American people and the land in his battle for domination, the degradation of nature incited a new myth, the “saving myth of 'the solitary, Indian-like hunter of the deep woods” who “suggests at least the possibility of harmonious intimacy between the human and the natural, free of the threat of violation” (Kolodny 5). With the growing need for wilderness conservation throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the Native American people's removal from the wilderness, therefore, the frontiersman morphs into a peaceful sojourner who has Native American sensibilities toward the land. Many figures embody the solitary wilderness adventurer, beginning with Daniel Boone and including Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, and Natty Bumppo (Kolodny 5). And this figure comes to define the American Adam that Turner, perhaps the biggest influence on the frontier myth, helped to solidify in the American imagination.

In recent years, as scholars have expanded the way they look at the frontier and history and as we have come to see how privileging a frontier mythos as well as an Anglo-Saxon version of American development obscures much of history, a paradigm shift has occurred in the way historians, literary critics, and others talk about the frontier. “Frontier” in many cases is now replaced with another term, “contact zone.” Mary Louise Pratt's term “contact zone” invites a new way of looking at the frontier. A “contact zone,” according to Pratt, is a “space of imperial encounters, a space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (8). Far from Turner's definition of the frontier as a space where the civilized and savage meet, which dichotomizes people into stereotypical roles as it privileges the white “civilizer,” “contact zone” does not privilege one race. Pratt's clarifies that

“contact zone” ... is often synonymous with “colonial frontier.” But while the latter term is grounded within a European expansionist perspective (the frontier is

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American people, for through the myth they become “the only obstacle of the creation of a perfect republic” (13).

a frontier only with respect to Europe), “contact zone” shifts the center of gravity and the point of view. It invokes the space and time where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect. The term “contact” foregrounds the interactive, improvisational dimensions of imperial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and “travelees,” not in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, and often within asymmetrical relations of power. (8)

By challenging the dominant, Turnerian view of frontier with new understandings of the dynamic power relations of the frontier, we are able to read texts like Cooper's and Bird's in such a way as to continue to complicate and counter Turner's frontier concept. I therefore pursue my study with an understanding of Turner's ideas and how they have been challenged by other critics who question the assumptions regarding gender and race that underpin conventional notions of the frontier and wilderness myths. Cooper and his character Elizabeth Temple and author Isabella Bird in my chosen nineteenth-century texts exhibit a privileged white perspective of the frontier: the Native American is at heart a savage and part of a doomed race, and the land a gift from God to be used by those willing and able to “properly” develop and cultivate it. In keeping with Pratt's idea of the frontier as a contact zone, however, I view the frontier or wilderness in these texts not as a site where a civilized people collide with a wild and uncivilized land and peoples but rather where peoples are “co-present” and where power relations are always fluctuating. Reading the texts through this lens illuminates more clearly the ideologies undergirding Cooper's and Bird's writing so that the “other's” story or other sides of history can be more clearly

discerned, even through what is left unsaid. A portion of my twentieth-century text, Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, also focuses on America's history but this time through the understanding of the ways that history has been skewed by the wilderness myth; Rukeyser, therefore, works to bring out the hidden history of a particular place, Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, which has been obscured and erased from the dominant historical narratives.

Whereas Cooper and Bird were fully embedded in the dominant ideologies that undergirded and developed Turner's frontier thesis, Rukeyser can be aligned with a group of people who saw the one-sided perspective to Turner's thesis and sought alternative understandings of America's development. Although Turner's frontier thesis became the dominating theory of the west's expansion, its popularity had periods of waning and rising, and, during those periods of waning, it was challenged on several fronts. Whether Rukeyser had a particular investment in countering the Turner thesis or not, her presentation of history in *The Book of the Dead* aligns her with those critics seeking to debunk his work in the 1930s Depression era. During this time, according to Etulain, Turner's popularity especially decreased as people questioned whether the theory's "exceptionalist themes" could continue to stand their ground against such a struggling and broken society (10). Thus it makes sense that new texts, such as documentaries, were created to document the present America and seek to define it during one of the nation's most difficult eras. In specific response to Turner, alternative theories and emphases arose, such as Herbert Eugene Bolton's focus on "what he called the 'Spanish Borderlands'" and Walter Prescott Webb's work in the 1930s that called attention to the plains, which he felt were overlooked by Turner in his interpretation of the frontier (Etulain 10). Literary writers also sought to redefine America by envisioning a new America as they also exposed the falsity of the American myths articulated in Turner's work. Muriel Rukeyser is one such writer.

Rukeyser revisions history on the American frontier, particularly in the wilderness of the 1700s in West Virginia, showing another side to history that was for so long obscured by a myopic view of the past centered on rugged individualism and Anglo-Saxon Manifest Destiny. Her work challenges the typical version of history to show the potential for present-day change that occurs through the recognition of America's myths as fabrications and the celebration of the workers' and minorities' contributions to America's development.<sup>13</sup>

### Women's Removal From the Wilderness

Turner's thesis, we must remember, pieced together into one powerful document many ideas about America that were already being perpetuated in society, thus further explaining its popularity: it struck a chord with Americans because these ideas were already being circulated throughout previous decades through literature like the biography of Daniel Boone, which helped create the idea of the solitary woodsman, or the letters of Crèvecoeur, which showed the land as an Eden awaiting an Adam to cultivate it. Significantly, these foundational texts largely exclude women's experiences, a pattern Turner followed in his influential thesis. Additionally, if women were represented in the wilderness at all before the nineteenth century, that representation was usually negative, such as in the captivity narratives, thus also partially explaining their exclusion from any wilderness myth. As Kolodny points out, Boone's narrative, with the presence of his wife largely edited out, was published in conjunction with a captivity narrative of Mrs. Francis Scott, giving the indication that if a woman were in the wilderness it was not because she had a choice (29). Despite the few captivity narratives that resulted in the woman captive adopting a positive view of the wilderness and the Native American life, the public was consistently taught

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<sup>13</sup> The 1970s brought much more criticism, so that, by the 1990s, many stated Turner's thesis to be dead (Etulain 11). According to Etulain, the critics in the 70s began to point out weaknesses, such as the lack of credit given to racial and ethnic minorities and women in how gender and class shaped the West (11).



through literature and other media that women did not belong in the wild. Wilderness for a woman was thus a prison, full of evil Native Americans, where there was little to no hope of escape, and, if she did escape, she, unlike the hearty man of the woods, was ill equipped to survive (Kolodny 30). As representatives of European civilization and of what is pure and good in society, women could have no part of the wilderness and thus the wilderness myth.

But, as the history of Boone's narrative shows, women were very present in the wilderness, even if their presence was too often edited out of the final version of stories or if the women themselves were framed according to society's standards rather than as they may have actually existed. In the case of the popular Daniel Boone narrative, one of the most influential in terms of the creation of the American Adam, Rebecca Boone, Boone's wife who was very much present in the wilderness with him, was rarely mentioned in the narrative. Moreover, if she was mentioned, editors framed her as they wanted to depict her, as a very feminine woman and helpmate to her husband who remains in the background.<sup>14</sup> However, clearly not all women felt that the wilderness was off limits to them despite the potential dangers, for women like Boone's wife were everywhere, following their husbands into the wilderness and making their lives there. The historical reality is that women were present, as evidenced by the accounts, diaries, and other documents recovered from the archives of libraries within the last forty years, and we can assume that many women enjoyed at least aspects of the wilderness, although the documentation of this reality is not as readily available as the negative portrayal of women in the wilderness provided by the popular captivity narratives.<sup>15</sup> Women certainly were not opposed to being

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<sup>14</sup> See Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1800*, (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984) 81-9, for a full discussion of different editors' depictions of Rebecca Boone and her overall general obscurity in the Boone narratives. Kolodny also notes that even Boone was shaped through editing: John Trumbull, who created the most popular account of Boone's narrative in 1786, edited the story to present Boone "as a man of the wilderness rather than the settlements," thus helping to create the mythic man of the wilderness from the historical figure (Kolodny 29)

<sup>15</sup> Women continued to use the captivity narratives to frame their wilderness experiences. Whereas "the white male

adventurous, as they showed themselves willing and capable of making their homes in the middle of dangerous country.<sup>16</sup>

#### Four Reactions to Wilderness: Women Respond

Women's reaction to the wilderness and its myth is wide and varied, depending on time period as well as other factors, such as the woman's class and race, and whether the woman is a character or author. I do not claim that the following list of ways women respond in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is exhaustive because there is so much to explore concerning this topic in both history and literature. The construction of the west, wilderness, or frontier as masculine incites women writers, characters, or explorers to respond by reimagining the wilderness, embracing the wilderness myth or aspects of the myth for themselves, focusing instead on the domestic realm, or deconstructing the created myth to show its inherent untruths.

As Kolodny shows, a small number of women responded to the myth of the wilderness by focusing instead on the domestic realm specifically within the west. The overwhelming number of domestic fiction novels in the mid-nineteenth-century certainly attests to the popularity of the genre, and some writers utilized the domestic specifically within a western landscape in order to mold a better American man. To counter the man of the wilderness who shuns family and instead ventures off to be on his own, these writers showed through their works that an honorable American man takes care of his family and his home. Kolodny explores

E.D.E.N. Southworth's 1856 *India: the Pearl of Pearl River* and Maria Susanna Cummins' 1857

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imagination continued to project, ever westward, its endless dream of rediscovering Paradise . . . the white female continued to encounter only the implacable and hostile American wilderness . . .” (Kolodny 31).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Fries Ellet's *The Pioneer Women of the West*, which provides sketches of sixty-one women who traveled west with husbands or other family. Ellet notes in her “Preface” that all but two of her sketches “were prepared from private records, furnished by relatives or friends, and in two or three instances by the subjects” (vi). One of her inspirations for writing her text was the hope that, through the testimony of individuals who experienced “forest life” or that of their families, “it was not yet too late to save from oblivion much that would be the more interesting and valuable, as the memory of those primitive times receded into the past” (n. pag. - vi).

novel *Mabel Vaughan* to specifically show how their works “reconstitut[e]” the “American Adam” (203). As Kolodny states, “If, as R. W. B. Lewis argues, the American fiction written by men often concerns itself with ‘an Adamic person . . . at home only in the presence of nature and God,’ the fiction composed by nineteenth-century American women [who wrote the western relocation novels] stubbornly returned that figure to the human community” (203). One may say that these writers sought to create a new American myth to replace that of the forming wilderness myth by challenging the growing accepted and purported view of manhood. Instead of a Natty Bumppo or Daniel Boone, Kolodny notes, the simply-dressed woodsman with gun and game slung over his shoulder or his horse in these novels is actually “a pioneer farmer, lawyer, rising politician, and most important of all, a man” whose family is his top priority (203). The number of these responses to wilderness and the wilderness myth, however, is relatively small, as these responses are a part of “a sub-genre of western relocation novels that emerged between 1850 and 1860” (Kolodny 223). In general, more women either accepted their place in the domestic realm, therefore ignoring the wilderness, or sought to find a way to include themselves in the prevailing mythology of wilderness, rather than challenge the race and class hierarchies and ideologies of manhood that the wilderness myth promoted.

A more prevalent response that women had to the wilderness and the wilderness myth was to reimagine and change the wilderness, making it a place for themselves. Often this change meant domesticating a section of the wilderness, especially through a garden. Kolodny points out, for example, that although many women found it difficult to embrace a wooded wilderness scape, which had long been associated with terror and violence of Native American attacks and captivities, the open and expansive glory of the prairie enticed them. Women felt more comfortable with the “open, parklike prairies of the middle and southwest” because they were

reminiscent of the “spaces that were truly and unequivocally theirs: the home and the small cultivated gardens of their own making” (6). Women therefore focused on making the prairies their home. As woods were replaced with grassland, the prairie became a potential home. As Kolodny states, “The prairie...spoke to women's fantasies. And there, with an assurance she had not previously commanded, the new self-conscious American Eve proclaimed a paradise in which the garden and the home were one” (6).

Although Kolodny’s work focuses on the ways that women imagined the prairies, her observations that women embraced the prairie wilderness are also evidenced, although not to the same degree, in some literature in which women occupy a wooded wilderness.<sup>17</sup> Chapter 1 of my study focuses on Elizabeth Temple in *The Pioneers*, for example, who seeks to cultivate the beauty of Templeton and imagines the possibility for a garden. The white, upper-class, educated lady shows herself capable of belonging on the frontier, where she can help convert the wilderness into a middle space, or a garden. Elizabeth is not interested in completely destroying the wilderness and replacing it with society, although she is interested in making her town habitable while still keeping its beauty. She laments, therefore, the ugliness of the chopped down trees that she sees upon her arrival from the east. And while the men of the town extravagantly waste nature's resources, by the time the story ends, Elizabeth has learned from the woodsman

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<sup>17</sup> The idea of women embracing the wilderness as home is interestingly seen, in my experience, most often with texts that highlight interracial relationships between white women and Native American men. We see this acceptance of the wooded wilderness as home, although not necessarily garden, for example, in Mary Jemison's 1823 published account of her captivity. Jameson was taken captive sometime around the age of fifteen yet chose to adopt the Native Americans as her people, marrying a Native American and living out her life as one of the tribe. We also see the embracing of wilderness as home, although not in as much detail, in fiction like Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie, or Early Times in the Massachusetts*. In this novel, a young white woman, Faith Leslie, the sister of the main character of the novel, is captured by Native Americans as a young woman and eventually marries into the tribe. When she is reunited with her sister and forced by trickery to return to the white settlement, Faith is miserable, for her home has become where her adoptive people are, in the wilderness. Although she does not marry a Native American, the white character Catherine Montour from Ann Sophia Stephens' *Mary Derwent* proudly lives in harmony with the Shawnee people and feels a freedom she is unable to feel outside of the wilderness. Interestingly, although Elizabeth Temple in *The Pioneers* also does not marry a Native American, for most of the novel Cooper obscures Oliver Edwards' true identity and gives the impression that he is Native American. Elizabeth also eventually adopts a Native American sensibility toward the land.

Natty Bumppo and the Native American Mohegan, adopting a similar conservation ethic that is essential for any wilderness preservation. Elizabeth highlights Kolodny's point concerning many women in nineteenth-century: "...women could – with perhaps greater equanimity than men-- accept [the wilderness's] disappearance. What women were apparently less willing to accept was the single-minded transformation of nature into wealth without any regard for the inherent beauty of the place" (7). Thus, although Elizabeth realizes that the wilderness will change, she always seeks to protect and preserve the beauty of the land as well as its resources.

Chapter 1, "James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers*: Elizabeth Temple as Ideal Woman of the American Wilderness," explores an upper-class white woman's potential relationship to the wilderness in the early nineteenth century, but the novel is also important because it includes the first appearance of Natty Bumppo, now the well-known iconic figure of male sojourner in the wilderness modeled off of Daniel Boone and other historical precursors. Although Cooper is most well known for his creation of Bumppo, the critical attention to this figure has overshadowed other characters like Elizabeth who represent other developing ideas during the 1823 novel's publication. In particular, she represents an ideal of American womanhood through a femininity that is predicated on interaction with the wilderness, as can be seen through her ability to balance the domestic with an active, outdoors engagement. As aforementioned, she also desires to create a middle space out of wilderness while at the same time conserving and protecting the beauty and the fecundity of the land; her response, however, differs from that of Bumppo. Elizabeth is practical, for she understands that the wilderness will be changed and converted and tamed through the continued push west and progress of Templeton, but Bumppo removes himself from Templeton, which is developing the wilderness, and instead moves further westward into the untamed landscapes. Elizabeth also balances her understanding that the

wilderness will be developed with the fact that conserving its beauty and resources is imperative to a healthy community. As one who chooses to remain, Elizabeth cannot be a part of the wilderness myth that Bumpo perpetuates through his continual removal west. Thus she is excluded from becoming a part of that white, male wilderness myth yet shows how some women did realistically respond to wilderness by imagining it as a potential home and, consequently, by taking a part of that wilderness and turning it into a cultivated garden.

Another response women had to the wilderness and its developing masculine myth was to embrace aspects of the myth that they could make their own while simultaneously adhering to set standards of feminine identity so that their wilderness adventures would be deemed acceptable, although perhaps eccentric. Elizabeth's response to the wilderness adheres not only to the first but also to this second way that many women responded to the physical and social landscape of the nineteenth century. Elizabeth's active engagement with the outdoors never masculinizes her, for example, although her activities, such as daring horsemanship, walking in the woods without a chaperone, and making bets at the local turkey shoot, are viewed as out of place by men around her. On the other hand, because Elizabeth is otherwise pious, pure, and modest, the more daring behaviors in the wilderness are overlooked.

The women who respond to the wilderness through a careful negotiation between their own desires and conventions for standard femininity challenge the exclusivity of the myth of the male rugged individual in the wilderness while still upholding much of the myth. Often they embrace aspects of the adventure and individualistic spirit yet utilize standards of femininity to frame their wilderness adventure and make it acceptable. Chapter 2, "Travellers are privileged to do the most improper things with perfect propriety, that is one charm of travelling.' : Isabella Bird: Rocky Mountain Traveler, Mountaineer, Adventurer, Lady," highlights how Bird depicts herself

as weak and helpless during a mountain climbing venture and credits her masculine guide Mountain Jim as the reason she is able scale the mountain. Thus, to achieve her own desires, Bird maintains an appearance of upstanding femininity, underscoring this depiction with her guide, who represents the correct masculinity appropriate for wilderness adventure.<sup>18</sup>

Women like Bird do not want to domesticate or change the wilderness; in fact, they revel in the wild. Rather, they capitalize on the inherent freedom associated with the wilderness to break away from society's expectations on their personhood. Often women who already have some sort of power or privilege in society, such as middle to upper-class white women with social prestige, money, and the ability to travel, are those who respond to the wilderness myth by adopting what aspects of it that they can or by testing the boundaries of accepted femininity through wilderness adventure. It is this type of response to wilderness that resulted in the first all-women mountaineering clubs in the 1800s, clear indication that women were ready to claim the freedom, adventure, and rugged individualism of the masculine myth of the wilderness, too.

Ultimately, however, although Elizabeth Temple and Isabella Bird test boundaries and embrace aspects of wilderness adventure, they still uphold the white, masculine myth of the wilderness and, with it, the “isms” inherent in the structure imposed upon the social order through the myth's general acceptance. The ideas that the white man discovered America, Native Americans and other non-Caucasian peoples were not as worthy of the land and its resources, and the white male explorer built and defined America all undergird the concept of Manifest

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<sup>18</sup> This response to the American wilderness can especially be seen in women's travelogues or travel narratives. See, for example, Karen Morin, *Frontiers of Femininity: A New Historical Geography of the Nineteenth-Century American West* (New York: Syracuse UP, 2008), for a great overview of several women travelers, including Bird, who utilize conventional notions of gender in order to gain access to outdoor spaces. See also Lila Harper, *Solitary Travelers: Nineteenth-Century Women's Travel Narratives and the Scientific Vocation*. (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2001), who even further expands this idea of negotiating gender and wilderness as she explores women like Mary Wollstonecraft, Isabella Bird, Harriet Martineau, and Mary Kingsley, who wanted in some way to enter into the male-dominated field of natural history and had to negotiate their own femininity with their outdoor work in order to try to break into a field in which men refused to embrace their contributions.

Destiny and the subsequent injustices done in its name. As Reginald Horsman articulates, by 1850 the Anglo-Saxon, white male driven concept of Manifest Destiny and its inherent racism and classism was in full force in the United States: “From their own successful past as Puritan colonists, Revolutionary patriots, conquerors of a wilderness, and creators of an immense material prosperity, the Americans had evidence plain before them that they were a chosen people” (5). This “racial ideology” that argued that Caucasians were superior to other races and thus more deserving of the land and its resources, Horsman points out, “could be used to force new immigrants to conform to the prevailing political, economic, and social system, and it could also be used to justify the sufferings or deaths of blacks, Indians, or Mexicans. Feelings of guilt could be assuaged by assumptions of historical and scientific inevitability” (5-6). The idea that America had a “superior” race that was “destined to shape the destiny of much of the world” and that other races were “doomed to permanent subordination or extinction” was in full force by the 1850s (6). Hints of this ideology appear in both Elizabeth Temple's and Isabella Bird's interactions with and discussion of the Native Americans, as they both, consciously or unconsciously, play into classist and racist ideas of Manifest Destiny and the wilderness myth.

However, not all women responded to the wilderness and the myths used to justify its ownership by integrating themselves into the overarching power structure. Women also sought to undermine the myths to show their inherent untruths about America's development. Part of this undermining consists of highlighting the people, including the minority, the slave, the lower-class worker, and women, whose contributions to history and whose presence are minimized or obscured through the perpetuation of and adherence to the concepts of a white, male, masculine Manifest Destiny. Many women and men of the nineteenth century expose the destruction of the Native Americans, the degradation of the slave, and the misuse of nature throughout the



nineteenth century in their writing, therefore countering the ideology of Manifest Destiny by highlighting the consequences of such selfishness and unchecked power. Women writers like Helen Hunt Jackson or Lydia Sigourney, for instance, focused their energies on highlighting the reality of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy and whose connections with wilderness were radically different than those of the white upper class because they were being displaced from, or killed or enslaved in the same space touted as a place of freedom.

Another part of undermining the myth of the wilderness and its subsequent ideologies and “isms” is to rewrite history, or to write the “other” back into history in order to counter the myth's falseness. The wilderness was not, in fact, void of human beings when the first white men “discovered” America. Women were not, in fact, left at home in the east as their husbands and male relatives headed west to settle the land for them. Even the iconic lone trapper of the eighteenth century was often not alone, as it behooved men to travel in small groups for their safety. Wilderness discovery and travel was, in fact, often a communal affair which included both genders and all classes and races. Letters, diaries, and other correspondence and documents indicate this historical reality, but the pervasive power of the wilderness myth obscured the truth. Often women or minorities attempting to resurrect the truth were ignored. Leckie and Parezo, for example, show in *Women Intellectuals Revisioning the American West* that women historians and anthropologists of the 1920s, such as Annie Abel, Alice Marriot, Ruth Underhill, and others, countered Turner's thesis by writing about the west's Native American people, but because they were women and sympathetic to the Native Americans, these authors were ignored and their works undervalued. (Armitage “Are We There Yet?” 70).

Chapter three, “‘There is also, in any history, the buried, the wasted, and the lost’: Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*: Uncovering and Recovering History in the American

Wilderness,” argues that Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* exemplifies this reexamination of American history and inclusion of the “other” into history, an inclusion that undermines the wilderness myth centered on white men’s version of history. Like the women historians and anthropologists who try to write the Native American back into the story of America, Rukeyser uncovers the stories obscured or lost because of the blind acceptance of the dominant historical narratives. But Rukeyser's text does more: as a multi-layered, trans-historical text, *The Book of the Dead* challenges the reader to uncover a more accurate communal history of American development in the wilderness, in which the servant, the slave, and the Native American were all integral; the work also brings the reader to the present-day to show how a history of covered-over oppression and exploitation of the “other” culminates in the present degradation of both worker and land in Gauley, West Virginia, the site of a work-induced silicosis tragedy. By writing about several women affected by the tragedy, Rukeyser posits women as advocates for justice, as capable of wielding the strength to create change as they honor loved ones. Women can protect future workers and change history by making sure that their and others' voices are heard. Finally, Rukeyser highlights that a harmonious, symbiotic relationship between the worker and nature is possible, a relationship that was once only possible for the sojourning white male.

## Conclusion

With a keen awareness of the many voices I leave out, my study examines three, white, middle to upper-class women's responses to wilderness, and, interestingly, one of these women is a character created by a man. My list of ways that women responded to wilderness is in no way exhaustive or representative of all women but rather a starting point to understanding the multi-layered responses that middle to upper-class, white women had to both the physical and social

landscapes of their times. In each case the women could not escape the dominant ideologies and myths of their time but had to decide how to navigate them— or how to powerfully reject them and present something new for people to follow.

Elizabeth Temple presents America of the 1820s, which already associated men with the outdoors and women with the home, with the idea that women can be strong, courageous, and active in the rugged outdoors and yet still be fully feminine in their chastity, modesty, and piety. Furthermore, her wilderness ethic suggests that women do have an important role to play in a wilderness that America had so far relegated to men's adventures and exploits. Yet Elizabeth, like Isabella Bird about fifty years later on a frontier further west, does not seek so much to undermine the racism and classism spurred on by the masculine myth of the wilderness but to instead embrace the positive aspects of that myth, such as independence and freedom, for herself.

Travel writer Isabella Bird's 1879 text highlights the nineteenth-century woman's delicate balancing act between propriety and desire to gain freedom and individualism in the wilderness. Bird's text illuminates her careful negotiation between the social expectations of middle to upper-class femininity and her own desires for wilderness adventure. Bird capitalizes on her real or supposed illness as a socially acceptable way to travel and thus, unlike many women of her time, actually makes it to the wilderness, but she must always carefully present herself in her letters as fully feminine, as respected by men, as weak and helpless in light of men's strength, and as pure and pious even in the wilderness, which had the reputation of masculinizing ladies. But as aforementioned, Bird also does not seek to undermine or destroy the masculine wilderness myth through her adventures but rather to garner the freedom and individualism that the wilderness supposedly embodies. The other women she discusses, moreover, clarify that her ability to travel, explore the wilderness, and shun society for solitude are all rare feats for women of her time and

enjoyed mostly by women of her class if enjoyed by women at all.

Finally, Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, written about fifty years after Bird's *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, contains a woman's revision of history which rejects and undermines the white male masculine myth of the wilderness by including in its historical narrative of wilderness exploration and America's development those "othered" by the dominate myth. Rukeyser thus joins with other men and women who reject the masculine wilderness myth made so popular by Turner's thesis and seek to replace it with a fuller, more accurate narrative. More than this, however, Rukeyser's text posits women as activists and key players in America's future, shows how past exploitation and degradation of the land and people affects the present, and looks to the future, inciting the hope and idea that people can work in harmony with rather than dominate nature, and that people of different races and genders will not only be treated equitably but also respected for their past, present, and future contributions to America.

Each woman character, traveler, or author in my study presents another response to the wooded wilderness and wilderness myth, allowing us to begin to piece together some of the ways that women responded to the physical space as well as the social ramifications of a perpetuating myth that relegates that space only to white men. Although such a small focused sample will necessarily leave unexplored many other women's responses, especially those responses to wilderness by women of color and women of other classes, my hope is that this study can be a starting point to those other avenues of inquiry. As we continue to add more women's voices to the study of women and the wilderness in literary studies, I believe we will continue to add to the ways that women negotiated their own race, class, and gender with their own desires for how they wanted to interact with the wilderness.

## James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers*:

### Elizabeth Temple as Ideal Woman of the American Wilderness

#### Historical Background and Thesis

European women generally had a rocky relationship with the American wilderness before the nineteenth century. As a part of often-struggling colonies, women in the 1600s and 1700s suffered from the hardships of the New World and realized with their fellow men that the land could often be brutal and unfavorable, rather than the Eden they were sometimes led to believe they were going to inhabit. The wilderness outside of their colonies was full of real, potential dangers, including wild beasts and sometimes hostile Native Americans that kept them from venturing into the woods for pleasure, adventure, or any other unnecessary reason. The first steps to taming the wilderness would be left to the men who ventured into the wilds to hunt, trap, use its other resources, or trade with the Native American people. These men would inspire the future myth of the wilderness, and women would become more and more associated with the home. If women did enter the wilderness and write about their experience, it was often because they were taken captive by Native Americans and somehow were able to survive the ordeal.

With the generally negative portrayal of women in the wilderness before the nineteenth century, positive depictions are especially important to take note of when they occur early in the nineteenth century, as they mark changing attitudes and potential for women in America. A text like James Fenimore Cooper's 1823 *The Pioneers*, which seeks to tell a story about a European settlement in New York State between 1793 and 1794, makes an argument for women's relationship to wilderness in the present even as it looks to the past, to the earlier pioneers, to tell

its story. In this story there are no female characters being held captive in the wilderness, nor any famines or other major hardships that the first settlers to America faced; instead, Cooper presents the reader with a fecund nature and a peaceful settlement, to which comes a very active, adventurous young lady named Elizabeth Temple who just finished school in the east and, as the daughter of the settlement's leader, is coming to take her place in her father's house. Despite her domestic duties, she still finds the time to enjoy the outdoors as fully as possible through walks, canoe rides, horseback riding, and pigeon shoots, thereby challenging the growing concept of separate spheres for men and women and showing that women also belong in the outdoors. As this chapter will show, Elizabeth represents ideas about what American femininity could be—active and engaged with the outdoors yet pure and pious and still connected to the domestic realm. Although she has largely been overlooked in criticism, her character is worthy of serious study not only because she represents a potential for a particularly American femininity, as an “American Eve” taking her rightful place in the wilderness, but also because she plays an integral role in the novel's developing plot and promotion of a conservation wilderness ethic.

Elizabeth Temple has been largely overlooked as a subject for serious study because her character, as well as most others, has been pushed aside in order to focus on another character in the novel, Natty Bumppo. As James Fenimore Cooper once hypothesized, Natty Bumppo, also known as the Deerslayer, Hawkeye, and Leatherstocking, is Cooper's enduring legacy as a writer. Interestingly, people are often more familiar with the name of Natty Bumppo or Leatherstocking than that of Cooper his creator. Bumppo has remained a part of the American imagination because he, along with figures like Daniel Boone, Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed, and John Wayne, represent a myth of the American frontier defined by Manifest Destiny, freedom, autonomy, natural law, and democracy, a myth that radiates forth a purportedly all-inclusive hope

and belief in future progress and individual freedom yet most often excludes from its direct participation people of color and women.<sup>19</sup>

Bumppo originated in Cooper's popular series collectively entitled *The Leatherstocking Tales*, a series of five novels in which Bumppo is the linking character. The series as a whole tells a story of westward expansion and colonization from 1740 to 1804, as it is experienced in the life of Bumppo from the age of a young man to his elderly years. The series was popular in its time period, and still today literary critics continue to uphold Bumppo's popularity. Yet the attention given to this character is often to the detriment of other characters, especially female characters, who could add complexity to the reading and meaning of Cooper's works. Until the past thirty years, criticism on Bumppo, especially using a mythological focus, has dominated discussion of Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. As William P. Kelly points out, "Literary critics and cultural historians have both recognized and augmented the iconographic character of the *Tales* by describing the series as a repository of a national mythos. Natty's flight from civilization and his bond with the pristine wilderness are emblematic, we have repeatedly been told, of the Adamic longing which distinguishes and informs our cultural perspective" (vi).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cawelti provides an excellent summary of the myth, quoted here at length: "The original American myth of the frontier, as many scholars have shown, originated with the Puritan errand into the wilderness' to bring light and Calvinist Christianity into the heathen darkness. This myth was transformed into the epic of the pioneers bringing law and order to a savage land. During the nineteenth century, this myth developed a further set of meanings which had dire consequences for the future. In this version of the frontier myth, the romantic ideology of nature as a source of regeneration and rebirth, became perverted into a myth of the frontier as creating an epic moment in modern history where civilized man once again encountered his savage and barbarian roots and, by engaging in savage violence, recovered the original potency which he had lost in the process of civilization. In the later nineteenth century, this myth of 'regeneration through violence' became in Theodore Roosevelt's version of the 'Winning of the West,' a return to Anglo-Saxon roots, and it can be further traced into the twentieth-century nightmare of the American quest for regeneration and the recovery of lost world power through the invasion of Asia and South America" (157-8).

<sup>20</sup> For more discussion on Cooper and the national myth, or readings of Bumppo through a mythopoetic lens, see D.H. Lawrence, (who is credited with the beginning of this type of criticism) in D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: The Viking P, 1961); Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960); R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1955); Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition* (New York: Doubleday, 1957); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957); and Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1973).

*The Pioneers*, Cooper's first written tale of the Leatherstocking series, introduces the character Bumpo, whose departure westward at the novel's end is the foundation for his mythical status. *The Pioneers* falls as number four in terms of the overall chronology of The Leatherstocking Tales, and Bumpo is not a main character in the story, but, perhaps because of Bumpo's initial popularity in the novel, he incited and became the leading character in future narratives. In this first tale, Bumpo fights for his “natural” or “squatter's” right to live and hunt in the woods that Marmaduke Temple, the local town's founder, owns. The elderly Bumpo lives with his Native friend Mohegan, the last Delaware of his tribe during most of the novel, but after Mohegan dies, Bumpo heads west hoping for a more solitary life in a land of untrammelled beauty and plentiful game, unlike Templeton, where settlers have destroyed the beauty and overused the resources. The ending solidifies Bumpo as a mythical figure; he represents a desire to return to a more primitive existence, or a rejection of societal development and progress; yet, at the same time, his departure into the west's less inhabited and wilder terrain paradoxically opens this wilderness to even more European civilization that, as the story shows, will destroy both the land and the Native American people who inhabit it.<sup>21</sup>

The overwhelming critical focus on Bumpo in *The Pioneers* is a problem because it limits critical interpretations that other characters, such as the heroine Elizabeth Temple and hero Oliver Edwards, make possible.<sup>22</sup> Gladsky, for example, asserts that critical interest in Bumpo,

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<sup>21</sup> The running away from civilization and its paradoxical result of bringing civilization into the wilderness is an “anti-myth,” according to Calweti. This anti-myth has continued in literature: “...Cooper's Leatherstocking is one of those typical American heroes who seeks himself where alone he can find himself—away from civilization in the deep forests (Leatherstocking), or in sleep (Rip), at Walden Pond (Thoreau), on the great river (Huck), or the road (Walt Whitman-Jack Kerouac), or, in desperate finality, in the sea (Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*). These are visions of the isolated individual who can never get far enough from civilization, and Cooper's Natty Bumpo – childless as he was – was their progenitor (158-9).

<sup>22</sup> Making Bumpo the apex of meaning of all the tales mistakenly assumes that he was a character meant to take precedence in *The Pioneers*. Critics' general statements about the Leatherstocking series further skew and obscure the importance of other characters within *The Pioneers* and hinder nuanced readings of female characters within other Leatherstocking Tales by missing their complexity and importance in the novels. Enda L. Steeves, in “No



rather than Cooper's original vision for the character, created his greatness and that *The Pioneers* in particular “perfectly illustrates how interest in Natty Bumppo...has inadvertently led readers away from a careful examination of Cooper's young heroes [Elizabeth and Oliver]” (47-8). For example, at the end of the novel, after a forest fire has destroyed much of the wilderness area of Mount Vision, Cooper, through the characters, illustrates two choices that people have after the land's destruction: leave for a new land, or stay and face the consequences of the destruction. Critics have mainly chosen to focus on Bumppo and his choice to seek a primitive state of existence by moving westward, but this focus ignores Elizabeth and Oliver's important decision to remain in Templeton and lead the people who must learn to balance between preserving the land's beauties and cultivating the land for their needs without destroying it. And as critics' overwhelming focus on Bumppo's choice to move west simplifies a complex set of ideas that Cooper meant to portray concerning the land, Kelly notes that general focus on Bumppo also has “had the effect of further denaturing the Tales. By converting five historical novels into a single myth, we have reduced the complexity of Cooper's vision and emptied the Tales of much of their content” (vii).<sup>23</sup>

The past thirty years, however, has generated new readings of the tales. Critics have countered the overly-used mythic approach by utilizing other critical paradigms, including

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Time for Fainting! The Frontier Woman in Some Early American Novels,” for example, mistakenly points out that the Leatherstocking novels “are novels wound around a dominating male character” and , therefore, “our image of the frontier woman in Cooper's Leatherstocking novels comes through the eyes of this male hero” (192). Steeves is incorrect on several accounts. First, one can argue that *The Pioneers* has no “dominating” male character but rather several characters taking on equal importance. Furthermore, her point assumes that only the perception of the main male character is narrated, but much of the action in *The Pioneers* is seen through Elizabeth's eyes: in the first chapter the narrator focuses on her view of the landscape, not Bumppo's view. Even in other Leatherstocking novels in which Bumppo is indeed the main character, the female characters are created through more than just his perception. Like other critics, Steeves incorrectly leaves no room for female characters to be of importance outside of a main male character.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Gladsky also points out how “influential voices” in literary criticism have, in general, dismissed young lovers of Cooper's tales as “dummies in a story window” (Edwin Cady, *The Gentleman in America*, 1949), “a great bore” (George Dekker, *James Fenimore Cooper: The American Scott*, 1967), and “conventional lay figures” (Henry Nash Smith, Introduction to *The Prairie*, 1950) (43).

feminism, Marxism, and ecocriticism, and by focusing on other characters, such as Marmaduke and Elizabeth Temple and Oliver Edwards. Particularly for *The Pioneers*, although there is still much important work to be done with the heroine Elizabeth Temple, critical focus has at least shifted from Bumppo to other characters such as Oliver Edwards and Marmaduke Temple, who are often discussed in relation to Bumppo's conservation or Native American land ethic, which is defined by his choice to only take that which is necessary for his survival, his deep respect for nature, and lifestyle choice to live as intimately with nature as possible rather than separated from it in a settlement. Marmaduke Temple's capricious attitude concerning the land, his willingness to succumb to excess for self-gratification, and his contradictory speeches concerning wilderness preservation opposes Bumppo's land ethic centered on respect for animals and minimal resource use.<sup>24</sup> Oliver, on the other hand, learns to balance Bumppo's Native land ethic and the cultivation of the land's resources, making him an ideal progenitor of the Templeton lands. Yet despite Oliver Edwards' growing critical attention, fully nuanced readings of his role in the novel are still lacking. As Gladsky notes, scholars “have either dismissed him as a stock element or described him in terms of Cooper's experiment with younger heroes who had Leatherstocking's vital relation to the forest,” rather than as a character central to the text (48). Moreover, “more recently, Cooper's readers have begun to understand Oliver in terms of the ideological conflict [of European civilization versus wilderness] within the novel without fully addressing Oliver's importance as [the text's] thematic and structural center . . .” (Gladsky 48).

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<sup>24</sup> For critical discussion of Marmaduke and his comparison to Bumppo, see Okada, Ryoichi Okada, “Irreconcilable Conflicts in *The Pioneers*.” *Chiba Review*, Vol.10 (1988): 1-18. For a reading of how the tension between these characters represents “the post-revolutionary debate on the nature of accumulation” see Richard Godden, “Pioneer Properties, or 'What's in a Hut?,'” *James Fenimore Cooper: New Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Clark (London: Vision and Barnes & Noble, 1985) 121-42. Also see James Grossman, *James Fenimore Cooper* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1967) 31-2; Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957); and Donald Ringe, *James Fenimore Cooper* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962) 32-7.

Compared to the attention given Edwards, even fewer critics have addressed Elizabeth Temple's central role in the novel. Jay S. Paul, for example, as well as Erin Atchison and Nancy Sweet, have provided insightful readings of Elizabeth Temple, exploring her role as mediator between Bumppo and Judge Temple's views, her importance as a high-class, educated heiress, and her independent spirit and outward disobedience to her father in critical moments of moral decision.<sup>25</sup> However, the small number of articles about Elizabeth as heroine of *The Pioneers* indicates the great need for more critical focus. Elizabeth Temple's lack of discussion also reflects a more general shortcoming in Cooper studies, for until the advent of second wave feminist criticism, Cooper's female characters have generally been ignored or condemned to the literary list of bad characters, and they are still waiting to be fully explored for their complexities and integral roles in Cooper's works. In his review of Cooper's first novel *The Spy*, W.H. Gardiner, a well-known early critic of Cooper, "established a set of critical judgments concerning Cooper's females that are echoed today" ( Dekker and Williams 4), and this criticism represents the most extreme dissatisfaction with Cooper's females. Gardiner says, "Cooper's genteel women are execrable, neither genteel, interesting, nor convincingly sentimental" (qtd. in Dekker and Williams 4). One of today's critics, Nina Baym, argues that Cooper's female characters have not been fully explored partially because critics in general have agreed with James Russell Lowell's assessment: "The women he draws from one model don't vary. All sappy as maples and flat as a prairie" (qtd. in Baym 696). Joyce W. Warren sums up several other negative criticisms of Cooper's females: "William Dean Howells protested that Cooper's novels lacked the presence of 'one genuine heroine'... Leslie Fiedler incorrectly describes Cooper's white women as sexless

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<sup>25</sup> See Jay S. Paul, "The Education of Elizabeth Temple." *Studies in the Novel*, 9.2 (1977): 187-94; Erin Atchison, "Transporting Elizabeth's Piano: Literature and the Piano in the Early American Republic." *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations* 8.1 (2004): 31-48; and Nancy Sweet, "'Sweet but Commanding': The Disobedient Daughter in Cooper's *The Pioneers*." *James Fenimore Cooper Society Miscellaneous Papers* 18 (2003): 8-12.

'wooden ingénues,' and Richard Chase...calls them 'bloodless and dull'" (92).<sup>26</sup>

The past lack of discussion about Cooper's female characters shows that critics generally viewed them as unimportant within Cooper's work, but in the past thirty to forty years, critics have begun to take a different look at Cooper's females and provide more insightful readings, discovering that they are not as flat and boring as once thought.<sup>27</sup> John P. McWilliams echoes many other critics' goals in writing about Cooper's female characters when he says that his "purpose is to challenge, in one significant way, the critical and scholarly neglect of Cooper's women characters" (62). And Signe O. Wegener alludes to multiple other critics' more recent foci when she asserts that "Cooper, despite his emphasis on his heroines' piety, modesty, filial devotion and obedience, creates strong female role models, women characters who from within its confines challenge and even subvert patriarchal authority. His heroines are by and large resourceful, capable, and inventive, often fond of the outdoors and even fascinated by horror" (144).

Despite a new focus on Cooper's women characters, much of even the positive criticism of Cooper's heroines does not explore the women's multi-layered importance in Cooper's works, and this is especially true for criticism of Elizabeth Temple in *The Pioneers*. Robert Lawson-Peebles, for instance, argues that women in Cooper's early fiction "provid[e] the vital link between property and 'social improvement'" (52). Lawson-Peebles, like others, sees and illustrates the important mediative position that woman often occupy within Cooper's work; women often are placed in a position of negotiation between physical and metaphorical spaces in the text, oscillating between male and female traits, or blurring or distorting the boundaries of

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<sup>26</sup> Even Warren, however, does not view Cooper's female characters positively, begging the question of how much influence past negative critics had on her 1984 work, which reinforces the mostly negative past critiques. Over-generalizations and absolutes riddle her work, such as the assertion, "Cooper's heroines are never permitted to initiate the action" (94), which Cooper's texts prove to be false or oversimplified at best.

<sup>27</sup> Kay Seymour House's 1965 *Cooper's Americans* is an exception.

social and domestic spaces. But Lawson-Peebles relegates vital and more fully-drawn characters like Elizabeth Temple in Cooper's *The Pioneers* to a seemingly non-human importance in the work, making them a "link" (52), or mere tool, which Cooper employs to discuss society and property. Baym also sees women's mediative role as the "links" of society, claiming that women mainly act as "the chief signs, the language of social communication between males" because "in the exchange of women among themselves men create ties and bonds, the social structures that are their civilizations" (698). Although women are important because they are "the nexus of social interaction," by focusing only on men's interactions, Baym disregards how Elizabeth opens up dialogue about women's role in society through her challenge to gender expectations. Moreover, Baym also incorrectly claims that "Cooper's women have no power over his men," obviously conflating all types of power, social and otherwise, in her discussion (698).

Particularly with *The Pioneers*, there exists a large split in the critical commentary on Elizabeth. Baym claims that Elizabeth Temple has the least "complexity" out of all Cooper's female characters of the Leatherstocking Tales, labeling her "profoundly uninteresting" and arguing that she "has been designed to embody" only the "type" of high-classed "lady" (699). This is a lady, however, who, out of her sense of right, defies the patriarchal authority which governs her, as well as creates and asserts within the wilderness her own social and persuasive influence. Additionally, Craig White, despite noting that "Elizabeth's profile, energy, and resilience make her one of Cooper's better woman characters" still believes that both Oliver and Elizabeth, "in contrast to the conflicted or comical realism of the other characters in *The Pioneers*," are "only silhouettes where, with the pain and passage of time, characters might grow" (91). However, despite criticism that views her character as lacking in depth, Elizabeth is interesting and important for the ways in which she disrupts cultural hegemony regarding gender,

further plot development, and grows meaningfully as a character throughout the text. I agree with Laura McCall, who asserts that Elizabeth is “one of the most imposing” characters that she has studied and mentions that Elizabeth resembles “Southworth's heroic Capitola Le Noir in many ways” (106). Elizabeth, I would add, shares feistiness, assertiveness, and a sense of humor with the later Capitola, along with the willingness to defy authority and challenge gender hierarchies and expectations.<sup>28</sup>

Historically speaking, the character Elizabeth was undoubtedly an important factor in the popularity of *The Pioneers*, which sold over 3500 copies the day after its publication (Dekker and Williams 1). James Grossman notes that it was probably the panther scene, printed early in newspapers as an advertisement for the novel, that enticed so many people to purchase the book and enabled such an excellent early sale (29).<sup>29</sup> Thomas Loudsbury, moreover, echoes the statistic that 3,500 copies were sold the first day and adds, “Even at this period, with a population more than five times as numerous, such a half day's sale, under similar circumstances, would be remarkable” (41). And, as it is well documented, the popularity of the romance soared as the literacy rate in America grew, especially among the middle-class female readership. Cooper was thus banking on the popularity of this genre and the desires of his female readers (although many men read romances as well) when he permitted the early publication of the panther scene. The first enticing glimpse was of Elizabeth facing the panther in the wilderness, inciting the audience's interest in a heroine's response to a wild and threatening land.

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<sup>28</sup> Other critics also have given Elizabeth much well-supported positive criticism. Atchison illustrates, for instance, that “Elizabeth is the dominant female, if not individual of Templeton” (39). Also, Jay S. Paul highlights her importance by discussing the many instances in which she “furnished Cooper with a thematically appropriate point of view,” including the essential scenes of the turkey shoot, the seining, and the fire on Mount Vision (189). Paul adds other ways in which she is an aware witness to all that occurs: she “attends to comments of the more experienced characters,” is witness to much of her father's and Bumpo's “deliberations” and to Mohegan's “death trance,” is sensitive to the feelings that Louisa has for Edwards, and even has “an amused compassion” for her ridiculous cousin Richard Jones (189).

<sup>29</sup> The novel went through six editions by 1829, a testament to its popularity.

Although *The Pioneers* is a romance, the dramatization and flowery language that we often associate with Romanticism are tempered with historical realism and autobiographical elements. What might appear to many readers today as romantic dramatization would appear to readers in Cooper's time as realistic or at least plausible, thus shaping the way that readers understood the American wilderness, both past and present, and its role in American life for both men and women. The realistic and autobiographical elements in Cooper's text suggest that the setting is a historically-accurate, general model in which characters, based on impressions of real people and thus realistically rendered, lived and acted. Cooper's depiction of the American wilderness, for example, is historically accurate for the late 1700s. Cooper was born approximately seven years after the time period in which his text takes place, and Loudsbury asserts that Cooper's "early childhood...was mainly passed in the wilderness at the very time when the first wave of civilization was beginning to break against its hills" (3) and that the "characteristics of his early home made deep impression upon a nature fond of adventure, and keenly susceptible to the charm of scenery" (5). Thus Cooper was able to use his childhood impressions as part of his base for his depictions of nature. Also, as his letters evidence, Cooper's time at Lake Ontario at the age of nineteen supplies many memories of the landscape that he uses for *The Pioneers* (Franklin 78). Cooper writes, "It was there [Lake Ontario], I obtained most of my notions of a new country, as well as several of the characters introduced into *The Pioneers*" (qtd. in Franklin 78)<sup>30</sup> *The Pioneers* includes realistic impressions of people from Cooper's childhood as well. Franklin, for example, notes that Natty Bumppo was modeled from David Shipman, who Cooper labeled "The Leather Stocking of the region" in his earlier *Chronicles of Cooperstown* (79).

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel H. Peck argues that Cooper's text "is a novel about a place, a *real* place" and that it "succeeds precisely because it realistically renders a sense of place" (40).

Elizabeth is a composite of feminine characteristics that allows insight into Cooper's broader social vision. Unlike many of the characters modeled only off of Cooper's childhood impressions of strangers, Elizabeth embodies the most meaningful characteristics of women that Cooper intimately knew, without pointing back to any single woman as a prototype. Some suggest that she is modeled off of his sister Hannah who died in a horse accident at a young age, but Cooper dismisses this quite angrily in a later edition's preface. House notes that Elizabeth Temple and another female heroine, Anneke Mordaunt, resemble "Cooper's wife, Susan, as his letters and journals depict her" because they are "[c]apable (even in business affairs), willing to adapt their behavior to the actual situation, yet never backward about expressing their own wishes" (18) Furthermore, Boynton's biography of Cooper provides several details about Cooper's mother, also named Elizabeth, that suggest her as a possible prototype.<sup>31</sup> My goal, however, is not to argue that one individual is the model for Elizabeth. The lack of clear prototype indicates that one does not exist; rather, Elizabeth embodies characteristics of women who mattered most to Cooper—his mother, his wife, and his sister—for she has the strength and resolve of Cooper's mother, the intelligence that Cooper's wife clearly exhibited throughout her husband's writing career, and the genteel attitude and civility that Hannah always exhibited in her interactions with people.<sup>32</sup> Cooper effectually combined the strengths and most beloved aspects

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<sup>31</sup> Henry Walcott Boynton provides a few details about Cooper's mother Elizabeth that further suggests her as a prototype to Elizabeth Temple. Elizabeth Cooper, for example, was willful and stubborn, best seen when she decided that she did not want to move to what would someday be Cooperstown. She fought with her husband and then "at the last moment...plumped down into a Queen Anne arm-chair of her father's and refused to budge," making her husband pick her up, "chair and all" (15). Moreover, just as Elizabeth retains half of the Templeton lands in her father's will, Elizabeth Fenimore Cooper "had owned some property in her own right" (143).

<sup>32</sup> Cooper's wife Susan most supported and encouraged Cooper's writing, becoming his confidant and often discussing plot with him. She is credited with encouraging him to use Natty Bumppo again in *The Last of the Mohicans* (Boynton 137). Wegener also notes the importance of Cooper's wife Susan in his writing career, saying that "letters and journal entries also attest to his abiding faith in a woman's intellectual abilities. His wife is his 'female mentor,' a person capable of not only running his household but of assisting him in his literary work. In a letter to Andrew Goodrich dated June 12, 1820, he calls her 'my tribunal of appeals'" (129). Boynton also notes that Cooper's sister Hannah was Cooper's "first teacher" and that she "seems to have meant more to him, and to most other people, than Madame Cooper did . . . Hannah was the family ornament, the cherished flower of the flock.



of these women in order to create Elizabeth Temple, making Elizabeth his ideal woman. Add the fact that Elizabeth is a “pioneer,” on the frontier of European civilization, and Elizabeth becomes Cooper's ideal woman in the wilderness. Because Elizabeth contains so many of the aspects that Cooper appreciated and loved about his female relatives, she has the propensity to resonate with the novel's readers, to appear and feel real to them, therefore modeling how a lady could engage with the outdoors. This engagement, in turn, challenges our modern notion of the masculine frontier myth which posits the wilderness as a masculine realm where the “American Adam” finds freedom from society's constraints as well as his spiritual self. Cooper creates, in other words, an “American Eve,” who he wants readers to see but who has been ignored in literary criticism to the extent that the American Adam has been explored.<sup>33</sup>

Somewhere between his first novel and his third novel *The Pioneers*, Cooper began to include the larger issue of Americanism in his romances, a fact which further supports the idea that Elizabeth is a model for the ideal American woman. According to Kay Seymour House, Cooper certainly catered to public opinion by writing romances (22-3), suggesting that he imbued his heroine with aspects of the angel of the house not only because his beloved sister Hannah modeled this ideal but also because it would heighten his popular appeal. However, according to House, the love affairs in Cooper's texts were of less importance to him than the action, so “with his second novel...Cooper subordinated the love story and established the pattern his books usually follow,” focusing on the topic of American identity (23-4). McWilliams' analysis coincides with House's, for McWilliams argues that all of Cooper's novels except his

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Cooper never forgot her, never ceased to mourn her” (20).

<sup>33</sup> The term “American Adam” was coined by R.W. B. Lewis in his 1955 book *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. His description of the American Adam as he articulates it in his prologue includes the fact that the American Adam is “an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (n. pag.).

first “are concerned with questions of American identity” and prompted by “a spirit of nationality” (*Political Justice* 3). Cooper's 1840 journals show the intimate link between the topic of American identity and *The Pioneers*: seventeen years after its initial publication, Cooper writes that *The Pioneers* “was intended to describe the sort of life that belongs to a 'new country,' forming a link in the great social chain of the American community” (qtd. in Franklin 78).

Cooper's subordination of the love story, therefore, developed heroines like Elizabeth who, through their outdoor ventures, challenge but don't abolish the personality and character of the typical sentimental heroine. House writes,

All of Cooper's novels taken together state that a female character could enrich her life without becoming unfeminine by leaving the domestic routine of towns and going where there was action. Paradoxically, it was only when a well-educated heroine invaded what was most eminently a man's world (ships, battlefields, forests, frontier settlements) that she acquired physical presence and complexity of character. The liberating influence of setting was not automatic (as the horrible example of Alice Monroe proved), but a few heroines managed to seem credible—even likable—when they shared what were essentially men's experiences . . . Cooper's best heroines, in short, respond to and are really created from the action of adventure tales. (39)<sup>34</sup>

Although *The Pioneers* is not an adventure tale, the complexity of character resulting from a heroine entering the wilderness applies also to Elizabeth. Her complexity, however, is a result of her using the wilderness space to test the limits of her feminine propriety. Whether Cooper

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<sup>34</sup> For discussion of several other types of heroines in Cooper's work, see Kay Seymour House, *Cooper's Americans* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1965) 22-39. House argues that Cooper creates three types of female characters, the “virgin and the virago” who can be found in any setting and “a third group” of women who “emerg[e] only in tales about the frontier, wilderness, or sea” (18).

created Elizabeth to challenge the pattern of popular fiction of the day and its sentimental, fainting, “angel of the house” heroine or, through her, sought to define American womanhood through America's unique wilderness, or, writing the novel purely to please himself, created a character modeled from women he loved most, we will never completely know.<sup>35</sup> However, the result of his endeavors is a woman of beauty, action, resolve, intelligence, and social power who validates American women seeking their own sense of identity connected to the American wilderness.

As intimately connected to the outdoors, Elizabeth is thus as important as Marmaduke Temple and Oliver Edwards in discussion of wilderness use, especially because she is in the social position to guide or influence the townspeople, which, in turn, can change society and save the lands of Templeton from further misuse. Elizabeth's education and social status allow her to be an excellent model for a developing society and provide her with the knowledge and power to rule or guide effectively. She is the only individual that we know of in Templeton who is classically trained, placing her in a position to represent the best of social progress and society. Moreover, her aesthetic sensibility, most probably encouraged by her schooling, is clear from the outset as we envision the landscape through her eyes. Elizabeth's ethical sense is further enhanced by her aesthetic sensibility, which gradually helps her to develop a wilderness ethic that balances use and cultivation with appreciation and respect for the land, an ethic antithetical to that of her father and her greedy cousin and sheriff Richard Jones. Jay S. Paul asserts a similar idea when he claims that Elizabeth's “capacity to feel and her education, her sophistication, are certain at the outset. But one thing remains to be learned: a full and even mystical knowledge of

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<sup>35</sup> Debra Johanyak notes, “By the 1820s, American women had largely been indoctrinated into the Cult of Domesticity which would soon highlight fiction of that time” (1). I think it extremely possible that Cooper wanted to assert a particularly American femininity through Elizabeth at the same time that he rejected the model of femininity rampant in England's literature and largely influencing the idea of womanhood in America.

the place, which, when attained, will guarantee her the perspective necessary for wisdom” (187). As he argues, her “responsiveness to her environment facilitates her initiation into its wonders, which qualifies her for her social role” (189). Her multi-faceted role is not without its drawbacks, however, as evidenced through her interactions with those of different races. Although she is the most educated character in the text, and although she grows in wisdom, the true potential of her power and influence is tempered by her choice to hold onto aspects of the patriarchal order that uplift whites and patronize those of other races.

Although Elizabeth in certain instances validates and reinforces established class and race hierarchies, in other instances she challenges hegemonic gender norms by undermining the angel of the house or true woman ideology. Cooper creates a very active heroine who faces dangers bravely and who, through her experiences within the wilderness, grows in independence and becomes willing to counter even her beloved father, the representative of patriarchal law and order. She thus tests the limits of and challenges the usual characteristics of passivity and obedience of the “true woman” and sentimental heroine. Cooper is sometimes credited with creating the gendered wilderness myth, in which wilderness is relegated to European men who enter and subdue or destroy the wilderness in order for European civilization to flourish; ironically, however, through her very presence in the wilderness and her social influence, Elizabeth debunks this gendered myth before it is even fully formed in American culture. She upholds the association between wilderness and freedom that is integral to the wilderness myth by claiming independence from certain social expectations of womanhood when she is in the wilderness, yet the association between wilderness and masculinity is further debunked because she always maintains her femininity even while engaging in masculine pursuits. In the outdoors Elizabeth maintains a respectable attitude and demeanor of an educated, upper-class lady rather

than, as many would fear, becoming unfeminine or masculinized because of her interaction with such a rugged terrain. The wilderness does not change her, in other words, but allows her to exercise her own strengths, intelligence and fearlessness to her own advantage, and, through doing so, to challenge certain social gender expectations.

Elizabeth's appreciation of the land, education in the wilderness, and social power show that she is an upper-class woman with the power and influence to successfully advocate for the oppressed, as well as a woman whose more active femininity in the wilderness challenges the gender boundaries relegating the upper-class woman to the home and hearth.<sup>36</sup> Cooper depicts Elizabeth, a representative of American (white) womanhood, as having social and monetary power backed by the patriarchy but also as one who, through her compassion, intelligence, morality, and courage, defies patriarchal influence in order to validate and protect Natty Bumppo when he most needs her help. Her willingness to fight for those who are wronged, however, is limited to Bumppo. With other characters, such as the free black man Brom Freeborn and Native American Mohegan, class or racial biases, her own sense of power, or her loyalty to the white patriarchy keep her from seeking an egalitarian solution to social problems. Through Oliver Edwards' and Bumppo's challenges to her father, Elizabeth begins to understand history from the point of view of the oppressed, but she only finds the courage to help Bumppo; Elizabeth adopts the stance of the benevolent patriarchy with Freeborn and Mohegan, thus complicating her role in the novel as one who undermines strict gender expectations yet upholds other socially

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<sup>36</sup> John P. McWilliams argues that Elizabeth advocates for Natty Bumppo but does not outline the growth of her character toward doing so ("More Than a Woman's Enterprise" 85). Also, critics sometimes briefly discuss Elizabeth in the wilderness, but most discuss her only as a traditional sentimental heroine—pious, pure, and obedient, and passive. Wegener's study challenges this view in several ways. For instance, Wegener points out how Elizabeth is not easily characterized as pious through a brief analyzing of the panther scene, in which Elizabeth cannot bring herself to pray (149). Wegener also is one of the few critics to note that Elizabeth "possesses both feminine and masculine character traits" (148), although she does not fully explore this assertion. Wegener's study is excellent, but the focus of her work does not allow her to delve fully into the nuanced ways in which the wilderness allows Elizabeth the freedom to subvert and challenge hegemonic gender norms.

debilitating hierarchies of class and race.

Elizabeth's interactions with those of a different class and race indicate that she will not use her power and influence to promote an egalitarian society, but she does challenge the “angel of the house” or “true woman” ideology through her active outdoor adventures. Full of physical gusto, Elizabeth models active, healthy, and assertive American womanhood during a time in which society was increasingly celebrating and demanding female passivity and domesticity. Although Elizabeth's active femininity is predicated on the ruggedness and danger of the wilderness, she maintains an easy balance between domestic and outdoor space, thus upholding an ideal that woman be connected to the home while simultaneously stretching that idea to include woman's presence in the wilderness as well. Although Elizabeth's active femininity meets the physical demands of a rugged, dangerous wild country, she maintains an easy balance between domestic and outdoor space, thus upholding an ideal that woman be connected to the home while stretching its narrow limits. Almost a decade before “the woman question” was a central topic of American discussion, Elizabeth challenges the “piety, purity, submissiveness, . . . domesticity” and passivity of the “angel of the house” (Welter 21). She especially challenges the ideal that women be “passive, submissive responders” to the men, who “were to be “the movers, the doers, the actors” (Welter 28). She instead exhibits more of the characteristics of what Frances Cogan calls the “real woman.” Cogan argues that “real womanhood” is a separate set of ideals from the “true womanhood” mentality of the time. Opposing “true womanhood's” focus on passivity, domesticity, piety, purity, submissiveness, and selflessness, this “popular” “real woman” ideal, according to Cogan, “advocated intelligence, physical fitness and health, self-sufficiency, economic self-reliance, and careful marriage” (4). Rather than supporting Cogan's argument of true and real womanhood as opposing ideals, however, Elizabeth exhibits traits of

both, so I use Cogan's term “real woman” to especially point out Elizabeth's healthy embracing (yet subduing) of her sexuality, her activeness, intelligence, and bold engagement in economic pursuits.

While she exhibits many of the tenets of the “true woman” Elizabeth crosses, redefines, and negotiates gender and social boundaries associated with the masculinized American wilderness. Elizabeth's distinct connection to the outdoors complicates the concept of woman's sphere, criticizes the passive femininity of true womanhood, and encourages Elizabeth's acceptance of her own physicality, including her sexuality. Elizabeth's use of the traditionally masculine gaze, her bold entrance into the masculine realm of commerce, her relationship with Louisa Grant, and her fearless interactions with the rugged terrain all highlight her challenge to true womanhood and argue for a distinctly American womanhood that embraces the freedom associated with the surrounding wilderness. Although she is blinded by her own prejudices and often reinforces class and race hierarchies rather than fight for an egalitarian society, Elizabeth's lasting importance is her challenge to gender distinctions and hierarchies, a challenge which encourages other women to claim more freedoms for themselves as well as extend that freedom to others.

#### Elizabeth's Challenge to Hegemonic Gender Norms

The American outdoors in *The Pioneers* is depicted as a space in which usually strict gendered behaviors and identities can be altered, and Elizabeth embodies this idea from the first depiction of her character. Upon first introducing Elizabeth and her father as they travel by sleigh to Templeton, the narrator notes that Elizabeth's “form...was literally hid beneath the garments she wore” (18) because of the cold. In addition, she wears both “furs and silks” that are “peeping

from under a large camblet cloak, with a thick flannel lining, that, by its cut and size, was evidently intended for a masculine wearer” (18). The outer garments also associate her with masculinity through the fact that Cooper shrouds the domestic heiress, who is being brought from school to home to attend to her father’s house, with the elements of the terrain: the silk, such as her “hood of black silk” (18) is layered with the fur of animals associated with the rugged outdoor, masculine realm. In Elizabeth's case, outer vestments, which usually point toward the femininity or masculinity of the wearer, are a delicate balance of the two and also obscure any gender identity associated with bodily form.

Foreshadowing later gender negotiations, Elizabeth uses her feminine power within the traditionally masculine outdoor realm through her interactions with the stranger Oliver Edwards, who her father accidentally injures during their sleigh ride to Templeton. After Marmaduke Temple discovers that he wounded Oliver Edwards with the bullet he had aimed at a deer, he insists that Edwards come to his house to be treated but is unable to persuade him to accept the proposition. Unable to convince him to enter the sleigh for medical aid, Marmaduke returns to the topic of the deer, offering Edwards one hundred dollars for the buck which they have agreed Edwards' bullet killed (25). After Edwards rejects the money, Elizabeth attempts to persuade him and, before speaking, pulls back the hood that “concealed the whole of her head” (18), thus allowing Edwards to see her feminine features: “During this scene the female arose, and, regardless of the cold air, she threw back the hood which concealed her features and now spoke, with great earnestness” (25). Despite that her words are wholly geared toward the comfort of her father, for she says, “Surely, surely—young man—sir—you would not pain my father so much, as to have him think that he leaves a fellow creature in this wilderness, whom his own hand has injured” (26), Edward’s “manner” is “softened” by Elizabeth’s “appeal” (26). Noting that



Edward's change could stem from a resurgence of pain from his wound, the narrator refuses to admit that Edward's altered behavior stems from "something irresistible in the voice and manner of the fair pleader for her father's feelings" (26). Because the inflicted wound is minor, however, the reader recognizes the speaker's humor as well as the affect of Elizabeth's beauty. Her persuasive strength is her femininity; she interacts with him through her feelings rather than, like her father, through a focus on rectifying a wrong or negotiating business, and her beauty heightens the affect of her daughterly devotion.

Elizabeth's power is also sexual, for underscoring her strength is Edward's intense attraction to her. Because of Edward's hidden intense anger toward Marmaduke over the issue of Templeton land ownership, more than a daughter's regard for her father is necessary to entice him to enter the sleigh. Even after she entreats him to allow their aid, Edwards "stood, in apparent doubt, as if reluctant to comply with, and yet unwilling to refuse her request" (26). The judge interprets Edward's hesitation clearly as masculine pride and encourages him to comply, noting that there exists "no human aid nearer than Templeton" and that even "the hut of Natty is full three miles" further than the town (26). Rather than conceding, however, Edwards distances himself from the judge by "extricating his hand from [his] warm grasp" (26). Marmaduke cannot convince Edwards; thus his decision to enter the sleigh is attributed to Elizabeth's persuasion, for, rejecting Marmaduke's hand, Edwards "continue[s] to gaze on the face of the female, who, regardless of the cold, was still standing with her fine features exposed, which expressed feelings that eloquently seconded the request of her father" (26).

Edward's inability to stop staring at Elizabeth after she pulls back her hood highlights Elizabeth's latent sexual power, which she may or may not be conscious of at this point in the tale. Warren Motley alludes to Elizabeth's sexual appeal when he argues that the "attraction

between Elizabeth and the young hunter advances in carefully choreographed stages of disrobing. Edwards moves irresistibly into the sleigh of his enemy after Elizabeth” shows her “features” (79). Although barely removing anything, Elizabeth still allows herself to be subjected to Edward’s male, sexualized gaze, perhaps knowing that her beauty and charm will convince him to accept their help, or perhaps thinking only that an honest appeal from a young woman will move him to act out of gentlemanly consideration. Only Leatherstocking sees Edward’s internal struggle between his attraction to Elizabeth and simultaneous dislike of her father and, after some “sagacious musing,” encourages him to go (26). Edwards’ “unaccountable reluctance” (27), even after Bumpo’s encouragement, can later be ascribed to his problems with Marmaduke; in this moment, Elizabeth’s femininity and sexual appeal triumph. Aware of her sexual power or not, Elizabeth shows how female beauty garners power even within the supposedly masculine realm of the wilderness when she uncovers her face. Her beauty overpowers Edward’s reason and subdues the anger and contempt incited by Marmaduke’s money offer, and he at last succumbs to her plea to enter the sleigh.

When the group arrives at the Temple home, Cooper further highlights Elizabeth’s sexuality by objectifying her through the narrator’s description. When Marmaduke, Edwards, Elizabeth, and others arrive and enter the Temple home, Elizabeth’s classical English beauty is uncovered for all to see as “the large black hood was removed, and the dark ringlets, shining like the raven’s wing, fell from her head, and left the sweet but commanding features of the young lady exposed to view” (66). At the same time that Elizabeth uncovers her beauty by taking off her cloak, the narrator ‘uncovers’ her through language. The result of this double unveiling is that the reader, like the characters in the home, gazes at Elizabeth as she is intricately described as if she were a beautiful muse: “Nothing could be fairer and more spotless than the forehead of

Elizabeth, and preserve the appearance of life and health. Her nose would have been called Grecian, but for a softly rounded swell, that gave in character to the feature what it lost in beauty. Her mouth...spoke not only to the ear, but to the eye” (66). Elizabeth in this moment exemplifies the “passive/ female” that Laura Mulvey discusses in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/ male and passive/ female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (589)

Cooper highlights Elizabeth as sexualized object of the male gaze through this physical description, in which he invites the reader to dwell upon Elizabeth while imagining others, who are also disrobing, doing the same (66). Even Remarkable, one of the other females present, wants to “examine” Elizabeth’s “appearance” (65) and knows that “her own power had ended” (66) as soon as she sees her beauty. Passive voice also highlights Elizabeth’s role as female on display, for rather than Elizabeth taking off her garments, the hood “was removed” and the shawl “fell aside” (66) as if she is a marble sculpture with fabric sliding off its smooth surface. Finally, Cooper highlights Elizabeth’s “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” through the description of her full-figured, womanly body, uncovered for both characters and readers as layers are removed: “So much, added to a form of exquisite proportions, rather full and rounded for her years, and of the tallest medium height, she inherited from her mother” (66). In this moment Elizabeth exemplifies the celebrated true womanhood's passive female.

Although in these passages Elizabeth is depicted as a passive beauty to be admired or an

object at which one may gaze, she also utilizes the traditionally male gaze during the same scene, thus upsetting the dichotomy between active/male and passive/female. Elizabeth's gaze becomes both powerful and sexualized within the domestic space as her love interest becomes an object of her view and contemplation, illustrating what Erin Atchison, in a different context, calls her "masculine sexuality of independence which colours her intrinsic feminine virtue" (41). After everyone has taken off their cloaks, Elizabeth, "glancing around her in delight," notices Edwards: "...an object arrested her view...that was in strong contrast to the smiling faces and neatly attired personages who had thus assembled to do honour to the heiress of Templeton" (67). For a moment Elizabeth is simultaneously the object of everyone's attention in addition to being a gazer herself, for the narrator describes Edwards as Elizabeth sees him: his "hand that held the cap, rested lightly on the little ivory-mounted piano of Elizabeth, with neither rustic restraint, nor obtrusive vulgarity. A single finger touched the instrument, as if accustomed to dwell on such places. His other arm was extended to its utmost length, and the hand grasped the barrel of his long rifle, with something like convulsive energy" (68). Elizabeth, the narrator notes, "continued to gaze at him in wonder" (68). The image of Edwards clearly is indicative of his hidden identity, for we learn later that he is a "gentleman" through social status although he chooses to disguise his identity and dress in rugged attire. Motley not only notices this fact but also adds a particular emphasis on the sexuality implicit in the image. To only read the scene as indicative of Edward's "still secret social status," Motley claims, is to "accept too easily that one hand doesn't know what the other is doing. Elizabeth, at least, senses that Oliver's presence unites the convulsive phallic gesture, tense with the unvoiced anger at the patriarch, and the gesture of the single finger that knows how to play Elizabeth's 'instrument' . . . she continues to gaze at his 'wonderfully speaking lineaments'" (80). The reader thus views Edwards through Elizabeth's sexualized gaze

as the narrator positions us to continue to view Elizabeth as the active gazer. With the introduction of Elizabeth's gaze, therefore, the narrator uncovers and underscores the covert sexual tension between Oliver and Elizabeth that will forward some of the later events of the story.

Motley concludes that "Cooper underscores the competition between [Edwards and Marmaduke] by dwelling on Elizabeth's sexuality and by placing her in the generationally ambiguous role of mistress of her father's house" (80). His assertion, however, downplays any autonomy that Elizabeth may exude in this moment and appears based on the often-propelled assumption that Cooper's female characters are passive instruments within a plot propelled by men. In this moment, for example, Elizabeth has autonomy from both men and, moreover, actively and freely gazes at Edwards for a long period of time. Cooper finally notes that she "glance[s] her eyes from the hunter to Monsieur Le Quoi" (70) after an extended discussion between Marmaduke and Richard concerning the deer. The reader is left to assume that her gaze never leaves the hunter from the time she notices him at the piano until she prepares to leave in order to prepare a room for dressing his wound.

Covertly beneath the discussion of the deer, therefore, exists the silent, almost unseen, ongoing action of Elizabeth's gaze. Her gaze indicates that her sexuality is not merely passive, making her an object of exchange between men. She makes conscious choices, such as showing her face in order to convince Edwards to enter the sleigh and gazing at her love interest, which not only continue to propel events and make her an elemental figure in the tale's action but also illustrate the possibility of femininity which recognizes woman's sexuality yet embraces the cult of domesticity's moral standard of female chastity. Signe O. Wegener agrees that "Cooper deploys the cult [of domesticity]'s conventions" including "the insistence upon female purity and

piety” as well as “women’s position as man’s moral superior and his teacher of moral and religious values” (52), and the sleigh incident highlights other aspects of that femininity as well, including respect for authority, tact, hospitality, and humbleness. Unlike other authors' representations of the sentimental heroine in American literature, Cooper does not deny Elizabeth’s sexuality at the expense of her purity; instead, her sexual gaze upsets the usual power relations between the sexes and the ideal of passive femininity, thus advocating for a more realistic conception of womanhood without sacrificing the ideal of purity.

Cooper further espouses his particularly American, active, femininity through many comparisons of Louisa’s and Elizabeth’s behavior and demeanor. Elizabeth's friend Louisa Grant embodies the ideology of the “true woman” of the cult of domesticity or the Victorian “angel of the house,” for she is docile, pious, and weak, illustrating none of the activeness that characterizes Elizabeth. Louisa is first depicted in the church “on her knees, but a short distance away from [Elizabeth], with her meek face humbly bent over her book,” a position highlighting her piety (125). Louisa quickly gains Elizabeth's admiration because she is brave enough to audibly “repea[t] after the priest” in a congregation that “regarded the ceremony as a spectacle, rather than a worship in which they were to participate” (125). Louisa's momentary strength stems from her piety and is executed with womanly propriety and meekness, in a “soft, low, female voice” and a posture of veneration, or, in other words, with the true reverence that the congregation should show (125). Louisa’s “appearance,” moreover, is “light and fragile,” her simple clothes are “neat and becoming,” and “her countenance, though pale, and slightly agitated, excited deep interest, by its sweet, and melancholy expression” (125-6). In every way she exemplifies the moral, humble, and gentle spirit that the true Victorian woman was expected to possess.

Cooper most clearly critiques the “true woman” ideology by highlighting the distinct difference between Elizabeth’s and Louisa’s ability to traverse the American landscape. Elizabeth's approach to the country's dangers highlights Cooper's ideal for an active American woman who embraces activity and even excels in her endeavors despite the wilderness's ruggedness and dangers. When Elizabeth, her father, Monsieur Le Quoi, Oliver Edwards, Richard, and Louisa take a horseback ride to see Marmaduke’s land prospect, Elizabeth fearlessly encounters the outdoors. As Marmaduke Temple leads the party “across a little bridge...in which large openings, of a formidable width, were frequent” (231), both Elizabeth and her “blooded filly” are unafraid of the danger: the horse “made a step or two with an unusual caution, and then, on reaching the broadest opening, obedient to the curb and whip of her fearless mistress, she bounded across the dangerous pass, with the activity of a squirrel” (232). When her father soon warns her to stop “practicing” her “skill in horsemanship” until the wilderness is more subdued, Elizabeth argues that wildness of the country will not disappear before her “old age” (232), implying that she will continue her pleasure pursuits despite the dangers: she will fearlessly traverse and explore the country until that far-off day when the woods are no longer dangerous.

Elizabeth and Louisa also respond very differently to danger during their trip, for Elizabeth responds bravely when the party is frightened and endangered by a nearby falling tree but Louisa becomes helpless. Elizabeth handles the danger with calmness yet caution: “Elizabeth checked her filly, and looked up, with an unconscious but alarmed air, at the very cause of their danger, while she listened to the crackling sounds that awoke the stillness of the forest” (239). Elizabeth's “unconscious . . . air” implies that she may not be wholly aware of the danger, yet her innocence makes her bold and able to handle the situation calmly; she maintains control of her

very frightened horse even as Marmaduke, with a “nervous arm,” grabs her bridle and hurries her forward (239). Unlike Elizabeth, Louisa falters in danger, illustrating her weakness and complete dependence on others. After the tree crashes, Edwards controls both his and Louisa’s horse because she “had relinquished her reins, and with her hands pressed on her face, sat bending forward in her saddle in an attitude of despair mingled strangely with resignation” (240). Louisa completely abandons control, resigning herself to possible death. She clearly did not have the fortitude to urge her horse onward and therefore “owes” her “life” to Edwards (241). Louisa remains incapacitated even after the danger has passed, for only Edwards' support keeps her from falling off of her horse (240). The physically and psychologically weak, feminine Louisa must rest until she is “restored to her senses” and has regained her previous “strength” (240), and, even then, she must be “supported on either side” for most of the ride home (240). The “angel of the house,” with her passive and frail constitution and body, becomes a liability during times of adversity and depends wholly on others for her safety and security.<sup>37</sup>

Cooper also shows through the integral panther scene that the American wilderness demands that its female visitors and residents be active and courageous in dangerous situations rather than passive weaklings. After denying Edwards' offer to chaperone them, Louisa, Elizabeth, and her dog Brave take a walk in the wilderness and encounter a mother panther and cub. When they see the panther, Elizabeth yells, “Let us fly!” but Louisa loses all control of her body and faints, her “form yield[ing] like melting snow” to the terror she encounters (307). Once

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<sup>37</sup> Although Nancy Sweet's reading of Elizabeth does not provide any in-depth reading of the comparison between Elizabeth and Louisa, she notes the two young women's relationships with their fathers: “Louisa is ever devoted to her own father, in contrast to Elizabeth, for whom filial obedience is tempered by her sense of propriety and justice” (9). Unlike Louisa, whose devotion to her father never wavers, Elizabeth, despite remaining devoted to her father for much of the novel, thinks for herself and acts out of her sense of moral right when she believes that the patriarchal rules and laws are unjust. Sweet sees Elizabeth's experiences in the outdoors as distancing from her father's “corrupt market values” which are found in “the domestic space” (10). Ultimately it is this distance from that corruption that allows Elizabeth, who is both “product of and antithesis to” Marmaduke Temple's “mercantilistic ambitions” (9), to “carry moral authority” (10).



again, Louisa's meek, passive femininity is too fragile for the dangers of the American wilderness, and she becomes a burden to Elizabeth, who, had she been alone, may have fled the panther successfully with Brave's help. Because Louisa is unconscious, Elizabeth acts bravely and quickly to "tear" away any pieces of Louisa's garments that "might obstruct her respiration" and to verbally "encourage" Brave (307). Only because of Louisa does Elizabeth become unable to "move" (309) and "wholly at the mercy of the beast" (308). Unable to act because of her friend, Elizabeth accepts her fate, "bowing meekly to the stroke" of the panther's paw (309) before Natty Bumppo saves her. The narrator states, "Had she been left to herself, in her late extremity, she would probably have used her faculties to the utmost, and with discretion, in protecting her person, but encumbered with her inanimate friend, retreat was a thing not to be attempted" (310). Just as Louisa almost dies because of her feminine weakness, Elizabeth almost dies because of her loyalty to her friend; nonetheless, she acts bravely within the situation's limitations.

Despite Elizabeth's many strengths, she has an innocence that often engenders precarious situations, for she remains ignorant of the wilderness's potentially fatal dangers. Elizabeth unknowingly endangers herself in the woods by attempting feats of daring horsemanship and walking with Louisa without a chaperone. Although confident in her horsemanship during the trip to see her father's land prospect, Elizabeth ignores, underestimates, or is not aware of the danger, for Marmaduke, fearing that Elizabeth will be killed or injured, claims that he "will be left to mourn" her if she continues to cross the bridge so daringly (232). Later Edwards offers to trade his fishing pole for a gun so that he can accompany Elizabeth and Louisa on their walk, thereby implicitly warning them of the real dangers of the wilderness (286). Elizabeth, however, responds, ". . . where there is no danger, no protection is required" (287). Even the narrator

momentarily ignores the need to act with caution in the woods in order to highlight the surety of female purity in the American wilderness: “Male attendants, on such excursions, were thought to be altogether unnecessary, for none were ever known to offer an insult to a female who respected herself” (302). By rejecting a chaperone, Elizabeth embraces freedom and privacy which promotes a fuller enjoyment of Louisa's friendship than can occur in the presence of an unwanted third party, but she also exposes herself more fully to the wilderness's real threats. A chaperone may be unnecessary because Elizabeth and Louisa are respectable women, but Elizabeth is also ignorant of the real danger and too proud to see her need for more physical safety.

Cooper's warning to women in the wilderness concerns more than their physical safety, however, as the female panther most poignantly illustrates. Elizabeth's growing acceptance and embracing of the wilderness may symbolize acceptance of her own sexuality and womanhood as nature intended it rather than as society has fashioned it. A careful reading of Elizabeth's responses to wilderness reveals a growing acceptance of and intrigue with wild nature, which may partially be read as representative of Elizabeth embracing her own sexual nature. When she first returns home after her woman's education in the east, her glances into the wilderness are described as “timid”: “...the gaze of the female [Elizabeth] was bent in inquisitive, and, perhaps, timid glances, into the recesses of the forest, when a loud and continuous howling was heard, pealing under the long arches of the woods, like a cry of a numerous pack of hounds” (19). The “howling” of Bumppo's dogs that meets Elizabeth's first timid gaze into the dark recesses of the unknown is only the precursor to the howling literal panther that she must face later and the symbolic precursor to her own “howling” desire for sexual freedom that the forest promotes and that the female panther represents. Unlike the uncertain first gaze into the forest, Elizabeth boldly encounters the deadly panther and never turns her eyes away from the horror: “Notwithstanding

the fearful aspect of her foe, the eye of Elizabeth had never shrunk from its gaze. . .” (310).

Elizabeth must go into the depths of the forest, or traverse the limits of her domestic freedoms, to discover her own limitations. In the case of the panther, Cooper suggests that Elizabeth must become aware of the real dangers of too much freedom as the wilderness embodies it, and then must subdue sexual desires threatening moral and social limits.<sup>38</sup>

The mother panther that the girls cross on their unchaperoned walk, therefore, symbolizes female freedom without social boundaries. Unlike Louisa and Elizabeth, the panther, fully embedded in the wilderness, maintains unbridled liberty. An image also of female sexuality and motherhood, its actions are untempered and wholly aimed at its survival and the survival of its young. Its wild, lawless, sexual freedom is a threat to society and must be controlled, and, unfortunately the panther is killed because it cannot be tamed and will always pose a threat. The death of the female panther and its cub warns of the consequences of unchecked female sexuality as subtly as Cooper promotes a more realistic concept of womanhood through Elizabeth’s sexual gaze. Elizabeth’s innocence or ignorance does not undermine her “real womanhood” or her active outdoor engagement but does indicate the need to maintain certain limits while renegotiating boundaries of female behavior and ideologies of womanhood. Elizabeth illustrates the possibility of simultaneously maintaining female honor and purity while recognizing and accepting women as sexual beings. She proves that women can be self-sacrificing, beautiful, moral, modest, and tactful and also be active in the outdoors. Moreover, compared to Louisa's

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<sup>38</sup> Erin Atchison is the only critic I've found who even hints at this idea of Elizabeth's sexuality, but she only mentions it and not in the same context. She argues that Bumpo’s compliment, that Elizabeth has “an eye like a full-grown buck,” hints “at the masculine sexuality of independence which colours her intrinsic feminine virtue” (41). Atchison does, however, link this sexuality to the wilderness when she compares Elizabeth to Cora Monroe from Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*: “Elizabeth is a dark heroine and almost dangerously in touch with the surrounding wilderness, though she never crosses the line into Cora's natural and potentially savage passions” (41). What is interesting about this comparison is the racial element: Cora can cross the line because she is partially black, but Elizabeth's whiteness, it appears, is ultimately what allows her to be viewed as pure despite her sexuality.

feminine demeanor, the femininity Elizabeth espouses is more vibrant and better able to engage with the pleasures and dangers of the beautiful yet rugged American outdoors. Her appropriation of the male gaze and ability to easily traverse the boundaries of home and wilderness also challenge the restricting tenets of femininity.

Elizabeth's tempering of her sexuality culminates in the scene in which Elizabeth and Edwards face peril from a fire on Mount Vision, and a dichotomy between the home and the wilderness highlights her subdued passions. In this same wilderness area of Mount Vision, Elizabeth had earlier embraced the freedoms of horsemanship, taken lively walks with Louisa, faced the threat of the mother panther and, with Natty's help, survived both the threat of death and the symbolic threat of succumbing to the sexual wildness that the panther represents. Faced with the actual moment that Edwards admits his love, therefore, Elizabeth subdues her reciprocated passions. Instead, Cooper, in keeping with the romances of the time, upholds Elizabeth as the moral icon of the household, the pure angel of the house. Thinking he is going to die, Edwards, in a frenzy of passion, falls "to his knees at her feet, and gather[s] her flowing robe in his arms, as if to shield her from the flames" (412) before admitting that Elizabeth has tamed his angry heart. He says, "I have been driven to the woods in despair; but your society has tamed the lion within me. If I have wasted my time in degradation, 'twas you that charmed me to it. If I have forgotten my name and family, your form supplied the place of memory. If I have forgotten my wrongs, 'twas you that taught me charity." (412). Edwards' words dichotomize the wilderness and society, and Elizabeth represents the good in society, opposing the wildness to which he retreated in anger. Elizabeth represents the moral order able to tame Edwards' internal wildness and allay the despair that he secretly felt concerning his denied right to the land.

Elizabeth subdues yet does not deny her physical passion throughout the deadly ordeal.

She does not respond to Edwards' confession of love because "her thoughts had been raised from the earth" (412). Instead of thinking about Edwards, she laments her and her father's separation with "regrets" that "had been mellowed by a holy sentiment, that lifted her above the level of earthly things. . ." (412). Opposing Edwards' overflowing passion during what appears to be her last opportunity to share her feelings, Elizabeth remain pure, innocent, or virginal, connected to home and father, rather than succumb to her fleshly longing. Almost immediately, however, a chance of survival challenges Elizabeth's spiritual focus: "But as she listened to these words, she became once more woman. She struggled against these feelings, and smiled, as she thought she was shaking off the last lingering feeling of nature, when the world, and all its seductions, rushed again to her heart, with the sounds of a human voice," which happens to be Bumpo calling her name, coming to save her once again from the peril of the wilderness (413). This scene highlights Elizabeth's purposeful tempering of her passions more clearly than any other, but Elizabeth's struggle as Cooper highlights it works most pointedly to solidify the fact that women, far from being bloodless angels, are sexual, passionate beings who can yet choose to maintain their purity even in the most trying of circumstances.

### Elizabeth Upholds Race and Class Hierarchies

Elizabeth courageously defies danger in the outdoors, and, at other times, she negotiates gender expectations, utilizing the woods as a free space to shape identity. As her outdoor experiences bring her more into contact with people of different races and classes, however, she also reveals her class biases through her actions, attitude, and responses to those individuals, most often reasserting class and race power hierarchies rather than seeing others as capable equals. When Elizabeth determines to enter into a traditionally male-only, leisure Christmas

tradition of a the turkey shoot, she exhibits both her best and worst qualities, for within a short amount of time she not only uses the freedom of the wilderness to negotiate her role in society but also is blinded by her high social status, upholding class and race hierarchies in the same wilderness where she claims freedom for herself.

Elizabeth's discussion with Natty Bumppo and Oliver Edwards the morning of the turkey shoot highlights her ability to traverse class and gender boundaries within the wilderness by engaging in business pursuits. When she and her cousin Richard Jones take a walk on Christmas day, they overhear Natty Bumppo, Oliver Edwards, and Indian John (Mohegan) talking about Templeton's annual turkey shoot. Wanting a chance to win the turkey, Elizabeth enters the clearing where the men are talking and asks which one will shoot in her place. A decision to uphold social class distinctions set forth by Jones gives Elizabeth the final courage she needs to engage in the usually masculine realm of business. She only enters the men's space, for instance, after Jones informs her that giving Oliver Edwards a shilling would be appropriate behavior. When Jones hears that Edwards is in want of money to attempt an extra shot at the bird, he decides to give him a shilling, but Elizabeth questions the propriety of the act, calling Edwards a "gentleman" (186). Jones scoffs, responding, "Gentleman again! Do you think a half-breed, like him, will refuse money?" (186). Jones's name calling interestingly provokes Elizabeth to engage the men in business. Immediately Elizabeth takes over his idea, enters the clearing, and gives the option to all of the men: "I feel inclined to try my chance for a bird. Which of you will take this money, and, after paying my fee, give me the aid of his rifle?" (186). Elizabeth does not abide by usual expectations for her sex concerning money, business, or propriety, for she engages in business without Jones's help, offering money to whomever will accept her proposal. Richard's aid in the transaction becomes unnecessary in this space, partially because he refuses to

acknowledge Edwards, who he thinks is part Native American, as a gentleman. If the men are not gentlemen, Elizabeth need not act with socially-expected ladylike behavior toward them.

Elizabeth most probably would not have asked the men to shoot in her stead if Richard had confirmed Edwards' gentleman status, but, once the class hierarchy is established, she acts, effectively traversing gender boundaries with the help of her father's money and an environment in which social expectations are fewer if not eliminated, and she secures Natty's promise to shoot for her.

While in the clearing, Elizabeth also challenges Oliver Edwards' expectations of women by rhetorically undermining or upholding gender identity according to her desires or best interest. After Elizabeth asks for the "aid of" someone's "rifle," Oliver Edwards, speaking "with an emphasis that could not well be mistaken, and with a rapidity that showed he spoke without consulting any thing but feeling," exclaims, "Is this a sport for a lady!" (186-7). Caught off guard by Elizabeth's frankness and fortitude, Edwards somewhat emasculates himself, losing his reason and becoming overwhelmed by "feeling," a historically stereotypical characteristic of femininity. Elizabeth's very presence in the woods disconcerts Edwards: "Her appearance startled the youth, who at first made an unequivocal motion towards retiring, but, recollecting himself, bowed, by lifting his cap, and resumed his attitude of leaning on his rifle" (186). Surprised by the sudden appearance of a woman in the space where he is used to interacting only with men, he almost forgets that he is a gentleman. Elizabeth challenges his courage by entering his space and speaking forthrightly, and only his ability to uphold gentlemanly behavior relaxes his pose.

Although Elizabeth may have entered the clearing hoping that Edwards, her love interest, would help her to win the bird, he instead challenges the idea that her behavior is appropriate by asserting that the sport is not meant for a "lady." This comment, in turn, incites a verbal power-

play between the two centered around gender, which Elizabeth, with her superior intelligence, wins. When Edwards soon says, “You will excuse me, Miss Temple; I have much reason to wish that bird, and may seem ungallant, but I must claim my privileges” (187), he indicates his awareness of expectations for his behavior: a gentleman would allow a lady to have the first shot at the bird. Elizabeth, however, rhetorically erases gendered expectations while simultaneously highlighting her feminine qualities in her response: “Claim any thing that is justly your own, sir . . . we are both adventurers, and [Natty Bumppo] is my knight. I trust my fortune to his hand and eye” (187). She demands no special behavior from Edwards and instead asserts that they are in the same position and with the same identity of “adventurer.” Within the wilderness, therefore, she negotiates and claims her own identity to best suit her in whatever interaction she encounters.

In addition to erasing Edwards' upper-class masculine identity, Elizabeth eliminates all expectations associated with her femininity when speaking to Edwards, thus releasing him from any obligation to act on behalf of her high social class. By refusing to acknowledge him as anything but a fellow adventurer, moreover, she also indirectly insults him for not acting the part of gentleman. At the same time, however, she underscores her femininity by calling Natty Bumppo her “knight,” making herself, therefore, his maiden. He will win the challenge for her, and she, a lady, will not have to act for her own cause. By having Bumppo act in her stead, labeling him her “knight,” and alluding to the power she entrusts to him through that position, she also reaffirms his masculinity, physical ability, sharp eye, and fearlessness. Elizabeth becomes like Richard Jones, using labels to define her and others' identities and roles, but she takes her power a step further by, in her interaction with Bumppo, redefining femininity to include adventuresomeness while, in her interaction with Edwards, undermining both feminine and masculine gender identities by labeling both him and herself adventurers. She thus



rhetorically positions herself in a state of power within each relationship, and although that power looks quite different depending on the relationship, Elizabeth always positions herself advantageously.

Elizabeth's assertion that Edwards is simply an "adventurer" but Bumppo is her "knight" also emasculates Edwards, who is visibly uncomfortable with her insinuation that he lacks knightly masculinity. Natty reacts with pleasure to his manliness being reaffirmed by the "frank address of the young and beautiful Elizabeth, who had so singularly entrusted him with such a commission" (187), but Edwards, whose maleness has been negated, reacts with uneasiness, "casting frequent and uneasy glances toward Elizabeth" as they leave the clearing (187). Edwards is clearly used to women's timidity, demureness, and silence and is uncomfortable with Elizabeth asserting his identity and excusing him from acting like a gentleman. At the same time, he is clearly intrigued, "glanc[ing]" (187) at her often but without confidence, for she has taken over the control of naming and defining, a power that traditionally belongs to men. Through her subtle and intelligent use of rhetoric, Elizabeth has powerfully defined her and his identities according to her desire, leaving him to scamper off like a dejected dog with its tail between its legs.<sup>39</sup>

Elizabeth's power becomes more public and visible at the actual turkey shoot. At the shoot, Elizabeth's social power influences the crowd, made up of "some twenty or thirty young men . . . and a collection of all the boys in the village" (190), and, when contentions arise, the disputants appeal to her as an authority. Although Bumppo earlier says that he knew "Dutch

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<sup>39</sup> Atchison highlights Elizabeth's use of power in this scene. Atchison claims that Cooper, "throughout his novels . . . created an idealised United States of America, in which class was clearly delineated and ultimately respected . . . Cooper's genteel heroes and heroines epitomised conscious class distinction. With no hereditary nobility in America, gentility was entirely a matter of how all members of society viewed a person" (38). Elizabeth thus uses these rather shaky grounds to label Edwards as a gentleman or to take away that status based upon her observations of his character, her feelings toward him in the moment, and her own desire for control.

women on the Mohawk and Scoharie” that “count greatly on coming to the merry making” of turkey shoots (187), the presence of an upper-class lady and daughter of the town's judge surprises and quiets the crowd until her “curious interest” and “smiling air, restore[s] the freedom of the morning” (192). Her presence itself bespeaks her long-lasting influence, however, for the “language and vehemence” of the crowd remain subdued “by the presence of such a spectator” (192).

Elizabeth blends into the background of the scene as Bumppo and others compete for the turkey but reemerges as an authority figure when a dispute occurs between Bumppo and Freeborn. Freeborn, a free black man who has provided the turkey for the challenge, claims that the snap from Bumppo's rifle counts as a fire but Bumppo disagrees. Freeborn then appeals to two sources of authority, saying, “Leab it to Massa Jone—leab it to young lady” (195). Despite this appeal, Bumppo argues that he is the one to “know best” based on his experience: “I say, no man need tell me that snapping is as good as firing, when I pull the trigger” (196). Freeborn, “alarmed” that Bumppo will get another shot without paying, thus most probably ending the wager money for this particular bird, once again appeals to “Massa Jone,” who “know ebbery ting” (196). Named Sheriff that morning, Jones takes control of making the final decision, usurping the authority of Bumppo's experience and ultimately ruling against Bumppo. His ridiculous ruling for such a trifle, to which he compares the act of dueling, pacifies everyone except Bumppo: “As this opinion came from so high a quarter, and was delivered with effect, it silenced all murmurs...except from the Leather-stocking himself” (196). Not finding an intelligent counsel and resolution in Richard Jones, Bumppo appeals to Elizabeth, saying “if she says that I ought to lose, I agree to give it up,” only to be disappointed when she says, “Then I adjudge you to be a loser, for this time” (196). In her decision Elizabeth relies not on her own

intelligence but on the law as Jones articulates it, even though his ruling is based on neither the experience of numerous turkey shoots nor the experience of shooting a rifle.

Elizabeth submits to Richard Jones's ruling and further supports his decision by asserting her own power under the benevolent patriarchy's ruling order. Elizabeth could have appealed to the people and encouraged a vote, arguing that those who have participated in multiple turkey shoots would know better than either she or Jones. She also could have advocated for Freeborn to make the final decision because he prepared the shoot and controlled the wagers and flow of the competition. Instead, she upholds Jones's decision but adds her own option to Freeborn, saying to Bumppo, "I adjudge you to be a loser, for this time, ...but pay your money, and renew your chance; unless Brom [Freeborn] will sell me the bird for a dollar. I will give him the money to save the life of the poor victim" (196-7). Although this "proposition was evidently but little relished by any of the listeners, even the negro feeling the evil excitement of the chances" (197), the statement is very telling about Elizabeth's character. Similarly to her father offering Edwards money for his buck, Elizabeth attempts to use money to quell the dispute and still get what she wants. Elizabeth no doubt does have sympathy for the bird, for this is not the first time she wished for some unfortunate animal's escape from a rifle's bullet, but her compassion for the bird does not motivate her to pay, for, if animal rights were her agenda, she would assert her influence to end the whole affair.<sup>40</sup> Instead, her compassion for Freeborn, in addition to her desire for the bird, prompts her to negotiate. Knowing that Freeborn will not make a whole dollar by taking his chances, she offers him an excellent deal, and is able to do so because of her access to the white patriarchy's money and social influence. And although he refuses her offer, she still, after Bumppo wins the bird, gives Freeborn "a piece of silver, as a remuneration for his loss" (199),

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<sup>40</sup> In the opening scene of the novel, Elizabeth secretly wishes for the escape of the buck her father attempts to kill.

which is clearly an act of charity. Instead of first asserting Freeborn's right to make decisions or later leaving Freeborn to accept the consequence of his decision not to accept her deal, Elizabeth reinforces his subordination in society and then pacifies him in that lowly state by giving him her charitable contribution to his meager purse.

After Bumppo wins the bird for Elizabeth, she uses it to assert her power once again, this time in her relationship with Edwards. Before the argument over Bumppo's rifle snap, Edwards took a shot at the bird and missed because of his hurt shoulder (194). Even earlier in the clearing Elizabeth heard Edwards admit that the only money he had was one shilling, enough to try one chance at the bird: this comment incites Richard Jones to offer Edwards another shilling before Elizabeth takes control of the situation (184). Before Bumppo takes a second chance at the turkey, however, Elizabeth brings attention once again to Edwards, saying, "Perhaps there is one whose right comes before ours, Leather-stocking . . . if so, we will waive our privilege," to which Edwards replies, blushing, "I shall decline another chance. My shoulder is yet weak, I find" (198). Elizabeth knows that the "tinge on his cheek . . . spoke the shame of conscious poverty" (198) and that he would try again if he had the money, but she says nothing further to him, for she has made clear through her attentions that, as fellow "adventurers," she has won and he has lost. When she finally has her prize in hand, she, in "serious earnestness" and blushing as well, takes the bird to Edwards and asks, "Will you, sir, accept the bird, as a small peace-offering, for the hurt that prevented your own success?" (199). Edward's response, unsurprisingly, highlights mixed feelings: "He appeared to yield to the blandishment of her air, in opposition to a strong inward impulse to the contrary. He bowed and raised the victim silently from her feet, but continued silent" (199). In this moment, Elizabeth shows Edwards that her money will provide her with opportunities that his poverty denies to him, but she also, as a love interest, shows that

they can be a team if he will accept her capability as a teammate. She is fully aware of how much Edwards wants the bird, for she “observed the change in his countenance” when he missed his shot and knew he felt his miss very deeply (194); thus, she seizes the opportunity to provide for yet humble him, for she offers the bird to him with all the grace and propriety of a lady despite that Edwards earlier declared that ladies do not engage in such activities (186). But her gift is also a chance for her to rectify the offense of her father accidentally shooting Edwards. Unaware of Edward's deeper wound concerning Marmaduke Temple's land, Elizabeth attempts to be the extended hand of her father's patriarchal power and to heal that breach by providing Edwards with the game that he could not win for himself.

The turkey shoot is a microcosm for the larger issues that were happening in the society of Templeton, and, in effect, allude to issues between class, race, and gender happening in Cooper's America. Despite being a supposed land of freedom, Cooper makes clear very early in the tale through Aggy, who is Richard Jones's slave, that not everyone is free. Even a free black like Brom Freeborn has no social power to assert his own judgments for the turkey shoot that he prepares and leads but must appeal to those with more social power to rule in his favor. The name Freeborn, therefore, only highlights his lack of freedom. Furthermore, the ruling class creates rules or laws to fulfill their own desires, while the experiences of the lower classes, like those of Bumppo, are undervalued or ignored and those with social influence, like Elizabeth, often side with the ruling class out of obligation or loyalty, thus reinforcing class, race, and gender hierarchies through acts in the name of the patriarchy. Thus the turkey shoot shows Elizabeth challenging patriarchal expectations of gender as she asserts her autonomy in the wilderness but also reasserting other debilitating hierarchies of race or class.

Cooper uses Elizabeth to reinforce these hierarchies, only to question them later when she

decides to make a moral stand for Bumpo when he is unjustly punished. The higher moral authority so often attributed to the pious, virtuous woman of the house is pitted against the woman of the house's filial loyalty and adherence to the patriarchal order and law. In this case, Elizabeth's higher moral authority trumps her loyalty to her father and shows the lengths to which she will go in order to stand for moral right. In a later and much more serious situation, Elizabeth sides with Bumpo over the ruling class, both arguing with and acting against her father in order to defend Bumpo, who she believes is being punished unjustly for first shooting a deer out of season and then attacking the constable Hiram Doolittle when he comes to arrest him for the deer. She first argues, "I know Natty to be innocent, and thinking so, I must think all wrong who oppress him" (382). Elizabeth does not refute the charge that Bumpo killed the deer or assaulted Doolittle, for these actions are undeniable; rather, her argument underscores Bumpo's natural right to use the land's provisions when necessary and his right to protect his private property. She argues that if the administer of the law is evil, like Doolittle who trespassed and tried to enter Bumpo's cabin, then one "cannot separate the minister of the law from the man" (382). In other words, Bumpo is innocent partially because of Doolittle's evil; Bumpo was not attacking a constable but acting on the right to protect his property from an evil man.

Marmaduke, however, uses his daughter's loyalty to him to challenge Elizabeth's position. Marmaduke tries to subdue her, arguing that she speaks about something that she "dost not understand" (382). When this argument is ineffective, he says that her logic is overridden by her feelings: "thy heart lies too near thy head" (383) and attempts to control her by questioning her loyalty to him. When Elizabeth claims all are "wrong" who "oppress" Bumpo (382), her father exclaims, "His judge among the number! Thy father, Elizabeth?" (383). This exclamation finally quiets Elizabeth, who asks that her father not ask her "such questions" (383). Although she

argues for Bumpo's innocence and, by extension, his right to live off the land and protect his property, Elizabeth relents when her loyalty to her father is questioned. Then, as has become a trend with both, Marmaduke brings out his pocket-book, planning to rectify the situation by paying Bumpo's fine. As he sends Elizabeth off with the money, he reminds her of her loyalty to him, saying "remember...that the laws alone remove us from the condition of the savages; that he has been criminal, and that his judge was thy father" (383).

But Elizabeth's sense of moral right ultimately prompts her to act against the law and shows the savageness of the law when it is mitted out unjustly. She also highlights her role as representative of higher morality, which should and does act in spite of and against the law when the law does not dole out true justice. Despite Elizabeth's loyalty to her father, she does not allow it to interfere during Bumpo's neediest moment; she sides with Bumpo over the law, remaining silent about Bumpo's planned escape from jail and aiding him during and after his getaway by utilizing her wits and her father's boat and money. When Bumpo divulges his escape plans, Elizabeth first begs him to stay, but, when she realizes that he is unyielding, she promises to take a canister of powder to him on Mount Vision: "Will I! I will bring it to you, Leather-stocking, though I toil a day in quest of you through the woods," she says, indicating the strength of her commitment to him despite that he breaks her father's law (390). This moment highlights Elizabeth's true strength of character and her willingness to advocate for justice, for, in the moment of serious decision, Elizabeth acts for the lower-class Bumpo who she knows has been wronged by the power of the patriarchy, and particularly by her father, who she later claims to love almost as much as God (412).

Elizabeth's decision to help Bumpo makes her a lawbreaker as well and shows the strength of her commitment to what she believes is morally right. When Bumpo's escape is

threatened, Elizabeth intercedes, making herself an accomplice. When Oliver Edwards drives Bumpo and Benjamin, another escapee, in his ox cart to escape, Edwards contemplates leaving the loud, drunken Benjamin behind in order to remain incognito, but at a key moment Elizabeth moves close to Edwards and says “rapidly, in a low voice, 'Lay him in the cart, and start the oxen; no one will look there'” (392). She thus makes herself an integral part of the men's successful escape. She also encourages them to steal and enables the act by disclosing the location of her father's boat on the lake, arguing that they will be able to navigate easily to any part of the woods if they use it (393). She even tells Edwards that she, not he, will be held accountable for any “trespass” against her father (393). As Sweet states, “In her recognition of a higher justice, Elizabeth [in effecting their escape] acts as a kind of court of appeal, asserting authority over her father's law” (11).<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth thus denies the law's ruling and even her own beloved father in order to act for the freedom of the innocent. Not content to only passively represent the moral authority granted to her as a woman of high standing, Elizabeth becomes “court of appeal” as well as law breaker, acting bravely when the governing body meets out unfair punishment.

Elizabeth's act of denying the patriarchy her allegiance to help Bumpo is the closest Elizabeth comes to being an advocate for justice. Despite that both Mohegan and Edwards challenge Elizabeth's monolithic understanding of the history of Templeton's lands, Elizabeth's sense of justice does not prompt her to act for Mohegan, another character oppressed by the patriarchy. Elizabeth echoes many of Cooper's time who believed in the Native American people's “natural right” to the land, or a right based on the fact that they occupied the land prior to white infiltration, but, as Cooper's text shows, this belief did not keep the Native American people from being dispossessed of their lands. In her interactions with Mohegan, Elizabeth acts

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<sup>41</sup> Sweet later adds, “The legitimacy of Elizabeth Temple's resistance to parental authority lies ultimately in the justice furthered by her insubordination. Hers is not an exercise in self-interested insurrection, but in social progress that can be wrought only through measured filial disobedience” (11).



similarly to how she acts toward Freeborn, becoming an extension of the patriarchal order, treating Mohegan benevolently and respectfully but refusing to admit the justice he deserves. Also, Cooper makes Mohegan, the last Delaware of his tribe, symbolic of an entire race of people, thus dooming the Native American people to death in the American imagination when Mohegan dies in this novel, which, as aforementioned, was lauded for its realism. The injustice that Mohegan experiences is thus rendered moot because no more of his people exist to become the recipients of a rectifying justice.

Making Mohegan represent the last of a race of people within the fictional setting of Otsego, Cooper gives the impression that Templeton's history represents the rest of America, all of which is open to the taming influx of European civilization, which renders the Native American people's "natural right" or first right of occupancy, null and void. Although Elizabeth, her father, and Richard Jones assert and accept the Native Americans' "natural right" to live upon and utilize the land, they never question the idea that the white man owns the land. The need to question the Native Americans' rights does not exist because, as a dying race with one lonely representative, no Native American people are going to come forward to claim entitlement. "Natural right" is easily accepted because this idea, too, belongs to the realm of history. Even Richard Jones, one of the most selfish, land-hungry characters, accepts the Native Americans' "natural right" to the land but only because that entitlement means nothing. Speaking of Marmaduke's land ownership, Jones says, "There is Mohegan, to-be-sure, he may have some right, being a native; but it's little the poor fellow can do now with his rifle" (93). Clearly Richard Jones adopts the notion of "natural right" as long as Mohegan is powerless and the title presents no lasting, true, ownership over the land.

Although in the early 1820s when Cooper wrote *The Pioneers* Native Americans were, as

far as is documented, no longer living in the Otsego area of New York, they still inhabited much of the eastern part of the United States and the west, making it especially problematic that Cooper uses Mohegan to symbolically represent an entire race of people.<sup>42</sup> Cooper “wrote the first three Leatherstocking novels . . . in the run-up to the Indian Removal Act of 1830, and he published the final books in the series shortly after the terrible Trail of Tears in 1838-1839” (Person 13), a fact that makes one question to what extent Cooper's portrayal of Native Americans as a naturally dying race was complicit in their continued removal and genocide. Also, if the Native American people were not met with violence and genocide, the idea that they had a “natural right” to the land, coupled with the beliefs that they were a dying race and a savage, childlike people in need of European civilization's moral influence, justified a “benevolent” patriarchy's power over them. This overseeing too often resulted in the Native Americans' forced assimilation or removal from their lands. By removing all traces of the Native American people from the world of his novel, Cooper affects the cultural imagination of the American people, suggesting that it is natural for the Native American people to make way for the white race. Cooper dooms the Native Americans to destruction in the American imagination. And Elizabeth, the one character with social influence and power within the novel who is also willing to fight for the rights of the oppressed, uses her power only by extending a hospitable hand to Mohegan, allowing him to live on the land of his ancestors until he dies.

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<sup>42</sup> According to Eric Cheyfitz, by the 1790s “when Cooper was a boy,” the “Iroquois . . . had virtually vanished from their former homes, treated, tricked, or simply forced out of their land after the Revolution. And the Delaware . . . who were occupying New Jersey, Cooper's birth place, when the first settlers arrived in the New World, had been pushed west of the Alleghenies into the Ohio wilderness by the force of white settlement” (72). Wayne Franklin also notes the Native American occupation of the Otsego Lake region, which would be the fictional Templeton, saying, “Otsego had its Indian sites, including a little orchard on the ground where the Cooper mansion was built. But neither Croghan nor Judge Cooper after him literally displaced the natives from the valley, so Mohegan as a further symbol of dispossession in *The Pioneers* derived from a general fact rather than a local one (122).

## Elizabeth and the Challenge of History

Although Cooper symbolically eradicates the Native Americans by narratively killing off Mohegan, Cooper yet challenges America's historical narratives that ignore the prior occupants of the soil. For example, during a trip to see a land prospect, a discussion between Elizabeth, her father, and Oliver Edwards concerning the development of Templeton highlights the tendency of the white patriarchy to ignore the "other" in history, yet the scene also challenges this monolithic version of history through Edward's questioning. Ultimately, through Marmaduke's retelling of his experience as land developer, he and Elizabeth produce a uniform vision of history, in which her mythic rendering of America is tempered with the reality of his experience. Oliver Edwards, representative of the "other," or the Native American, challenges this historical version, however, by questioning Temple's validity of the land and making the reader aware of those people absent from Marmaduke's rendition of history. Cooper thus brings the reader's attention to the dispossessed Native American people by using Elizabeth to highlight the myth of America as a land of plenty, her father to oppose that myth with the historical reality of hardship, and Oliver Edwards to challenge both Temple's white patriarchal version of history and his values.

During their conversation, Marmaduke and Elizabeth produce a uniform version of history, in which her mythic rendering of America is tempered by the Marmaduke's real experiences. When Elizabeth travels with her father and others to see his land prospect, she asks Marmaduke to recount what he "thought" and "felt" concerning his "enterprise" of creating a settlement out of the wilderness (232), and the ensuing discussion highlights the nostalgic American cultural myth of the land of plenty that prevailed in Cooper's time. Wanting to have a correct history, Elizabeth seeks the most accurate account of the settlement, which she assumes only her father, the founder, can provide. When Marmaduke admits that he "encountered pain,

famine, and disease, in accomplishing the settlement of [the] territory,” Elizabeth highlights the pervading myth of America as a second Eden: “Famine! . . . I thought this was the land of abundance! had you famine to contend with?” (233).

Marmaduke's response balances Elizabeth's Edenic view of the land with the reality of labor, showing his faith in a Protestant work ethic to create abundance through agriculture. The emphasis on farming, however, devalues the ways that others before him survived and thrived off of the land. According to Marmaduke, the land's latent abundance needed man's cultivation to bring forth fruit. His version of history, therefore, replaces Elizabeth's myth with the reality of his and others' diligent work and faith in agricultural achievement. He says, “Those who look around them now, and see the loads of produce that issue out of every wild path in these mountains, during the season of travelling, will hardly credit that no more than five years have elapsed, since the tenants of these woods were compelled to eat the scanty fruits of the forest to sustain life, and, with their unpractised skill, to hunt the beasts as food for their starving families” (233). His comment sets the agricultural accomplishments of the settlement above the mode of life of Bumppo or Mohegan, who still hunt on a regular basis and have not adopted the more “civilized” agricultural lifestyle.<sup>43</sup> For Marmaduke, an agricultural society is superior to the ways of Bumppo and Native American hunters and gatherers, despite the fact that, rather than starving like Marmaduke's followers, they thrived by combining several method of obtaining food.

Elizabeth is unsatisfied with Marmaduke's response concerning the land, however, indicating the strength of the myth that America's abundance was so replete that one may simply

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<sup>43</sup> During Cooper's time this argument for agriculture being more civilized than hunting and gathering also perpetuated racism and justified the enforcement of a more “civilized” mode of living on the Native American people, often dispossessing them of their land. The racist argument was that the Native American people, in their more “natural” or wild state, would be better off outside the influence of European civilization; thus, they must leave the land that the colonizers wanted for themselves. Linking agriculture with European civilization was just another way to cover up or excuse racism and greed for land. Even when groups like the Cherokees in the south freely adopted an agricultural lifestyle, they were still discriminated against and dispossessed of their lands.

pluck it from the trees. Elizabeth asks, “But, my dear father...was there actual suffering? where were the beautiful and fertile vales of the Mohawk? could they not furnish food for your wants? (233). Her father again shows his belief that any abundance is the direct result of strenuous work and progress. He says, “Remember, my child, it was in our very infancy: we had neither mills, nor grain, nor roads, nor often clearings: --- we had nothing of increase but the mouths that were to be fed . . .” (234). He implies that if they had agricultural accomplishments earlier, hunger would not have existed.<sup>44</sup> Marmaduke supports the myth of abundance but adds to it the historical reality of his experience, that work brings forth that latent potential. Elizabeth and her father's discussion is an act of passing down the white patriarchy's version of America's land settlement: Marmaduke, the white patriarchy, tells his story (history) to Elizabeth, who accepts his authority, knowledge, and beliefs. In the meantime, they ignore the passing of ownership from the Native Americans to white settlers, another important element in the settlement's history.

Edwards soon challenges Marmaduke Temple's monolithic version of the settlement's history, however, by questioning the validity of Temple's land ownership, thus highlighting those excluded from Marmaduke's history and bringing the topic of Native American land possession to the discussion's forefront. Elizabeth becomes transfixed by Edward's “deep attention” to her and her father's conversation (236), so Edwards to take over the role of asking questions. After discovering that Marmaduke stayed in Bumppo's cabin for a night after his first excursion to Mount Vision, Oliver inquires, “Said he [Natty] nothing of the Indian rights, sir? The Leatherstocking is much given to impeach the justice of the tenure by which the whites hold the country” to which Marmaduke responds, “I remember that he spoke of them, but I did not clearly

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<sup>44</sup> Ickstadt points out that Cooper shared Jackson's “republican-agrarian rhetoric” (22). In this moment, this belief in the progress of European civilization through farming comes through clearly.

comprehend him, and may have forgotten what he said: for the Indian title was extinguished so far back as the close of the old war” (237). Marmaduke disregards and does not try to understand Bumpo's argument concerning the Native rights to the soil. To Marmaduke, any claim to land existing apart from “the patents of the Royal Governors” and the “confirmation” of his own “State Legislator,” or, in other words, outside of the country's written law, is a language he does not need to understand or follow (237).<sup>45</sup> Edwards coldly says, “Doubtless, sir, your title is both legal and equitable” (237), a sarcastic response given Edward's rightful claim to the land and his questioning of Marmaduke's rights. The irony of the remark is heightened later in the novel when Cooper reveals that Edwards is the rightful heir to the land.<sup>46</sup>

The presence and challenge of Oliver Edwards, who represents the “other” in history, highlights the fact that the white patriarchy's version of history disregards the Native Americans' land ownership, and the interchange between Edwards and Marmaduke affects Elizabeth's understanding of the region's past. “Struck” by the “attention” Edwards gives her father, Elizabeth pays close attention to their verbal exchange (236). Always a keen observer, she sees Oliver's dissatisfaction with Marmaduke's response concerning the Native American people.

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<sup>45</sup> Cheyfitz argues that the “word *legal*—a word that much of the criticism of *The Pioneers* has focused on—when applied to white dealings with Indians, marks a violent problem in translation” (73). He adds that “we must question whether this white term, historically inseparable as it is from the notion of land as private property, has any meaningful equivalent in cultures where land is not *owned* (at least not, apparently, in our sense of the term) but held in common. And if the term *legal* cannot be translated into Indian tongues with any significant degree of faithfulness, in what sense it is 'legitimate' to use this term as a mark that differentiates between acts of force and fraud and acts *we* term 'legal'?” (73). His critique indicates that Marmaduke and others believe that they do not need to clarify the meaning of their words to those whose land they acquire through “legal” documents. They disregard the “other's” language yet also make their own language incomprehensible to them.

<sup>46</sup> The reader, at this point and throughout the majority of the text, is led to believe that Oliver Edwards is part Native American, giving the impression that he advocates for the Native American people in this scene. However, as we discover at the end of the novel, Oliver is both white and the legal heir of the land, which the Delaware people gave to his grandfather, named the Fire-eater. Edwards really questions Marmaduke's legitimacy to the land because he sees himself as true heir based on the Native Americans' right to give their land away to his grandfather. If only conquest legitimates land ownership, however, then Edwards' right is nullified. Marmaduke's unwillingness to acknowledge ownership outside of written documentation implies that he will not see the Fire-eater's, and therefore Edwards', right to the land. Thus Edwards' true motive for asking about the Native Americans' rights is to discover how Marmaduke will respond to his claim to the land via the Native Americans' gift of land to his grandfather.

Edward's questioning disrupts the white patriarchal monolithic version of history, revealing its incompleteness and bias. And although the narrator does not clarify how Edwards affects Elizabeth's understanding of history, a future conversation that she has with Mohegan, in which she becomes embarrassed during Mohegan's recanting of history, indicates her awareness that she supports a biased or one-sided historical view.

Elizabeth's embarrassment during her conversation with Mohegan concerning the land makes sense by looking at Elizabeth's growth, especially in relation to the law. A discussion with her father concerning Bumpo's run-in with the law underscores the fact that she is fully aware that she adheres to a biased, incomplete version of history, for the conversation illustrates her dissatisfaction with society's laws and justice; additionally, the conversation highlights her growing knowledge that white society's views are not always correct. After Bumpo goes to jail but before she climbs Mount Vision to give Bumpo gunpowder and discovers Mohegan, Elizabeth argues with her father about the perfection of laws, and thus the system, to which they adhere. When Bumpo is fined and put in the stocks, Elizabeth questions whether Bumpo's act was a crime deserving punishment. Marmaduke says that "the sanctity of the laws must be respected," to which she "impatient[ly]" responds, "Surely, sir . . . those laws, that condemn a man like the Leather-stocking to so severe a punishment, for an offence that even I must think very venial, cannot be perfect in themselves" (382). This comment challenges the authority and integrity of the system Marmaduke represents; she questions the validity of written laws and documents that constitute his view of history and government and thus indirectly challenges the very system that Europeans have used to establish legitimacy to the land.

Thus, when Elizabeth tries to pacify Mohegan as he laments the past and especially expresses sorrow about the land that was, according to him, stolen from the Fire-eater (Oliver

Edwards' grandfather, Major Effingham), Elizabeth knows that the ideas of history to which she adheres are as imperfect and shaky as the laws that come from her source of authority, the white patriarchy. When faced with the issue of legitimate land ownership in her conversation with Mohegan, however, Elizabeth once again supports the patriarchy represented by her father. When Mohegan claims that he has seen “his English and American Fathers burying their tomahawks in each other's brains, for this very land,” and that, as a consequence, he “has seen the land pass away from the Fire-eater, and his children, and the child of his child,” Elizabeth argues, “Such is the custom of the whites, John,” as if custom itself is an acceptable reason for war and murder (401). She then attempts to assuage her own guilt and that of her white ancestors by arguing that the Delaware people also give and receive land: “Do not the Delawares fight, and exchange their lands for powder, and blankets, and merchandise?” (401). Mohegan, however, differentiates between the Delaware people passing the land to the Fire-eater, which they did because they “loved him” (401), with the savagery with which the English Fire-eater's land was passed to Marmaduke, who, as “a new chief set over the country,” represents the American Republic fighting against England (401). Mohegan says, “Where are the blankets and merchandise that bought the right of the Fire-eater? . . . they [men fighting for the Republic] tore [the land] from him, as a scalp is torn from an enemy; and they that did it looked not behind them, to see whether he lived or died. Do such men live in peace, and fear the Great Spirit?” (401).

This allusion to the savagery of the white man, which is a characteristic that has been applied to the Native Americans throughout the text, makes Elizabeth confront an alternative view of history that she does not want to admit as well as acknowledge her own guilt: “'But you hardly understand the circumstances,' said Elizabeth, more embarrassed than she would own, even to herself” (401). Unwilling to admit her father's imperfections, she blames Mohegan's



ignorance for their inability to agree to one version of history: “If you knew our laws and customs better, you would judge differently of our acts,” she tells Mohegan (402). She also argues that her father “is just and good” and that Mohegan should “not believe evil” of him (402). Her embarrassment, however, is the most important detail of the conversation, for it suggests her knowledge of and anxiety over the fact that her version of history is biased and, in light of Mohegan's views, inadequate. Her embarrassment also points to her guilt in refusing to admit another voice into her father's history and her own complicity in the system that denies Mohegan the land. In a prior comment to Edwards, Elizabeth says she would feel “a great relief” if she could indeed claim some descent to Mohegan because being able to do so would alleviate her pain over Mohegan's loss: “I own that I grieve when I see Old Mohegan walking about these lands, like the ghost of one of their ancient possessors, and feel how small is my right to possess them” (280). She, therefore, does not wholly believe at this moment on Mount Vision that her ancestors' possession of the land is fully justified or that Mohegan is ignorant; her embarrassment stems from her own guilty conscience over acting the part of poster child for the white patriarchy.

The challenge to a uniform vision of history, however, has minimal to no impact on real-world issues concerning Native American rights, for Mohegan challenges not the Native American loss of land but rather the transfer of land between whites, making it unnecessary to legitimize the whites' ownership. As Susan Scheckel points out, Mohegan does not challenge the white man's ownership of the land, only the violence against whites who own the land: the

“right 'to give away the country in council” . . . is one Indian “right” that most Americans were quite willing to acknowledge. . . . the granting of Indian land to Major Effingham is represented as a willing act of love and appreciation, and once

they have given the land to the white man the Indians respect his absolute ownership of the land and everything on it. In this passage, the only violence associated with the loss of the Indians' land and the violation of his rights is not violence between Indians and whites but violence among whites themselves, conceived in broad historical terms. . . . (137)

The crimes that Mohegan laments, therefore, are not those against himself and his people but those against his white friends, so he does not compel Cooper's contemporary readers to wrestle with the violence between Native Americans and European colonizers happening even as they were reading the novel for the first time.

Similar to her reaction to Brom Freeborn earlier in the novel, Elizabeth accepts the white patriarchy's power over another race and, rather than advocate for, seeks to assuage Mohegan and support him in what capacity she can as an extension of the patriarchy. Heinz Ickstadt asserts that despite the fact that both *The Pioneers* and *The Last of the Mohicans* “represent a republic which was centered in the villages and pastoral landscape of the East and whose western expansion had reached its final limit at the Mississippi, [these texts] established a pattern of historical interpretation that satisfied an increasing need for collective justification, consolation and atonement” (20). Elizabeth's embarrassment over Mohegan's assertion of white savagery causes a rupture in the “collective justification” of land acquisition within the novel, but a rupture so very small as to almost be unseen, and one that comes from a character with no legal power to give land back to Mohegan. Instead, Elizabeth, attempts to console and support Mohegan by supporting him financially and encouraging his assimilation into society. When she first discovers him on Mount Vision, she laments that he has been away from the village for a long time, reminds him of the “willow basket” he promised to make her, and says that she has a

“calico” shirt for him (400). She thus encourages Mohegan's continued assimilation into her society by wishing his presence and supporting his basket weaving, most probably with monetary payment. When Mohegan says that he can no longer make baskets and also rejects the shirt, she yet encourages him, saying, “I feel as if you had a natural right to order what you will from us” (400). Clearly Elizabeth's idea of “natural right” excludes a claim to the land or even her support in his chosen way of life outside of her society.

Comparing Elizabeth's willingness to defy the law for Bumpo's freedom with her attitude toward Mohegan uncovers Elizabeth's belief that neither Mohegan nor his people were truly wronged. Elizabeth's advocacy for Mohegan never extends beyond sympathetic words. She encourages Mohegan's subordination to society's structure as she simultaneously breaks the law by aiding Bumpo, now a fugitive, so that he can live outside of society's structure. Although Franklin sees Elizabeth as sympathetic toward Mohegan, he agrees that “[u]nfortunately, her sensitivity is... largely verbal” (116). Yet despite her verbosity, she never argues with her father concerning Mohegan's right to “order what [he] will” (400), starkly contrasting her overt willingness to quarrel with her father over Bumpo's innocence. Moreover, despite being embarrassed during her conversation with Mohegan on Mount Vision, Elizabeth is not willing to admit even to him that the Native American people were ever wronged. Although willing to defy her own father to help Bumpo live a life of independence off of the land, she offers Mohegan not true freedom but an extension of the ruling order of Cooper's day—an act of benevolent patriarchy. Instead of enabling him, she offers to take care of him as if he were a child, supplying him with a shirt and encouraging him to make baskets. She is willing to share the land and her society with him but keeps firm control of her father's legitimizing ownership.

Despite Elizabeth's internal questioning of the legitimacy of the patriarchy's version of

history, Mohegan's destiny, and the destiny of the Native American people he represents, is set: he will, like the burning wilderness on Mount Vision, be consumed by the greed and the destruction of the encroaching civilization. By linking Mohegan with the savage wilderness, Cooper makes his destruction inevitable as the wilderness is tamed or destroyed. On Mount Vision, the most wilderness-like area within the entire scope of the book, Cooper depicts Mohegan in his most savage state and then narratively destroys the most savage wilderness area in an all-consuming fire: Elizabeth finds Mohegan sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree, and he looks at her with “an expression of wildness and fire” (399). Mohegan's untamed or “wild” demeanor and the image of the fallen tree solidify his association with nature and symbolize his fallen state and imminent destruction. “His “appearance” of Mohegan, is “terrific” or aboriginal: his hair, for example, is “plaited on his head, falling away, so as to expose his high forehead and piercing eyes,” and in “the enormous incisions of his ears” he weaved “ornaments of silver, beads, and porcupine's quills, mingled in a rude taste, and after the Indian fashions” (400). He paints his face and bare chest red and wears “a large drop” in his nose which drops to finally “rest” on his chin (400). At no other time does Mohegan decorate himself with such adherence to his traditions, and he soon reveals that he has come to Mount Vision to die. Reverting to his native dress alludes to Mohegan's inability or refusal, and, by extension, the Native American people's ultimate inability or refusal, to appropriate “civilized” society, and the wild, war-decorated Mohegan is doomed precisely because he refuses to assimilate into society.

Elizabeth acts as a taming influence that Mohegan rejects: she offers him goods, work, and a place in the colonizer's society, but the position is not a seat of honor. Although she acts for her own and Bumpo's interests in the wilderness, both her power and desire is limited when she confronts the possibility of moving beyond sympathetic words to advocacy for Mohegan through

a calculated, anti-patriarchal act. At this moment she is to Mohegan just another of the white colonizers who dismisses his rights and who is full of self-denial concerning her complicity in his destruction. Thus her entreaties to him to save himself fall on deaf ears, Mount Vision burns, and, although Mohegan is saved from perishing in the fire, he dies from his wounds.

### Elizabeth's Growing Native American Land Ethic

Despite that the forest fire destroys Mount Vision, hope yet exists for the natural world in Templeton where none exists for Mohegan, and, ironically, Mohegan's version of land use, or, to use Aldo Leopold's well-known term, his "land ethic," is his lasting legacy, for Elizabeth learns and eventually adopts his and Bumpo's ideology. In a novel that highlights extremes concerning land use, ethics, and ownership, Elizabeth and Oliver, heirs of the Templeton land, promote a future of balanced respect for and cultivation of the land, born out of a unique combination of Native American sensibility toward nature and European ancestry. Scheckel notes the importance of Edwards' social status in his land claim, saying that "it is Oliver's challenge, based upon the rights of inheritance, rather than Natty's challenge, based upon natural law, to which Judge Temple responds and finally succumbs" (131). Oliver is the main character in Cooper's "model of kinship and inheritance that included the prior 'owners' of the American land—both the Indians and the English – as ancestors willingly conveying their authority and property to their rightful American heirs," and this model creates a "symbolic affirmation of Americans' legitimate claim to the land and to the legacy of nationhood" (Scheckel 130). Thus the issue of land ethics is inseparable from issues of ownership. As Scheckel indicates, Cooper downplays the Native Americans' dispossession through Edwards' relationship to the Delaware tribe, and Cooper also indicates that Edwards' social status, namely his relationship as grandson to

Marmaduke Temple's long lost friend and landowner, is that which allows him the only true claim to the Templeton land.

The hope of living out a conservation land ethic, however, is rooted in Edwards and Elizabeth's relationship to the Native American people's worldview, not to their European history. As Thomas Philbrick argues, Edwards is “firmly linked to the Indian past” because he is “the grandson of Major Effingham, who had been proclaimed a chief by the Delawares and adopted by Mohegan as a son” (593); thus, Edwards is “the inheritor of the Indians' moral claim to the land” (593) as well, for he is the rightful owner by rights of the Native Americans to give their land as a gift. Edwards learns the Native American ways from Mohegan and Bumpo, living with them and continuing his intimate friendship with them even when he moves into the Temple house. He maintains a level of adherence to their modes of living with respect and love for nature because of both his friendship to them and adopted status as Mohegan's grandson, which garners a certain loyalty to Mohegan and his values that one can assume transcends Edwards' social status in society.

Elizabeth also combines a Native American symbolic adoption with social status and land ownership, although she has been ignored by most of the critics focused on land ownership or treatment, most probably because, as Sweet notes, “legally, the entire Temple estate belongs to Oliver Edwards Effingham once he marries Elizabeth” (12).<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth's social role and power, however, must be taken into account. As the turkey shoot incident shows, Elizabeth's very presence influences the people of Templeton as they alter their behaviors according to her demeanor. Her ultimate power is in being a model of right thought and action for others. Paul

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<sup>47</sup>. Scheckel, for example, despite her insightful reading of Oliver, fails to discuss Elizabeth's role in the model of imperialism. Also, as one of few who mentions Elizabeth, Terence Martin notes that she “is the bearer of culture to a new settlement,” but fails to see her as, like Oliver, having a Native American morality toward the land. Only Nancy Sweet has noted that both Oliver Edwards and Elizabeth Temple have a claim to the land, arguing that Mohegan “transfers his moral claim on the land to Elizabeth and Oliver as his chosen heirs” (12).

agrees, arguing, “Though she can never become a judge or a legislator, she can emulate her father's regard for the spirit of law and can become, in turn, a person worthy of emulation” (192). Well aware of this power, Cooper took pains especially to link her, like Edwards, to the Native American people's respect for the land, outlining her growth toward a Native American sensibility through a scene in which she watches Bumpo and Mohegan fish. Oliver Edwards is already aligned with Bumpo and Mohegan through friendship and adoption; as Elizabeth adopts the same Native American sensibilities as her future husband, the lasting legacy of the Native American people's respect for the land continues through the white heirs of the soil.

Elizabeth will influence the use and treatment of the land despite that her husband legally owns it, for, even after she is married, Elizabeth has more power and influence than a typical woman of her time. When she argues that Edwards should send Louisa and her father eastward so that Louisa can find a husband, she says, “You know . . . that my father has told you that I ruled him, and that I should rule you. I am now about to exert my power” (449). Also, when Edwards states his surprise at her ability to “manage,” she responds, with a sly smile, “Oh! I manage more deeply than you imagine, sir . . . but it is my will, and it is your duty to submit, – for a time, at least” (449). Jokingly said, Elizabeth's comments still powerfully point to her as an equal in their marriage and to her influence not only in the past with her father but in the present with Edwards. McCall echoes this when she argues, “The novel closes with assurance that their marriage will be based on mutual respect, companionship, and equality” (108).

Cooper also does not leave his readers wondering how Elizabeth will act as co-“manager” of the land and its resources but rather shows her aligning herself with Bumpo and Mohegan's wilderness ethic. A wilderness ethic, as Lamb, Goodrich and Brame explain it, “defines” how individuals or groups of people “address issues concerning the management of wildlands” (6). A

“well-founded ethic,” in turn, will “strengthen one's connection to wild lands, enabling the celebration of joy, personal fulfillment, and spiritual contentment commonly found in the wilderness experience” (6).<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth and Oliver Edwards' wilderness ethic will have influence because they as leaders will model what they desire to see, and, as Lamb, Goodrich, and Brame point out, ethics “evolve into norms, which are the underpinnings of laws” (6). Thus, with their social status and influence as support, Elizabeth and Oliver Edwards' ethic will “evolve into norms” and eventually into laws. As Aldo Leopold would say, “ethics are social approbation for right action, social disapproval for wrong actions” (qtd. in Lamb 6). As the future owners of the soil and most powerful influence over the land's treatment, therefore, their way of viewing the natural world has the largest implications for whether or not a balance will be created between use, aesthetic appreciation, and conservation.

Evidenced through her demeanor and interaction with Mohegan, Elizabeth begins to adopt Bumppo and Mohegan's ethic during a fishing trip. Mohegan embraces the idea that people of different races can be of one family, or of one mindset, opening up the possibility for Elizabeth to adopt the love and respect for the land inherent in his worldview. Eager to venture onto the lake in a canoe Mohegan made, Elizabeth follows as Mohegan “approache[s], and taking her soft, white hand into his own swarthy and wrinkled palm, [says]– 'Come, grand-daughter of Miquon, and John will be glad’” (267). Calling her the “grand-daughter” of William Penn, who had a good relationship with the Native Americans, highlights his willingness to share knowledge of his way of life and his ability to view her as a friend, as Penn was a friend, part of

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<sup>48</sup> Lamb, Goodrich, and Brame break down the meaning of a wilderness ethic very clearly, highlighting the many facets inherent in its development. They claim that “ethics comprise the convergence of choice, values, and judgment,” clarifying also that these aspects affect and influence each other: “Values shape the choices we make when we exercise our judgment, and each individual carries a unique set of values” (3). A wilderness ethic focuses specifically on “right and wrong” action toward the environment (6). As Lamb, Goodrich, and Brame state, “Family, environment, education, society, history, religion, and culture all contribute to form the foundation for one's ethic, the guide for one's actions. It is this personal ethic as related to wildlands—one's *wildland* [or wilderness] *ethic*—that defines one's relationship with these lands” (6).



an entrusted circle of people who, because of connection, privilege one another. Within the same invitation he calls himself by his white name, John, and calls William Penn by his Native American name; this inversion of Native American and European names highlights the possibility of crossing racial boundaries and adopting the “other” as family or friend. This ability to cross cultural boundaries and adopt Mohegan's way of seeing allows Elizabeth to carry on his legacy when he is gone, inheriting not only his people's land but also their land ethic as her experiences with him instill in her a new mode of seeing the world.

Mohegan's words before entering the canoe allude to the possibility of Elizabeth being a part of his adopted family, but Elizabeth is aligned with Mohegan in other ways as well. Mohegan, for example, symbolically adopts Elizabeth into his tribe by calling her “daughter” several times during the forest fire on Mount Vision (400, 402, 404). As Sweet adds, Mohegan “honors her longstanding kindness and respect” to him and “recognizes in Elizabeth the nobility that he has lost” (11). Furthermore, Kay Seymour House notes that “Elizabeth, sympathetic to the position of Natty, [Mohegan], and . . . Oliver Effingham, seems not at all abashed at the suggestion that she looks as though she might have some Indian blood” (41). These hints at Elizabeth's Native American heredity are, of course, no more accurate than they are for Edwards, for she is certainly not a Native American's daughter, but Cooper's choice to link Elizabeth with the Native American people through familial name-calling and physical likeness connects her even more strongly to Edwards as future inheritor of the land who will, like the Native American people, respect the land and ensure its posterity.

The spring fishing excursion exposes Elizabeth to three different wilderness ethics, represented by her father, Richard Jones, and Mohegan and Bumppo. When Elizabeth goes fishing with Bumppo and Mohegan she experiences their Native American sensitivity and

respect toward the land in their commitment to take only what is needed. Her positive experience suggests that her future overseeing of Templeton will differ greatly from that of her father, who professes the need for conservation yet engages in hedonistic wastefulness, and from Richard Jones, whose wilderness ethic is characterized by greed and anthropocentrism. Land and resources are, for Jones, existent for man's use, and destroying the beauty and stability of the land to gain one's desires is completely acceptable because, in his mind, the land's abundance is endless. His wilderness ethic is apparent in his definition of "fishing": "give me a good seine, that's fifty or sixty fathoms in length, with a jolly parcel of boatmen to crack their jokes, . . . and let us haul them in by thousands; I call that fishing" (252). Extravagant wastefulness characterizes his idea of fishing, and he has neither respect for the fish he kills nor concern for the fact that his intrusion on the lake destroys the creatures' habitat.

Marmaduke Temple's land ethic is also uncovered through Jones's argument for his own mode of fishing. Jones says, "I will show you...fishing—not nibble, nibble, nibble, as 'duke does, when he goes after the salmon-trout. There he will sit, for hours, in a broiling sun, or, perhaps, over a hole in the ice, in the coldest days in winter, under the lee of a few bushes, and not a fish he will catch, after all this mortification of the flesh" (252). Although Jones paints a very unpleasant image of a fishing experience, Marmaduke responds, "Ah, Dickon . . . thou knowest but little of the pleasure there is in playing with the hook and line, or thou wouldst be more saving of the game" (252). Marmaduke sees Jones's wastefulness, but has also too often in his hedonism forgotten his own goals of conservation in order to "play" in nature's abundance, exposed by Jones's destructive tactics. Even with Jones's fishing expedition, Marmaduke "yield[s] to the excitement of the moment" and takes his part in hauling in the net, which contains approximately one thousand bass (259), only to later lament the fact that so many fish will be

wasted. He cannot, in other words, temper his own pleasure, an act necessary to truly conserve resources for future generations.

Before she watches Bumpo and Mohegan fish, Elizabeth is aware only of Jones's and her father's modes of fishing. Jones says, "I invite the company to attend, and then let them decide between us" (252) which is the best method; however, Elizabeth experiences another wilderness ethic when Bumpo and Mohegan provide her with a personal experience of their way of fishing. Their fishing is defined by minimal impact to the creatures' space, respect for the individual creature hunted, and purposefully taking only that which is necessary for their daily needs. After Jones's first haul with the seine, which Elizabeth and Louisa only experience from afar, Bumpo and Mohegan arrive in Mohegan's hand-crafted canoe. Despite fearing that the canoe is frail, when Edwards assures her of "its perfect safety" and entices her with a poignant description of spear fishing, Elizabeth's feelings change: "she changed, suddenly, from an apprehension of the danger of the excursion, to a desire to participate in its pleasures" (267). Her growth toward Bumpo and Mohegan's wilderness ethic, therefore, begins with her open-minded willingness to enter into their experience of fishing firsthand and, in Paul's words, "confront the unfamiliar" (189) without allowing fear of the unknown inhibit her.

Bumpo and Mohegan's fishing expedition contrasts sharply with Richard Jones's previous fishing haul and allows Elizabeth to judge the value of each. Elizabeth is excited about Jones's haul of thousands of fish because she thinks that the village people will eat all of the catch, making the fish a "great blessing to the country, and a powerful friend to the poor" (260). Her father informs her, however, that even the poor are "always prodigal . . . where there is plenty, and seldom think of a provision against the morrow" (260). In contrast, Bumpo and Mohegan's fishing eliminates the wastefulness of taking more than one's necessary portion. After

Bumppo spears a single fish, one that he has taken a long time to find and kill, he says, “That will do, John . . . I shall not strike another blow tonight,” to which Mohegan “replie[s] with the simple and energetic monosyllable of— 'Good.’” (270). This simplicity, furthermore, defines Bumppo and Mohegan's entire experience. For example, Bumppo carries a single spear, and they remain silent in their fishing excursion in order to not scare the fish: “A slight gesture with his spear, indicated the way in which the Leather-stocking wished to go, and a profound silence was preserved by the whole party” (268). Their silence, as well as their canoe designed simply in order to glide through the water without disturbing the fish, contrasts sharply with the noise of Jones's huge vessel and heavy man-powered seine which requires loud orders to maneuver. Bumppo and Mohegan's attempt to make as little impact on the environment as possible by spearing only one fish, maintaining silence, and utilizing a tool that does not upset the waters bespeaks their respect for nature and its inhabitants.

Elizabeth's experience on the lake also includes for her a certain amount of dazzle or charm, what one might label magical or supernatural, that she cannot experience with Jones's fishing, and Cooper contrasts her vision in both experiences in order to align her even more fully with Bumppo and Mohegan. When Jones leaves shore for the first catch, Elizabeth's participation is extremely limited: she can only “watch the motion of the batteau, as it pulled from shore . . . but it very soon disappeared in the darkness, when the ear was her only guide to its evolutions” (256). When they pull in the first catch, she “strain[s] her eyes” in order to vaguely see the men haul in the catch (258). Jones's fishing limits her participation even as an observer, but her inclusion in Bumppo and Mohegan's fishing boat permits a more personal interaction with nature's beauties and mysteries and exposes her to sights that the other mode of fishing, focused on quantity rather than quality, makes impossible. For example, the lights on both boats are used

to entice fish to come to the surface, but Jones's fishing does not depend on this effect, for the seine drags across the bottom of the lake, picking up anything in its path. Bumppo's torch light, however, is used as a tool for success and also enables Elizabeth to see the lake as never before, to penetrate its depths and see the creature in its natural element as the fish, too, by rising toward the light, permits her to penetrate its secret abode. When Bumppo asks Mohegan to go into deeper water in order to attempt to catch a "shiner," they add a "few additional knots" to their torch so its light "penetrate[s] to the bottom" (269). Elizabeth's "curiosity" is "excited by this unusual exposure of the secrets of the lake" and, as she looks at the chosen fish, it shows its interest in the light by raising itself toward it (269). The narrator describes this moment for Elizabeth as supernatural, for only Benjamin's voice from the heavier boat "awakened" her from the "trance" caused by her "gazing" into nature (270). Leland Person, moreover, connects this importance of individual experience with conservation, arguing that "the main objective [of the fishing scene] exceeds the obvious object lesson in conservation. Cooper seemed to recognize that conservation needed to be rooted in appreciation, in a subject-object relationship between human and natural being that at least approached a subject-subject relationship," which Elizabeth achieves when Natty "present[s] Elizabeth [with] a gift of vision of the huge lake trout" (10).

When Mohegan and Bumppo soon maneuver the canoe so that they can watch the larger fishing endeavor, the same light on the water that allows Elizabeth to penetrate the depths and see the fish that Bumppo spears permits her to see how unnatural the other fishing expedition is. When Kirby, a worker on the boat, accidentally knocks Benjamin, who is standing at the stern, into the lake, the party soon discovers the Benjamin cannot swim and Mohegan and Bumppo travel close so that their light can show where Benjamin is (271). Elizabeth's view of Benjamin in the lake as the light once again allows her to penetrate its depth contrasts sharply with the

earlier, natural, magical vision she has when she sees the fish: “The blood of Elizabeth curdled to her heart, as she saw [Benjamin] thus extended under an immense sheet of water, apparently in motion, by the undulations of the dying waves, with its face and hands, viewed by that light, and through the medium of the fluid, already coloured with hues like death” (272). Jones's and others' greediness causes this accident, for the management of a smaller vessel would not have endangered Benjamin as much. Through Elizabeth's gaze of his fallen form, Cooper most vividly contrasts the naturalness, appropriateness, and success of Bumppo and Mohegan's mode of fishing and, thus, their wilderness ethic, with the unnaturalness of Jones's fishing. Bumppo and Mohegan's fishing highlights a wilderness ethic that, to use Lamb, Goodrich, and Brame's words, “strengthen[s]” Elizabeth's “connection to wild lands, enabling the celebration of joy, personal fulfillment, and spiritual contentment commonly found in the wilderness experience” (6). The supernatural or magical quality of her experience alludes to this joy or spiritual contentment. The opposing unnatural image of Benjamin drowning in the same lake, however, provides an opposite effect, as all she sees is surrounded by the quality of death. Because how one acts within nature is indicative of one's wilderness ethic, one can conclude that Jones's ethic does not promote true joy, fulfillment, or contentment but only danger to both people and nature.

Elizabeth and Oliver's role and responsibility will be to find a balanced use of the land. They must recognize the past and possibly future need for seines, which “were made” so that “the lakes and rivers” could be “dragged for fish” for the survival of the people (234), but at the same time they must reject Jones's acts of wastefulness, such as dragging the lake not once but twice and not using the majority of the fish. Privileged to enter into the Native American wilderness ethic and gaze into the water and see what is so often hidden, Elizabeth gains a respect and awe for nature that Richard Jones's greed and desire to control nature will never

allow him to develop and that her father's hedonism causes him to ignore in key moments of necessary discipline and restraint. By modeling the choice to take only that which is necessary and sharing their daily act of providing food for themselves, Bumppo and Mohegan teach Elizabeth a true respect for nature; her willingness to experience the new or unknown and their willingness to share their knowledge results in Elizabeth penetrating the depths of the lake with her gaze and coming face to face with the fish, or the wild, in a way that makes her recognize the individuality of each creature and its importance for human nourishment and survival. We are left to conclude that, based on what she has learned through her experiences, Elizabeth will espouse a balance between land use and conservation, which Oliver Edwards already practices, and that the two together will cultivate this ethic throughout their rule over Templeton's lands. Elizabeth's gentle influence over the townspeople will make it easier for the townspeople to adopt her views, and the laws of Templeton will someday bear out this more balanced land ethic, eliminating the waste of resources committed by so many and conserving what land is left.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

Elizabeth's character is clearly more complicated than most critics have recognized throughout the many years of Cooper criticism. Even before the American wilderness myth is fully formed, she debunks the notion that the wilderness is a space only suitable for men, and her interactions with the landscape and others in this space oftentimes surprises or even offends others who think activities like turkey shoots and horseback riding are too rough or masculine for women. Elizabeth also challenges the angel of the house's too often sickly femininity, especially as she repeatedly shows herself as capable and assertive, unlike her friend Louisa who is

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<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth's experience also aligns her more with Edwards, whose respect for Bumppo and Mohegan and their hunting and fishing way of life is clear through his continued relationship with them even after he moves into the Temple house. Elizabeth's adoption of a more Native American view of nature, therefore, is important not only in that it shows her growth as an individual but also narratively as Cooper moves toward the happy ending of marriage by uniting the worldviews and sympathies of the lovers.

constantly a liability to everyone's safety in the wilderness. Without the wilderness and her experiences in that space, Elizabeth would not grow as a character, nor would she be able to accept an environmental ethic based on Bumpo and Mohegan's respect and use of the land and its resources, for experiencing their way of fishing enables her to embrace a more intimate, less invasive connection to the natural world.

The freedoms that she claims in the wilderness space, however, are also defined by and dependent on her social status and power in society, and Elizabeth is often blinded by her loyalty to the white patriarchal ruling class and does not recognize her own complicity in the racism and classism perpetuated by the established social hierarchy. In key moments, such as during interactions with Freeborn or Mohegan, when Elizabeth could assert an egalitarian ethic toward others and assert their right to the same autonomy she claims for herself, Elizabeth instead becomes the extended hand of the “benevolent” patriarchy. Her lasting challenge to society, therefore, is her testing of the limits of accepted gender roles and expectations through her wilderness adventures and in her continued management of the lands even after marriage. Elizabeth enters into a space that is considered a man's realm and not only challenges the expectations that others have for her because she is a woman but also succeeds or excels in her chosen endeavors or adventures. Her character, therefore, disrupts society's growing insistence on separate spheres of life and influence for men and women, giving the white, upper-class woman impetus and power to change society's expectations for women so that they, too, can experience freedom associated with wilderness. Her wilderness experiences also allow her to freely choose a land ethic which will most ensure the future prosperity of Templeton as it balances the land's use and conservation. Elizabeth challenges power relations of the time and, by successfully claiming the freedoms of the wilderness, invites other women to do the same.



“Travellers are privileged to do the most improper things with perfect propriety,  
that is one charm of travelling.”<sup>50</sup>:

Isabella Bird:

Rocky Mountain Traveler, Mountaineer, Adventurer, Lady

Isabella Bird's time in and exploration of the Rocky Mountains in 1873, which resulted in her book *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* published six years later,<sup>51</sup> is worth briefly thinking about in relation to a comment that Henry David Thoreau makes in his 1862 essay “Walking,” which highlights the nineteenth-century woman’s struggle to be free and active partakers of walks into the western wildness. Thoreau writes, “How womankind, who are confined to the house still more than men, stand it, I do not know; but I have ground to suspect that most of them do not *stand* it at all” (n. pag.). Rather, when Thoreau and his walking companions are coming back from their morning journeys, women are sleeping in the houses they pass. For reasons Thoreau does not discuss, women cannot or do not access the outdoors, specifically the wilderness that he reaches as he continues to walk further westward and away from society. Instead the woman is relegated to the domestic household where she sleeps, an image that alludes to spiritual as well as mental and physical fatigue.<sup>52</sup> Thoreau also does not include women in his call to pay societal debts and leave behind father, mother, and children

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<sup>50</sup> qtd. in Lila Marz. Harper, *Solitary Travelers: Nineteenth-Century Women's Travel Narratives and the Scientific Vocation* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2001), 82. Bird wrote this in a letter during her Hawaii trip.

<sup>51</sup> Before being published in 1879 as a book of letters, Bird's *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* was first written as letters to her sister, then published serially in 1878 as “Letters from the Rocky Mountains” in the *Leisure Hour*. Her popular work went through eight editions before 1912. (Boorstin xvii-xvii).

<sup>52</sup> David Seed notes, for instance, that in “Walking” Thoreau “identifies travel with the movement of the mind so that, however much he seems to be bounded by his physical dwelling and immediate New England neighborhood, Thoreau actually wanders across huge tracts of time in a kind of peripatetic meditation on civilization” (5). If traveling is both physical and mental, the sleeping women are taking no part in either their mental or physical development in relation to their country. Moreover, Thoreau's *Walden* continuously emphasizes the idea of being awake, and this emphasis includes both a physical as well as mental of spiritual state. This idea of women not being able to partake in the activity of walking or outdoor venture is also highlighted by Margaret Fuller in her 1843 *Summer on the Lakes*, which recounts her journey to the Niagara Falls and Great Lakes region. She says in her work, for instances that, for women, “resources for pleasure” often do not exist because “they have not learnt to ride to drive, to row, alone” (*Summer* 62). While men, Fuller notes, may enjoy a fishing excursion, for example, women “found themselves confined to a comfortless and laborious indoor life” (*Summer* 117).

before walking westward, further pointing out a common cultural assumption or reality concerning woman during his time: women are relegated to the home and its extensions, such as the garden or town; wilderness is for men. Although in the last thirty years there has been a surge toward recovering women's writing about the frontier or west, bringing forth texts that complicate the idea of a male-dominated settlement of America, many nineteenth-century texts already studied echo the assumption that women do not belong in the wilderness. As well, the lack of women wilderness adventurers and the emphasis on the domestic garden and home in American literature and letters further reinforces their absence from the wilderness. Even Isabella Bird, herself a famous travel writer and plucky adventurer, states at one point in her journey to Longs Peak in the Estes Park region of Colorado, "This is no region for tourists and women, only for a few elk and bear hunters at times" (54).<sup>53</sup> Her comment begs the question, "What, then, was *she* doing there?"

A simple answer to the question of why Bird was in the Rocky Mountains does not exist. As I will show, Bird traveled for several reasons, including for health, for adventure, and for escape from societal restrictions placed upon her as a middle to upper-class woman of her time. An often sickly woman, Bird utilized her doctor's remedy of travel after trying many other cures, and she found that traveling provided her with the freedom that she needed to not only regain her health but thrive as a person. Just as important as why Bird was there, however, is what the account of her experience shows us about her and others' relationship to wilderness and the time period and area in which she traveled. Because traveling could often be viewed as unwomanly, Bird had to carefully represent herself as a lady throughout her Colorado adventures, rhetorically navigating the tension between society's ideas of femininity and the unbridled freedom

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<sup>53</sup> I utilize the name Longs Peak, without the use of an apostrophe, because this is how the name of the peak is today spelled. When quoting Bird, however, I will use her spelling, "Long's Peak," as I have found no evidence that this version is incorrect for the time period.

associated with the wilderness and frontier. Also, Bird's descriptions of and interactions with people of different races and classes living in the west, in addition to her careful construction of her own gender, race, and class identity as an upper-class white woman traveling and dwelling in the wilderness, illuminate multiple ways that race, class, and gender affected the experience of “freedom” associated with the west and wilderness in the nineteenth century.

Health issues prompted Bird's travels, but finding and experiencing solitude and beautiful scenery also drew Bird to Colorado, the seeking of which also encourages her to test her own limits. This larger goal of finding solitude frames other adventures that Bird has along her travel route. As a visitor with money and leisure, Bird appropriates the freedom that the masculine west represents and utilizes it to gain valuable and interesting experiences, such as climbing a mountain or traveling over 700 miles on horseback through the country, and these experiences often provide the solitude and beauty she seeks; in fact, the freedom-driven west prompts her to test the limits of her own physical strength and standards of female propriety, as can especially be seen during her climb up Longs Peak.<sup>54</sup> This challenging of her own limitations sharply contrasts with the experiences of women who live in the region, however, for the women that she meets are married or working women without the money and leisure to leave and who are clearly burdened by life in the west. Bird's account of other women hints that Thoreau's assertion, that women are not able to access the freedom associated with wilderness, is often true, for the women Bird meets and writes about live in hardship. Ultimately the ability to access freedom in this space, the text shows, depends on wealth, which enables mobility.

Bird's unique subject position as a middle-class British outsider in America allows her to explore the myth of the American frontier through an outsider's perspective, and the fact that she

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<sup>54</sup> Bird's account also interestingly highlights ways in which usual gender expectations for both sexes can be altered, for some single men she meets successfully tend to the domestic realm, and she, in the meantime, becomes a cowpoke and adventurer well-known for her riding ability.

has the money and leisure to travel, as well as the ability to write and justify her travels, allows her to choose the subject positions of the objective traveler or tourist, or to take on other roles, such as servant, cowpoke, or adventurer when she chooses to delve more deeply into the west's opportunities.<sup>55</sup> However, although she readily adopts the subject position of servant or adventurer, she refuses to embrace a position that would help her to better understand other western people, such as the desperado or the Native American: she maintains an objective distance in her depiction of both in order to maintain the appearance of respectable white femininity, or, when she does discuss the desperado Jim Nugent, she does so to highlight her own femininity and goodness. She also refuses to delve deeply into the Native American presence in the west, yet what she does share, especially in relation to the tensions over the land, undermines any notion of western cultural white hegemony—the “other” is always present, even if relegated to a marginal status in Bird's text. Bird's text thus provides a unique perspective of the west through the eyes of a woman who must carefully construct her identity for readers in order to gain and justify her sought-after freedom yet still adhere to feminine conventions. This balancing act of working within masculine paradigms of the west yet maintaining her lady-like appearance heavily influences her narrative as it affects her depiction of herself in relation to others, yet, in a wilderness region culturally associated with freedom, Bird also challenges expectations of upper-class femininity through her independence, fortitude, adventuresome spirit, and deliberate

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<sup>55</sup> James Buzard provides a lengthy analysis of the terms “tourist” and “traveller” to tease out the different connotations behind the terms as they appear throughout the history of tourism, but, as he points out, “there is no absolute consistency in the use of the terms themselves. . . . 'Traveller' and 'tourist' have been used interchangeably, as well as in opposition” (14). In my work I use these terms interchangeably as to not create confusion or get hung up on terms, especially because, based on Buzard's analysis, I could make an argument for Bird being both traveler and tourist at different times throughout her experience. Also, no matter which role, servant, cowpoke, etc., that Bird chooses to momentarily adopt, her status of lady is always secured. Her role of cowpoke, not discussed in this chapter, is case in point. Although she takes on what is considered to be a man's labor, she justifies doing so by the fact that she is being useful to Evans, her landlord who desperately needs help; she thus maintains her ladylike dignity while thoroughly enjoying the challenges and excitement of rounding cattle. She works several times upon Evans' request and enjoys her unpaid labor, but when Evans offers to pay her to work through winter, she refuses.

traversing of gender and class delineations.

Bird's Legitimizing Illness:

The “woman of the house” ideal that Barbara Welter's groundbreaking essay presents provides a good basic delineation of the expectations of white womanhood in the nineteenth century. According to Welter, the ideal middle and upper-class Victorian woman had several main traits: “piety, purity, submissiveness, . . . domesticity,” and passivity (Welter 21). Since Welter's essay, critics have scrutinized, reevaluated, and complicated the discussion of the Victorian woman by exploring ways women writers and characters challenge these ideals or highlight different values, and we have discovered that, although the traits that Welter points out are certainly held up as a standard for white women of the time, women challenging the boundaries of culturally sanctioned behavior and identity permeate the literature of the nineteenth century, and Isabella Bird is no exception. Sometimes challenges to the cult of true womanhood were subtle transgressing of accepted behavior, as with Elizabeth Temple's appropriation of the male gaze in Cooper's *The Pioneers*, and sometimes challenges were cloaked in humor, as with Fanny Fern's sarcasm in her well-read newspaper vignettes in *New York Ledger* or hinted at in works like her autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall* (1854). And sometimes the challenges were direct and clear, as in Sojourner Truth's “Ain't I a Woman” speech that asserted the womanhood of black women against the racialized and classist ideology of the cult of true womanhood.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Rachel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) highlights the racist dimensions of the cult of true womanhood and how women responded. As she states, “Any historical investigation of the ideological boundaries of the cult of true womanhood is a sterile field without a recognition of the dialectical relationship with the alternative sexual code associated with the black woman. Existing outside the definition of true womanhood, black female sexuality was nonetheless used to define what these boundaries were” (30). Later she clarifies what black women writers had to do to combat the ideology of true womanhood: “Black women, in gaining their public presence as writers, would directly confront the political

Bird's chosen epistolary form for her text helped her, like other women, respond to the demands of middle and upper-class femininity yet justify entering into the public realm. Like women of her time, Bird had to negotiate the angel of the house ideal with her own hopes and desires for self-definition, and she struggled with her socially-sanctioned role in society and her own desires, which her background as well as her letters themselves highlight. Bird also knew before traveling that she would want to publish pieces of her adventure, for she already had a history of published works. By framing her text as personal letters to her sister, Bird adheres to a form that was socially acceptable for women, as the writing of letters was something that women did mostly from home. Her form also promotes a sense of intimacy or privacy that a letter addressed to a dear sister should incite, for, although her final product was edited from her original letters, the epistolary form still creates the sense that one is looking into an unedited view of her experiences and that the text is meant only for the private realm. Her epistolary form ultimately connects Bird to home and hearth in the reader's imagination, and thus to feminine standards, because she remains connected to a beloved sister through the only means of communication while so far from home.

Part of Bird's justification for leaving home and traveling is her multiple health issues, for one can discern from Bird's life and letters that her Colorado trip was at least partially undertaken to improve her health through travel. This is her stated reason in her letters and certainly part of the impetus for traveling to Colorado, which was an ideal destination as a popular rest area for consumptives in the mid-nineteenth-century. Bird was one among many women of the upper classes in nineteenth-century England whose doctor prescribed a "change of air" as a treatment for health complaints; but "a change of air" meant or would come to mean a

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and economic dimensions of their subjugation. They had to define a discourse of black womanhood which would not only address their exclusion from the ideology of true womanhood but, as a consequence of this exclusion, would also rescue their bodies from a persistent association with illicit sexuality" (32).

lot more than simply a remedy to women like Bird who found that travel provided a potential cure for their physical illness but also procured freedom from social constraints and the daily ennui of the household that often weighed them down psychologically, the toll of which too often resulted in physical illness.<sup>57</sup>

Bird's claim to be traveling for health benefits thus deserves attention because it points to a cultural problem of the nineteenth century—namely, that women were socially and physically constrained by social expectations and that the succeeding boredom, inability to dream and explore, and pressure to live up to society's demands often resulted in real or perceived illness. As Dorothy Middleton notes, Bird “suffered from the kind of ill health common to many of the lady travellers, probably caused to a large degree by frustration and boredom” (*Victorian Lady Travelers* 68-9). The illness, in turn, was treated by releasing the woman from society for a period of time through travel, and, through the adventure of travel, the woman would often regain her health as well as an interest in life. Laura Laffrado argues, “In nineteenth-century U.S. culture, the dominant appearance and behavioral scripts promoted for women were narrow, limited, and nearly impossible to avoid. The women who best met these standards were fictions of the patriarchal gaze: fantasy illustrations or living women significantly modified by indoctrination, dependence, and repression” (8). Women like Elizabeth Temple and Isabella

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<sup>57</sup> Monica Anderson notes that in the past 20-30 years, many women's travel accounts, popular and well critiqued at their time of publication but sitting dormant in libraries or archives for many years since, have gained new focus, especially for postcolonial critics. Anderson asserts that studies of British imperialism, “much of it from a postcolonial perspective,” have changed how we “write about nineteenth-century women travelers and their texts,” and work “in feminist theory, discourse theory, political and cultural theory, and autobiography and biography” (16). Because so many travel writings are viewed from a postcolonial perspective, I want to clarify that although Bird's text can be explored using this critical focus, this trip to America did not have the underlying imperialistic agenda that underscored her later travels. As Monica Anderson points out in *Women and the Politics of Travel, 1870-1914*, not until the 1880s and 1890s did the “increase in enthusiasm for Imperial expansion—the New Imperialism.”—come into full force (13). Also, as Kay Chubbuck states, every journey Bird took was for a cause, including “for health, for empire, for good deeds . . .” (Introduction 1); Preceding England's New Imperialism, Bird's 1873 travels were prompted more by her personal agenda for health than for nation or even good deeds, although both the latter reasons also come into play in lesser degrees. The scope of this work, therefore, will mostly explore Bird's personal agenda for health and pleasure. My later focus on the Native American presence in Bird's work, however, will highlight Bird's complicity in the white masculine colonizer's belief system.

Bird—those spirited women with strong self-will—struggled against these prescriptions and found ways to undermine them. Laffrado writes about “ways in which women diverged from conventional gender scripts and also wrote of their divergences, implicitly offering subversive alternative female models” (6), including in her criticism how familial devotion, motherhood, and patriotism permitted unacceptable behaviors such as writing and selling one's work, promiscuity, freedom to travel, and cross dressing and fighting in battle (10). Dorothy Middleton in “Some Victorian Lady Travelers” notes that travel for Bird “was a key to freedom from the domestic routines which satisfied her younger sister, but bored Isabella almost literally to death” (69). There were clearly others who felt the same way as Bird about the constraining demands of woman's lot in England and who found their freedom in travel.

I would add sickness to the list of familial devotion, motherhood, and patriotism, which validated usually unacceptable female behavior. Many of Bird's activities, such as traveling without an escort, putting herself in danger of being physically assaulted while traveling alone, attempting to do what was considered a man's labor when she helps her landlord with cattle rounding, and testing her physical limitations for the sheer adventure, become acceptable partially because they stem from Bird's travels as a “sick” individual looking to become well. Andrew Hill Clark in his 1966 “Forward” to Bird's *The Englishwoman in America* notes that “English writers on America were legion in the later nineteenth century and books by peripatetic, upper-class Englishwomen, travelling for their health, were neither few nor highly regarded by professionals” (ix).<sup>58</sup> The large number of upper-class women traveling for health and writing

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<sup>58</sup> We must question Clark's meaning of “professionals,” however, remembering that, since his 1966 critique, there has been a revaluing of women's texts as well as revisions of and new dialogue concerning the criteria that denotes valuable literature. The “professionals” to whom Clark refers most probably include the men of London's Royal Geographical Society, where sexism was overt and women were refused their much-deserved distinction and respect. The popularity of women's travel writing, however, points to its importance and its worth both then and now. Anderson, for instance, notes, “In general, individual women's travel writing across the nineteenth century received good press. As well, more general reviews such as Elizabeth Rigby's article on the “Lady Travellers” published in



accounts of that travel gives every impression that Bird was not alone in utilizing the escape route of travel provided by health professionals. She was an anomaly, however, in the fact that, unlike the writing of most of the other women escaping both their social constraints and their ill health through travel, her writing was well-received and respected. The success of her travel books made her “one of the best known travel writers of her day” (Kaye “Introduction” xx).<sup>59</sup>

Traveling for health benefits adheres to a socially-sanctioned prescription for womanly behavior, thus allowing traveling under this pretense to become another way that women in the nineteenth century gained their sought-after freedom. In the process of finding their own freedom and definition outside of the standards of ideal femininity, women, as Laffrado and others argue, often also underscored those prescriptions in order to sanction the approval of the masses. In the case of Bird and other women travelers, this often meant constructing their identities to fit the womanly ideal to counter the public perception of their unfeminine activities. As Laffrado says, “For women, cultural approbation of one's behavior was constructed as crucial. In private life, women who entered the historical record and women who did not were various and varied. In public models created by the machines of representation, little variety existed” (8). These women latched onto and promoted valued social ideals such as motherhood and patriotism in order to gain approval and help their behavior appear less threatening to society. The need to balance usually unacceptable behavior with conventional womanhood is no different for Bird: traveling under the label of an invalid allowed Bird to do many activities she desired and enjoyed and

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the *Quarterly Review* in 1845 expressed positive sentiments regarding women's travel. The depreciation comes later in the century when women are seen to be threatening the old happy status quo” (19).

<sup>59</sup> Morin clarifies Bird's successes, undergirded by class: “Her class privilege allowed her to travel the world, become one of its foremost mountaineers and the first woman elected to London's Royal Geographical Society (in 1892), and publish nine travel books. She traveled and wrote widely on Japan, the Middle East, Tibet, and China; she is certainly among the best known and most studied of Victorian women travelers in North America, with two popular books on the subject” (1). Morin adds that Bird was also “one of the first Euro-American women to wear pants in public” (2), which is not surprising given the level of activity she choose as well as her love of the Hawaiian riding dress, which helped her to ride more comfortably and thus reduce the stress on her back caused by riding side-saddle.

permitted her the solitude and time away from society's presumptuousness and judgmental dogmas, but she also had to counter her wayward activities by continuously pointing to her femininity and female honor, which must also be protected by the male figures, even desperados, that she encounters.<sup>60</sup> In keeping with representations of the west, Bird constructs Colorado as a place full of lawlessness and freedom, but, to counterbalance the lawlessness and freedom which can turn people into brutes, Bird also depicts Colorado as a place where men's chivalry always trumps brutishness when they encounter "respectable" women.

Bird's biography highlights how illness facilitated her beginning travels as well as her marked improvement upon leaving home for the first few trips.<sup>61</sup> A glaringly evident dichotomy exists between Bird's ill health at home in England and her robust health and carefree spirit abroad. Susan Armitage notes that when Bird lived in Edinburgh before she began traveling, she was "plain, soft-spoken, and timid. Furthermore, she was an invalid, incapacitated for months at a time with a chronic spinal disease" (26). The fact that Isabella Bird was legitimately ill is well documented in biographies and other articles.<sup>62</sup> She was always a sickly child, and, at the age of

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<sup>60</sup> Two other aspects of Bird's construction of her feminine identity are worth mentioning here. First, Bird uses the genre of the letter to help her writings and her travels be more accepted, for, if she is an invalid, then the letters show her devotion to her sister, who she must be away from for so long. The epistolary form is also fitting, as it gives the impression of emphasizing the personal realm of the family rather than the public realm, despite the fact that the letters are being published. Second, Bird constructs herself as being useful and of service to others, so that she often appears as doing good for others in her travels and is therefore still exhibiting the feminine ideal. When her landlord Evans asks her numerous times to help out as a ranch hand, for instance, Bird counters the fact that she embraces a man's role with the womanly virtue of being helpful and accommodating. Being helpful also influences Bird's decision to take on the role of a servant, which I will discuss later. Although she wants to cross class boundaries to experience servanthood, her overarching goal, as she depicts it, is to help her friends, thus making an action which is usually taboo completely acceptable and womanly under the circumstances.

<sup>61</sup> Although I believe that Bird had health issues that travel helped to alleviate, the idea that she was faking some of her illness, as many women did to attain their desired freedom, is not entirely out of the question. After my research I am convinced that she was indeed ill, although a lot of her illness was exacerbated because of her boredom and feelings of pressure to conform to her expected role as dutiful daughter and Victorian woman.

<sup>62</sup> Chubbuck provides excellent information about how illness affected Bird, but I must disagree with her overall conclusions that "it seems sure that Isabella's illness originated in her mind" and that Bird was, overall, a "neurasthenic: a woman bedeviled by physiological symptoms that arose principally from psychological problems" (6). Chubbuck places too much emphasis on Bird's illness being incited by her mind. I lean more toward the conclusion that Bird was physically more prone to illness, which society's confinement and "remedies," as well as her own mental constitution, exacerbated.

eighteen had a very dangerous operation to remove a fibroid tumor near her spine (Kay 30, Steffoff 30). After this operation her father took her to the Scottish Highlands to help her recover, and Bird's rapid health improvement in reaction to the novel scenery is repeated throughout her subsequent travels: "As soon as Isabella arrived amid the heather-covered hills, she completely forgot her pain and spent hours scrambling up the steep, narrow trails and trekking over miles of rocky, mist-covered mountains" (Kaye 30). Over the next few years, however, as Rebecca Steffoff notes, "her health and spirits did not improve. She could hardly walk or get out of bed" (30). It was at this time, when Bird was 23, that the doctors prescribed her first remedy of travel. The trip included travels to parts of Canada and America, including "Montreal, Toronto, Chicago, and New England" (Steffoff 30) and resulted in her well-received book *The Englishwoman in America*, published in 1856 (Steffoff 31).<sup>63</sup> Ann Ronalds notes that in this trip Bird "covered several thousand miles, her illness almost forgotten in her enthusiasm for new scenes" (89). When this trip did not heal her completely, however, Bird's father sent her on another venture to America, and this time studied Christianity, eventually publishing her second book, *The Aspects of Religion in the United States of America*, published in 1859 (Birkett, *Off the Beaten Track*, 22).

Bird's trip to the Rocky Mountains is, therefore, not the first trip that she had taken for her health, for her 1854 travels to Canada and America at the age of twenty-two were predicated on the goal of improved health.<sup>64</sup> That trip did indeed improve her health, and she came home feeling very well. Soon after she came home, however, her father died, and Bird blamed herself and vowed to remain at home and be self-sacrificial, as she believed her father would have

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<sup>63</sup> See also Ann Ronald's introduction, which outlines in more detail Bird's travel itinerary on this particular trip (89).

<sup>64</sup> Evelyn Kaye notes that even on this first trip Bird was interested in writing a book about her travels. Her first few weeks were spent "on her cousins' farm on Prince Edward Island in Canada," but, after becoming increasingly interested in America and ignoring warnings from her relatives, Bird packed her bags to travel to America (31). She survived a very dangerous storm on her route to Maine, and then traveled from Maine to Ohio. From Ohio she "went to Chicago and Detroit, took a boat across Lake Erie and went to visit Niagara Falls," where the tourism thoroughly disappointed her (32). She also visited Montreal, Quebec, and New York City on this trip before taking a boat out of Boston to Halifax. The entire trip covered more than 6,000 miles and took about a year (33).

wanted. As Kaye notes, for many years after his death Bird contented herself with writing and being close to home, but in 1869 she realized that she needed “something challenging to do” (42). Or, as Middleton says, “the frustrated egoism which is a part of all strong natures was struggling to be free and could not find release within the range of a Victorian woman” (21). Bird's need to have some sort of change and “challenge” in her life most probably exacerbated her health issues by drawing her attention to the issues she may have been able to ignore had her life included more adventure. Once again experiencing headaches and back pain, and again becoming anxious about her own health, Bird was given the old remedy—a change of air (Kaye 44). This time sickness prompted her trip to Australia and America, and eventually Colorado.<sup>65</sup>

Although the Rocky Mountains were a part of Bird's planned travel itinerary, circumstances led her to land in Hawaii, where she lingered for six months exploring the islands.<sup>66</sup> Here she found the freedom from social constraints and expectations that she so craved and that developed the courage and desire in her for more, which she continued to seek for the rest of her life. In Hawaii she was free to explore the islands on her own and take on adventures; she tells her sister in a letter, “I like the independent ways of going off on my 2 hour journey alone crossing in my scow swimming and fording my rivers and getting in wet up to my waist! How frightful we should think it at home if we heard of anyone 'having had' to swim a river” (qtd.

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<sup>65</sup> An alternate argument concerning Bird's choice of Colorado is that she traveled to find a husband. Chubbuck posits this in her work, arguing that she could find no better locations to travel than “Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, and Colorado,” all of which “suffered from a dearth of marriageable women in precisely the years that Isabella visited” (16). She also argues that Isabella certainly had to have known about the lack of women in these regions: “British newspapers and magazines were loud in their complaints about the colonies' staggering superfluity of men, and they pleaded with English ladies to go out and join them” (16). Chubbuck even suggests that several trips to Massachusetts in the 1850s, prompted by her father, were undertaken with the hope that Bird would possibly find a husband, but, Chubbuck concludes, her hang up with her social class kept her from accepting any man she met over many years as being an acceptable husband (17). Susan Imbarrato in *Traveling Women : Narrative Visions of Early America* also hints at marriage as a longstanding reason for traveling west: “Families relocated with great dreams for their future, and for single, unmarried travelers, the new towns of the West promised new legacies” (1).

<sup>66</sup> Bird had met a woman on the boat who became her friend. The woman's son became gravely ill, and the woman begged to be let off the boat at the next possible location. Being a stranger to the islands, she asked Bird to accompany her. Always ready for adventure, with a desire to serve others when possible, Bird heartily agreed.

in Chubbuck 57-8). She continued to garner the freedom that exotic locales offered by actively engaging in often dangerous pursuits in the outdoors and by adopting new modes of behavior that, although unacceptable for a lady in England, were perfectly acceptable for an English lady in another part of the world. In Middleton's words, Bird, like other lady travelers in the nineteenth century "was able to enjoy a freedom of action unthinkable at home" (4). Bird's tour of the Hawaiian Islands, often called the Sandwich Islands in the nineteenth century, included "touring the plantations and forests on horseback, climbing volcanoes, and peering over cliffs and waterfalls" (Steffoff 31-2).<sup>67</sup> In Hawaii she "saw Hawaiian women riding astride their horses like men did, so she decided to do the same," soon discovering that riding astride rather than side-saddle allowed her to ride pain free for the first time (Steffoff 32).<sup>68</sup> Bird also eschewed the usual riding garb for the Hawaiian riding dress, which allowed both greater freedom of movement as well as the ability to ride astride rather than side-saddle, a practice she continued in Colorado except on rare occasions when she became concerned about her ladylike appearance in public.<sup>69</sup> Eventually, however, she realized that she had to leave the beautiful islands soon or,

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<sup>67</sup> According to Chubbuck, Bird ventured to the mouths of three volcanoes during her stay (140).

<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, despite her desire to always appear womanly, Bird differed from many of the lady travelers of her time in regards to riding. Middleton notes in her seminal work that the nineteenth-century woman traveler, in general, "deplored the occasional necessity of riding astride and could barely bring [herself] to wear trousers" (4). Monica Anderson, as well as other critics, put this "preference" into perspective by discussing how "socially correct dress was seen as a measure of one's social respectability, . . . being the visible manifestation of an individual's willingness to play by the rules" (209). As women travelers were already upsetting deeply ingrained social expectations for female behavior, any way that they could continue to appear appropriately feminine was embraced and exploited. Whereas other women refused to ride astride in order to keep up appearances, perhaps because of her poor spine, Bird, after discovering the joys of riding astride, hated having to ride side-saddle yet sometimes did so for the sake of appearances around cities where the English were present. As Pat Barr says, "That was Isabella's way: she was not an iconoclast and confined her comfortable unconventionalities to foreign parts where they were not necessarily judged as such" (29). Bird even assured her readers when she began to ride astride, "It was only my strong desire to see the volcano which made me consent to a mode of riding against which I have so strong a prejudice" (qtd. in Barr 29). But, coming to realize how much more easily and comfortably she could ride astride, Bird adopted the mode whenever possible after her volcano excursion.

<sup>69</sup> Her hatred of trousers aligned with that of most other lady travelers for many years as well, but she did not consider the Hawaiian riding outfit "trousers," (although others argued it was just as unfeminine) and was very invested in making sure that her outfits were feminine. According to Ingemanson, Bird eventually designed her own riding suit, which would be both feminine and "allow easy movement" (18). Middleton notes that after a *Times* writer described her "as riding in the Rockies in 'male habiments' she told John Murray [her publisher] that she had

she feared, she would never do so. After refusing a kind gentleman's hand in marriage, she felt that the appropriate time to leave had arrived. After living in Hawaii for nearly six months, she left for California and the rest of the American West. *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* begins with her time in California before she travels to Colorado Territory.<sup>70</sup>

Colorado most likely was a part of Bird's travel itinerary because the territory, known for its fresh air and scenery, was a popular site for consumptives. Although in her Colorado travels Bird never clarifies what her particular health issue is, Boorstin says that “when she set out for this trip,” which also included Australia, “she was still suffering from ill health, which she hoped to improve by travel,” giving the impression that the trip is predicated on the hope of recovery (xv). Bird was still clearly ill in the first part of her journey in Australia. In her private letter<sup>71</sup> dated Nov 8, 1872, she discusses a heat wave she experienced in Victoria, Australia, which brings on severe symptoms of illness: “I was never too hot but my life seemed extinguished. Neuralgia in my head[,] pain in my bones[,] pricking like pins and needles in my limbs[,]

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neither father nor brother to defend her reputation, [and therefore] she expected him personally to horsewhip the *Times* correspondent” (8). Bird also added a prefatory note to the second edition of her book, explaining in detail the ways in which her Hawaiian riding dress, now also called the “American Lady's Mountain Dress,” was “a thoroughly serviceable and feminine costume for mountaineering and other rough traveling in any part of the world” (qtd. in Birkett, *Spinsters Abroad*, 197-8). For further information concerning nineteenth-century ladies' travel clothes, see Dorothy Middleton, *Victorian Lady Travellers* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1965) 8-10. Evelyn A. Schlatter also has a very interesting article, “Drag's a Life: Women, Gender, and Cross-Dressing in the Nineteenth-Century West,” in which she posits that women posed as men in order to attain the independence that the west appeared to offer to all but only really offered to men (335). Her article illuminates how important clothing was in society's attempts to control gender identity. For other discussion on Victorian women travel and clothing, see chapter five of Monica Anderson, *Women and the Politics of Travel, 1870-1914* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2006) 198-221; Birgitta Maria Ingemanson, “Under Cover: The Paradox of Victorian Women's Travel Costume,” *Women and the Journey: The Female Travel Experience*, eds. Bonnie Frederick and Susan H. McLeod (Pullman: Washington State UP, 1993) 5-19; Jennifer Bernhardt Steadman, *Traveling Economies: American Women's Travel Writing*, (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2007) 141-66.

<sup>70</sup> Colorado was not a state at the time of Bird's visit in 1873. It did not become a state until 1876. Bird's trip to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) and America were only the beginning of a half-lifetime of adventures. Over the next thirty-one years, Bird also traveled to “Australia, New Zealand, . . . Japan, Malaya, Sinai, Tibet, Persia, Korea, and China at a time when ladies were supposed to be helpless and submissive,” according to Evelyn Kaye's introduction to *Amazing Traveler Isabella Bird: The Biography of a Victorian Woman* (n. pag.).

<sup>71</sup> Chubbuck collected and printed Bird's private letters. Throughout this chapter I make clear if I am quoting from her private letters. By this label I mean the original letter that Bird wrote to her sister and which she may have later edited for publication. Most of what I quote from Bird's private letters are pieces of information that she chose to leave out of her published account but that illuminate important aspects of her character or experience.

excruciating nervousness[,] exhaustion[,] inflamed eyes[,] sore throat[,] swollen glands below each ear[, and] stupidity. So it would be madness to stay” (qtd. in Chubbuck 46).

Bird's illnesses were certainly both psychosocial and real, but the medical practice's “remedies” and “treatments” for those real health problems most certainly exacerbated the problems and further degenerated Bird's already weak body. Chubbuck notes, “Isabella's symptoms were diverse. She had carbuncles on her spine,<sup>72</sup> lesions on her legs. She suffered from fevers, headaches, rashes, nausea, rheumatism, chest pains, muscle spasms and hair loss” at one point or another in her life, among other difficulties such as “abscesses on her feet and aching in her jaw” and resulting depression (4-5). Bird's recoveries, at least partially due to the social and mental freedom she embraced when abroad, are also probably due to the fact that she was no longer receiving the medical treatments in England and Scotland. Birgitta Ingemanson clarifies that the “role of the Victorian medical profession in keeping females physically immobile” is well documented in scholarship and that this “passivity” in itself made women ill, as they became “frail by an enforced sedentary existence without any outlet for action” (13). To add to Bird's already sedentary life at home, in Scotland Bird “underwent a number of operations (including one to remove her teeth); wore an uncomfortable steel brace at the back of her neck; and was bled regularly, both by incisions and by leeches” (Chubbuck 5). As if these “remedies” were not enough to produce more ailments, Bird also took laudanum and chlorodyne, which, according to Chubbuck, “can cause nausea, loss of appetite and constipation” (5), and potassium bromide, which during some points in her life she took three times a day, caused “psychological derangement”: Bird's ingestion of her potassium bromide at one point made her shake

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<sup>72</sup> Carbunculosis is a “staphylococcus skin infection that results in large, infectious knobs on the back of the spine” and comes with its own set of physical effects including “fever, fatigue, inflammation and malaise.” It can also create “lesions and abscesses all over the body- which Isabella had,” and, Chubbuck posits, it “may have been responsible for Isabella's heart pains, muscle spasms, night sweats and joint aches” (Chubbuck 6).

uncontrollably and feel terrified, then resulted in a bad rash (6). Finally, the alcohol she consumed to “soothe her nerves” could also have taken its physical toll (Chubbuck 6).

Steffoff sums up succinctly and wonderfully what the researcher of Bird comes to discover: “Isabella Bird Bishop was a strange combination—weak and ill when she was surrounded by the comforts of home, tireless and strong when she was traveling in circumstances that most people would have regarded as almost impossibly difficult” (40).<sup>73</sup> Clearly Bird did not find the “comforts of home” very comfortable to her constitution or able to meet her needs. Bird's journals and letters as well as her quick recovery once she is removed from the constraints of English society show that at least a part of her “illness” is attributable to psychosocial reasons. Evelyn Kaye notes that Bird felt guilty because she longed so intensely for travel and the subsequent depression that ensued made her sick. Thus, the doctors prescribed the perfect cure—a “change of air” and a “sea voyage,” which were “fashionable remedies for ailing ladies” (“Introduction” xxi). Bird may never have fully realized that her physical illness was exacerbated if not prompted by society's restraints, but, as Steffoff says, “something within her rebelled against [societal] conventions and made her ill whenever she tried to follow them” (41). The pressures to be a respectable and good English lady surely weighed heavily on Bird as she battled between that which she was supposed to be content with as a woman and the adventures for which she pined, but eventually her desires won. For example, when she vowed to stay in Britain after her father died because she believed it was what he would have wanted, Bird's

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<sup>73</sup> After Bird's death, the *Edinburgh Medical Journal* wrote, “When she took the stage as a pioneer and traveler, she laughed at fatigue, she was indifferent to the terrors or danger, she was careless of what a day might bring forth in the matter of food.” When Bird was at home, however, “she immediately became the invalid, the timorous, delicate, gentle-voiced woman that we associate with the Mrs. Bishop of Edinburgh” (qtd. in Steffoff 40-1). The newspaper exaggerates, however, with extremes. Bird did not “immediately” become an invalid once back in Edinburgh, Scotland, where she and Henrietta settled after their parents' deaths. It took months for her to relapse, and, in the meantime, she always remained busy with writing, studying, charity work, and other endeavors. Oftentimes she was trying to pacify her true desires for adventure and accept the role that society delegated to her. Fortunately for us, and for her, her attempts to pacify herself eventually always failed. At even the day of her death, Bird had been planning another trip. She died with her bags packed and addressed for her next adventure.



health only continued to deteriorate. But when she traveled, she found renewed health and vigor. Armitage claims that Bird “found herself” after she stopped in Hawaii on her way to California: “She blossomed with health and set off on her adventures, which sustained her, physically and mentally, for the rest of her life” (“Another Lady's Life” 26).

Steffoff attributes this newfound energy to a discovery of the freedom that traveling provides. According to Steffoff, Bird discovered travel's freedom in the face of a deadly hurricane at sea during one of her voyages: “All of Bird's boredom, illness As both her published and private letters show, being away from society and all of its social expectations is intensely satisfying. In a personal letter, she writes to Henrietta during her fifth month at sea that she loves the sea, saying,

It is to me like living in a new world so free, so fresh, so vital, so careless, so unfettered, so full of interest that one grudges being asleep and instead of carrying cares and worries and thoughts of the morrow to bed with one to keep one awake, one falls asleep . . . to awake to another day in which one knows that there can be nothing to annoy one. No door bells, no 'please ma'ams', no dirt, no servants, no bills no demands of any kind, no vain attempts to overtake all one knows one should do. Above all no nervousness, and no conventionalities. No dressing. If my clothes drop into rags, they can be pinned together. . . . I cannot tell you how much I like my life. . . . I feel like 'a viking wild'. (qtd. in Chubbuck 31-2)

Her letter indicates that the lack of social responsibilities is freeing, invigorating, and healing. As Armitage says, Bird “knew that the appeal of travel arose from the absence of the social burden of propriety and convention that weighed so heavily on 'ladies' in the 1870s” (“Another Lady's Life” 30). At some psychological level, Bird recognized, as indicated in her letter, that a lack of

social burden meant to her the absence of “nervousness,” what the medical establishment in Victorian times might call “hysteria.” Thus, whatever illnesses were incited by her “nerves” were squelched once Bird removed herself from her social burdens.

Furthermore, comments found in her private letters throughout her Colorado journey highlight how deeply satisfying are Colorado's solitude and beauty: at one point she tells Henrietta that she never wishes for women, who are already scarce in Colorado (qtd. in Chubbuck 192). At another point she highlights the freedom she feels in Colorado, writing to Henrietta after one of her usual solitary horseback rides, “I wished you could have seen me galloping on that large horse in my ragged Hawaiian dress with 2 huge hounds galloping with one the very picture of outlawed 'free leggism'” (qtd. in Chubbuck 180). And she revels in the wildness and danger of the area, at one point endangering her life just to see a view of Green Lake, which was only accessible by traveling 2500 feet “up to the timber line along an unknown road” (qtd. in Chubbuck 168). She says of this venture, “It was evil excitement highly spiced with terror,” yet also is confident in her abilities and revels in the final outcome: “It was an exciting exploit but on a horse I can do anything. . . . I like to breathe the cool elastic air at 12000 feet” (qtd. in Chubbuck 169).

When Bird arrived in Colorado, she was still physically ill enough to continue her travels for her health, especially for her spine. Although it is possible that we hear so little about Bird's spinal problem because she has already healed so much since her trip to Hawaii, she may have wanted to subdue the comments about illness in order to gain appeal for her work. Needing to carefully guard her reputation, Bird deleted many comments about her ill health when she edited her letters for publication. As Kristi Siegel says, “Early women travel writers skirted a delicate course. To get an audience, a woman needed to provide material that was reasonably exciting; to

keep an audience, she needed to remain a lady” (2). Thus, although it may have been appropriate to hint at her own illnesses in her final published account, complaining too frequently or too loudly would not draw in and keep audiences enthralled. Also, as with other lady travel writers, Bird had to negotiate her personal desires and social expectations in her writing. Chubbuck states that “Isabella . . . found the juncture between who she was and who she thought she ought to be immensely uncomfortable. Isabella's guilt about her journeys meant that she jealously guarded her reputation” (1-2). Subtle hints of her battle for improved health thus keep Bird from being labeled a complainer and keep her work from becoming boring yet provide the justification for her travel and protection for her reputation as a lady. Allowing her audience to assume she is still ill makes Colorado's “camp cure” the perfect remedy,<sup>74</sup> and the potential for her illness to spring up at any point in time excuses her to dwell until she is ready to leave.

Bird's published letters only hint at Bird's delicate health, but her private letters clarify that she continued to struggle with her back throughout her stay. She says to Henrietta in November toward the end of her trip, for example, that, although attached to the area, “. . . I can't say that I have any feeling of wellness because my back always drags. I should be puzzled to say what ails my body and I sleep for ten hours, and have no pain except the gnawing in my spine” (Chubbuck 185). Rather than dwelling on her ill health in her published account, however, she edits these parts out and instead comments on all that is exciting and rejuvenating about Colorado. The air near Estes Park is especially invigorating to Bird. Bird lauds its healing properties and view: “The scenery up here is glorious, combining sublimity with beauty, and in the elastic air fatigue has dropped off from me [. . . ] and [the area's] unprofaned freshness gives me new life” (54).

In fact, it appears from her published account of her Colorado trip that her spinal

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<sup>74</sup> The “camp cure” involved camping for weeks or months at a time in order to regain one's health.

problems have almost completely disappeared. Despite her serious spinal problem that leaves her helpless for months in England, Bird is still somehow able to ride every day, sometimes more than 25 miles, in Colorado. She gets bucked off a horse at least once and injures her arm, but spinal complaints are minimal unless incited by a decision to ride side-saddle for the sake of appearances. Bird's illnesses all but disappear when she is traveling. Besides the rare mention of an ache or pain, her written account of her travels in Colorado only hint of the fact that she is traveling for her health. If it were not for the clear evidence to the contrary, some of the activities in which Bird participates would give the reader reason to suspect any claim to illness at all, for the activities themselves are not for invalids and, moreover, place one with a weak constitution in danger of becoming ill or injured. Far from putting her in more danger, Colorado appears to provide Bird with a new location in which to challenge her own physical limits while enjoying novel pursuits and the area's beauty. Bird took many all-day horseback riding trips through dangerous areas, braved lengthy snowstorms during her treks, and even wore out her boots with all of her activity; she then borrowed a pair of men's boots so that she could climb a mountain. All of these activities give the impression that Bird was perfectly healthy in Colorado, and only her private letters indicate the true extent to which she suffered periodically throughout her adventures. Ultimately, alluding to yet not dwelling on her illness in her published account, Bird justifies her travels yet does not hinder audience interest, allowing her to enjoy her experiences fully yet protect her reputation.

### Bird and the West

Bird's desire to appear as a moral, respectable lady also affects her representation of those whom she meets in the west and causes her to carefully temper her appropriation of the freedom

that the west represents with descriptions of herself and others that continuously highlight her status as a respectable, moral, virtuous lady. Much has been written concerning the woman travel writer's attention to gender<sup>75</sup>, and Bird's text is no different from many others of her time in its attention to highlighting her decorum and respectability. As Siegel notes, "Given that travel—and particularly unescorted travel—was deemed inappropriate for a lady, women often employed a narrative stance that could be described as the decorum of indecorum, a fine balance in which they strained the conventions of femininity, but did not break them" (3). In Bird's particular account, she revels in her newfound personal freedoms found in the outdoors, but she also highlights the negative connotations of the west, which cannot be ignored, through her depictions of rogue cowboys and lawlessness in order to ultimately highlight her own virtue, safety, and morality and thus maintain the social decorum needed to continue her own adventures.

Although travel anywhere in the nineteenth century gave women freedoms that were impossible to experience in the stifling culture of home, the American West, with its cultural connection to freedom, invigorates Bird even more than Australia, Hawaii or other places she could have visited, and her ability to appropriate for herself the promise and hope of freedom that the west gives the traveler enables her to test her own physical limitations and find joy in different, freeing experiences. In her most positive descriptions of the west, the wilderness and its wildness, beauty, and solitude exhilarate Bird, and she takes every opportunity she can to experience these manifestations of the inherent westward freedom. When she first sees Estes Park, for instance, in all its grandeur, she is so overcome by its beauty that, in her words,

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<sup>75</sup> See, for instance, Ruth Y. Jenkins' "The Gaze of the Victorian Woman Traveler" in *Gender, Genre, & Identity in Women's Travel Writing* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) 15-30, for a good discussion of how some Victorian women travel writers attempted to counter possible attacks against their femininity by distancing themselves from women of other cultures and further "othering" the women they encounter. Jenkins' essay is just one of fifteen in a book of essays all devoted to how women travelers negotiated the gender prescriptions of their time and identified themselves in relation to place and others in their writings.

“mountain fever seized” her, and with one encouraging word to her horse, they gallop over a mile of “smooth” ground “at delirious speed” (81). In the wilderness she most fully embraces the freedom for self that is integral to the myth of the western frontier, a myth which posits the frontier as a place of boundless opportunity and escape from society, a place where one can make a new start and succeed in life, and where the land in its beauty is waiting for one's intense enjoyment.

Western freedom has some negative connotations as well, however, in the image of the lawless rogue and cowboy, which are too popular for Bird to ignore in her account. Therefore, Bird's account of towns in California and Colorado depicts the west as a place of lawlessness, full of potentially dangerous men who shun any sort of limits to their freedom. Truckee, “the center of the 'lumbering region' of the Sierras,” Bird points out, is often “spoke of as a 'rough mountain town’” where all the “roughs of the district congregated” and where “there were nightly pistol affrays in bar-rooms” (7). When she exits the train in Truckee, she sees that the streets are “glaring with light and crowded with men” (8). This town, like others mentioned in her westward travels, is a “masculine one.” Although she sees a few women in her travels to towns, the crowd she sees in Truckee is “solely masculine” (8). Bird shows her familiarity with the iconic cowboy as well when she meets a man who loans horses and who she describes as “the very type of a Western pioneer” (9). The man “bowed” to her, then “threw himself into a rocking chair, drew a spittoon beside him, cut a fresh squid of tobacco, and put his feet, cased in miry high boots . . . on the top of the stove” (9). His roguishness is further highlighted when Bird points out that he “wore a pioneer's badge as one of the earliest settlers of California, but he had moved on as one place after another had become too civilized for him” (9). Bird is fully aware of the purported images of the west as lawless and dangerous, which are the negative results of people

embracing absolute freedom for self, and she highlights those stereotypical images of the rogue cowboy in her descriptions of the towns and its members. Without saying that her descriptions are completely false, therefore, we must remember that her descriptions of the towns, the crowds, and, even, some of the most interesting characters such as Mountain Jim, are framed to enhance what people already associated with living on the frontier.

Bird must counter the absolute lawlessness and roguishness of the iconic cowboy with enough information to clarify that, despite that these characters infiltrate and influence the west, they do not negatively influence her character. Thus the western rogue both engages readers' interests and highlights her own upper-class Christian morality and propriety. Bird's descriptions and experiences of people sometimes veer from the full stereotype of the western rogue or cowboy because, to keep up appearances, Bird's relationships must be defined by the same Christian virtue and purity that one would expect from a woman living at home, and those she spends the most time with must be worthy of her company; therefore, the man whose company pleases her the most, Mountain Jim, must not be depicted as a completely lost, lawless desperado. Mountain Jim is thus simultaneously desperado and gentleman.<sup>76</sup> When he and Bird meet, he indicates that she is a countrywoman of his, and when Bird describes his “good” side, she dwells on his handsome appearance as well as his chivalrous behavior toward her. Jim's face, half of which is devastatingly handsome and half of which is grotesque from the mauling of a bear, is the perfect visual manifestation of his polar character traits. His drunkenness is to be feared, and

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<sup>76</sup> Rozelle Lee goes so far to argue in a different context that the “mountain man-hero stereotype—one that depicts freedom and rusticated John Waynery on the range—shrivels in *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*” illustrated, in part, through Bird showing “the hunter's incomplete relationships with both civilization and frontier” (18). Instead of the freedom they seek, the “mountain man finds himself enslaved either by processes of supply and demand or the psychotic tendencies underlying his depletionist culture” (18-9). Rather than “shriveling,” however, I would argue that the image of the mountain man is alive and well in the text, utilized for Bird's specific ends. Bird uses the mountain man image to embrace for herself the freedom associated with this stereotype. Yet the mountain man's ruggedness also highlights Bird's femininity as his potential for lawlessness invites her chastisement and thus illuminates for readers her morality and temperance.

he is quick to fight, but, on his trip up Longs Peak with Bird, he recites poetry and tells her the story of his childhood and descent into lawlessness as tears fall down his cheeks. The perfect balance of gentleman and rogue, Mountain Jim is somebody that Bird can be enthralled with must yet keep at a distance.<sup>77</sup> She utilizes his extremes to provide continued interest but also highlight how she is able, through her keen sense, to maintain her virtue.

Because western freedom is both liberating and dangerous, Bird carefully aligns herself with Victorian upper-class, white femininity and its expectations for female purity and modesty and uses, furthermore, the stereotypical western desperado to highlight and reinforce her own created self-image as prudent, intelligent English gentlewoman. Mountain Jim especially helps Bird to illuminate her character traits through the fact that she refuses his professions of love yet, as a good Victorian woman should, prays for him, sympathizes with him, and pities his lot in life and past mistakes. At one point, for example, after lamenting the fact that Jim is a “ruin of a man,” she writes to her sister, “May our Father, which is in heaven yet show mercy to His outcast child!” (220). She also, however, shows her keen sense when she indicates her distrust of the man in a later letter, occurring after Mountain Jim has told her his entire sordid past while on a ride with her: “Essentially an actor, he was, I wonder, posing on the previous day in the attitude of desperate remorse, to impose on my credulity or frighten me; or was it a genuine and unpremeditated outburst of passionate regret for the life which he had thrown away? I cannot tell, but I think it was the last” (211). Bird hints at the possibility that Jim was being deceptive yet chooses to believe that he is remorseful, illustrating her forgiving character, sound judgment, and

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<sup>77</sup> Bird's relationship with Jim Nugent is often a topic of discussion, as scholars attempt to figure out the nature of their affections for each other. Middleton notes that the attraction between the two “only comes to light because her [private] letters are available . . .” (10). Like a proper lady, Bird was not public about her relationship. There is little indicating more than a congenial friendship in her published account. For more information about Bird and Nugent's relationship, see Dorothy Middleton, *Victorian Lady Travellers*, 34-9; Robert Root's *Following Isabella*, 275-81; and Pat Barr's *A Curious Life for a Lady*, 60-99.



decision to err in favor of those for whom she cares, all of which underscore her Victorian womanhood and continue to reinforce her alignment with hegemonic gender norms of her time despite her location in the wilderness.

Mountain Jim, Bird suggests, is like the many desperado figures who take the freedom and limitless opportunities that the west promises to an extreme that results in lawlessness and questionable morality. Bird therefore may embrace the opportunity and adventure that constitute the mythic frontier for herself, especially by embracing wilderness experiences that allow her to test the limits of her own self, but she always does so properly and without falling into the questionable morality of the desperados she admires. Bird spends much of her time actively seeking adventure in the outdoors such as climbing Longs Peak, taking a solitary lengthy ride across part of the state, and even partaking in cattle rounding. However, she simultaneously shuns and laments any lawlessness, drunkenness, and potential violence in the towns and individuals that she describes, always keeping to a feminine, morality-driven construction of herself for her reader.

In order to maintain her appearance as a respectable, moral lady, Bird must also carefully temper the images and discussions of lawlessness and adventure, seen especially in depictions of cowboys, desperados, or adventurers, with discussion of how safe her surroundings are for ladies like herself. Her letter dated September 7<sup>th</sup> in Truckee, Wyoming, highlights most clearly her purposeful attempt to pacify readers who think that a woman traveling alone jeopardizes her physical or moral safety. While on a horseback ride, Bird first meets and speaks to a teamster, who shows his concern for her and thankfulness that she avoided a particularly unkept trail, adding, finally, his civilities that he hoped she had enjoyed her experience in Tahoe (18). Bird adds, “Then I saw a lumberer taking his dinner on a rock in the river, who 'touched his hat' and

brought me a draught of ice-cold water . . . and gathered me some mountain pinks, which I admired” (18). And in case the very gentlemanly behavior does not speak for itself and her reasons for writing about them, Bird clarifies, “I mention these little incidents to indicate the habit of respectful courtesy to women which prevails in that region. These men might have been excused for speaking in a somewhat free-and-easy tone to a lady riding along, and in an unwonted fashion. Womanly dignity and manly respect for women are the salt of society in this West” (18). Bird thus attempts very early in her work to put to pacify any concerns that her behavior endangers her virtue or is unacceptable in this region. Once making her case, Bird is free to do what may seem inappropriate elsewhere with complete lack of inhibition in the west. Only a few weeks later, she sets off to find the solitude from society, and, within a few months, she has found that solitude, climbed Longs Peak, become a ranch hand, and explored over 300 miles of Colorado alone on horseback, without feeling the need to justify her behavior or argue that her virtue is safe.<sup>78</sup>

With her virtue protected, Bird is even freer to seek her own desires, but always doing so in a way that will be seen as appropriate for a lady of her standing. For Bird this end sometimes means catering to the prejudices of those who may see her. Bird felt that many social expectations were trivial and also depleted her quality of life and personal happiness, yet she is not immune to wanting to promote her self-image of genteel Englishwoman who maintains social graces in public places. Throughout most of her narrative, Bird revels in the freedom she experiences while she is in the wilderness portions of Colorado but finds the towns stifling

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<sup>78</sup> Bird's narrative supplies hints throughout, however, of how others perceive her. She does not come out and say, “I continue to act like a lady at all times,” but she subtly hints at this idea when she mentions, for example, that the ride from the train station to Fort Collins, which was closer to her desired end of reaching the mountains, was grueling, “even with [her] white umbrella” (33). When she stops for dinner that evening, she says that the men who shared the dinner apologized to her “for being without their coats, as if coats would not be an enormity on the Plains” (34). Bird thus continues to position herself as a subject that is looked at as nothing less than a proper English lady, garnering the respect and even apologies of the men when they see a lady in their presence and are unprepared to appear as gentlemanly as she is womanly.

partially because she feels a need to conform to expectations of Victorian womanhood in these areas. In Denver, for example, she decides that she must ride side-saddle in order to appear most lady-like. When she leaves the town, she says, "I rode sideways till I was well through the town, long enough to produce a severe pain in my spine, which was not relieved for some time even after I had changed my position" (140). At certain moments, especially anytime that she is around "civilization," Bird feels the need to exhibit Victorian propriety even if doing so puts her health at risk or makes her unhappy. She rides side-saddle elsewhere as well to appear womanly. At the border of Colorado Springs, the final goal of her solo horseback journey, she dismounts her beloved borrowed horse Birdie to trade her unconventional Hawaiian riding outfit for a skirt. She says, "I got off, put on a long skirt, and rode sideways, though the settlement scarcely looked like a place where any deference to prejudices was necessary" (152). Although the expectations of Colorado's towns are extremely lax compared to the East or to England, Bird still caters to possible prejudice.

### Bird's Search for Solitude

Despite these few moments of conformity to gender expectations, Bird, with her virtuous image intact, pursues her chief desire, finding the solitude that will remove her from the judgments of society, a goal that usually only the lone male adventurer in the wilderness accomplishes. Society, however, is a constant hindrance to her ultimate goals of dwelling in a place that will promote new strength and vigor and experiencing a full appreciation of the region's beauty. Traveling by railroad to the Colorado region, Bird first sees the Rocky Mountain range from the train, but the situation for her is far from ideal: ". . . five distinct ranges of mountains, one above another . . . upheaved themselves above the prairie sea. An American

railway car, hot, stuffy and full of chewing, spitting Yankees, was not an ideal way of approaching this range which had early impressed itself upon my imagination” (30). The romantic language often used to describe a traveler's first encounter with a glorious vista is thus impossible for Bird because of the present company.

Bird's goal from the moment she sees the mountains from the train is to be closer to them, and the hope of the solitude that she will experience when she reaches the mountains is her driving force, especially because she is appalled by society. Her letter from Fort Collins dated September 10<sup>th</sup> describes at length the crudeness of the settlement and her consequent disgust: “These new settlements are altogether revolting, entirely utilitarian, given up to talk of dollars as well as to making them, with coarse speech, coarse food, coarse everything, nothing wherewith to satisfy the higher cravings if they exist, nothing on which the eye can rest with pleasure, The lower floor of this inn swarms with locusts in addition to thousands of black flies” (35). Two days later, she clarifies that she is sharing her suppertime with “thirty men in working clothes, silent and sad looking,” who share a repast with her of beef which is “tough and greasy,” with butter that had “turned to oil” and both of which are “black with living, drowned, and half-drowned flies” (36). Much like the settlement of Greeley from which she came, Bird is pleased to find a ride even closer to the mountains.

Bird continues to be thwarted, however, by the society that she must rely on to help her as she travels to her ultimate destination. The man who takes her from Fort Collins, for example, Bird describes as “stupid” for not understanding the directions, and, after both boarding houses to which she was recommended are full, the driver continues onward, becoming lost and scared in the rugged terrain as evening begins to descend. Bird ends up boarding with the Chalmers family who live in the “very rudest” cabin that Bird has ever seen, which she describes as

“partially ruinous . . . its roof of plastered mud being broken into large holes” (38). Knowing that if she leaves the Chalmers to return to the city that she will be further from her goal, Bird remains. The hope of solitude prevails, for the society of the settlements is not fulfilling or gratifying to her. As she says, “If I went back to Fort Collins, I thought I was farther from a mountain life, and had no choice but Denver, a place from which I shrank, or to take the cars for New York.” (39). So despite the “life” at the Chalmers residence being “rougher than any [she] had ever seen,” Bird decides to stay: “. . . if I could rough it for a few days, I might, I thought, get over canyons and all other difficulties into Estes Park, which has become the goal of my journey and hopes. So I decided to remain” (39).

The goal of solitude in the wilderness trumps all present issues for Bird. Her hopes to remain only a few days with the Chalmers before traveling closer to the Rocky Mountains but stays over a week, and she eventually must rely on Mr. Chalmers to lead her closer to Estes. The closer she gets to a land of complete solitude and possibility, however, the happier she is. On an outing with the Chalmers, the goal of which was to reach Estes, Mr. Chalmers loses the way and then loses the horses, giving Bird some short-lived alone time as her two companions search for the horses. During her time, she reflects on the land's potential for restorative solitude: “This is a view to which nothing needs to be added. This is truly the 'lodge in some great wilderness' for which one often sighs when in the midst of 'a bustle at once sordid and trivial'. . . This scenery satisfies my soul. . . . It is magnificent, and the air is life giving. I should like to spend some time in these higher regions, but I know that this will turn out an abortive expedition, owing to the stupidity and pigheadedness of [Mr.] Chalmers” (55).

This adventure happens after Bird leaves Truckee and travels through Cheyenne and Fort Collins but before she reaches Estes Park, but after all this time Bird continues to dwell on Estes'

potential for herself. After several days of Mr. Chalmers failing miserably in his attempt to lead Bird and his wife to Estes Park, he relinquishes his leadership to Bird, who leads them all back to their rundown shack. Even though this outing was unsuccessful, Bird continues to long for the solitude and peace of Estes Park and is even more determined to reach her goal. After the unsuccessful venture, Bird writes, “Yet, after all, [the family ] were not bad souls; and though he failed so grotesquely, he did his incompetent best. . . . I . . . watched the stars through the holes in the roof, and thought of Long’s Peak in its glorious solitude, and resolved that, come what might, I would reach Estes Park” (63). The lonely solitude that she celebrates at Longs Peak is exactly what she herself, in this part of her journey, craves. Privacy is essential for Bird to thrive in Colorado. In a September 25<sup>th</sup> letter from Longmount, Colorado, in which Bird questions whether she will make it to Estes Park, she worries that the accommodations will be as bad as the Chalmers’ residence and, more importantly, “that solitude will be impossible” (72). Not only the quality of the living space but also the ability to be alone concerns Bird, hinting at the idea that privacy, which implies her breakaway from society, also affects her health.

Solitude for Bird fosters freedom not possible in towns and cities or rundown shacks with judgmental housewives, and when she finally reaches Estes Park, rents a cabin all to herself, and gains her desired solitude, she is overjoyed. She writes, after many days in Estes Park, “This is a glorious region, and the air and life are intoxicating. I live mainly out of doors and on horseback, wear my half-threadbare Hawaiian dress, sleep sometimes under the stars on a bed of pine boughs, [and] ride on a Mexican saddle . . . ” (102). The joy she feels stems from her freedom to live where she wants, enjoy her days outside on horseback, without domestic or social duties to others, to sleep where she wants, even if it is unconventional, and to ride straddling the saddle without concern about social prejudice. Later in the same letter, Bird dwells on how different

Sundays are in Colorado than at home: “To be alone in the park from the afternoon till the last glory of the afterglow has faded, with no books but a Bible and Prayer-book, is truly delightful” (114). She delights in this worship not only because nature's beauty invites joy but also because “one may worship without being distracted by the sight of bonnets or endless form, and curiously intricate 'back hair,' and countless oddities of changing fashion” (114). In sum, the social distractions and pomp that is found in so many places is absent. By implication, any expectation put upon Bird to conform to the latest fashion is also absent.

Because Estes provides Bird with the much-desired privacy in both a cabin and a location, she comes to the conclusion that Estes is the epitome of perfection as far as a place to regain her health. While lodging at Estes Park, Bird writes that her new location offers “everything that is rapturous and delightful –grandeur, cheerfulness, health, enjoyment, novelty, freedom, etc., etc. I have just dropped into the very place I have been seeking, but in everything it exceeds all my dreams. There is health in every breath of air; I am much better already . . . It is quite comfortable—in the fashion that I like. I have a log cabin . . . all to myself” (73).<sup>79</sup> When she wants company, Bird can go to the main building, where other visitors and the Welsh landlord and landlady congregate. All of her dietary needs are taken care of, as the landlord supplies “fresh meat every day . . . delicious bread baked daily, excellent potatoes, tea and coffee, and an abundant supply of milk like cream” (73). She soon adds, “This is perfection, and all the requisites for health are present, including plenty of horses and grass to ride on” (74). Thus solitude provides Bird with freedoms not possible as she is living in society, the standards of which both stifle her and negatively affect her health. Thus her long and arduous search for the

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<sup>79</sup> Bird's description of the cabin, “with a skunk's lair underneath it, and a small lake close to it” cannot help but to make the reader think of Walden and its animal inhabitants and solitude for the cabin dweller. Harper notes that Bird met Emerson and Thoreau on her second trip to America (146). It is not out of the question, therefore, to assume that Bird read Thoreau's *Walden* and was influenced by it in her own search for solitude and freedom from civilization's constraints upon her person, although the extent of that influence we will never know.

freedom and health only to be gained through solitude is worth all of the hassle, for she gains the ability to ride whenever she wants, to experience the beauties of nature which thrill her, and to avoid all of the distractions and hassles of society and its expectations upon her person.

### Bird's Depiction of Western Women

Bird's larger search for solitude from society highlights a difference in mobility between her and most of the women she talks about in her letters. Knowing the difficulties that Bird experienced as she tried to reach Estes and struggled to find guides and horses despite her money and leisure to travel, one may then begin to know how much more stationary the residents are whom she meets. Bird's difficulties with crossing the plains to reach Estes and consequent stay with the Chalmers for several weeks, however, allowed her to meet women and their families whom she discusses in some detail during this time period. The Chalmers and the Hughes families represent those who traveled west for its supposedly limitless opportunities. As Susan Imbarrato says, "Migration signaled the possibility of a better life as courageous immigrants and brave pioneers headed into the wilderness and onto the frontier with ax and gun, on horse and in covered wagon. From such images, a powerful mythology developed of the inspired traveler settling the western frontier" (1). Bird's depictions of the women of the region, however, highlight the reality of their existence: a hard life with little pleasure, in which the dream and hope of the myth we now associate with the frontier is little realized, and where little hope exists to travel elsewhere.

Bird's depiction of the women of the region highlights the harsh reality of their lives; whereas travel in early America, according to Imbarrato, "offered opportunity for adventure and advancement" (1), the women of Bird's narrative, now long settled, have little opportunity for



further travel, adventure, or advancement. The Chalmers, for instance, live in a run-down shack, “its roof of plastered mud being broken into large holes” (38). In her description of their dwelling place, an “emigrant wagon and a forlorn tent” lay in the foreground, as if to remind the reader of the dream that the family had for health and prosperity upon their arrival (38). In the background lies a broken down saw mill, all that is left of the Chalmers' attempt at prosperity, which failed, we are to believe, because of their overall “shiftlessness” (47) and habit of blaming everything that goes wrong on something or someone else (46-7). The Chalmers initially traveled to Colorado for Mr. Chalmers' health, and, although he found it, the family found little else. “Life,” Bird notes, “was reduced to its simplest elements” here, for “no table, no bed, no basin, no towel, no glass, no window, [and] no fastening on the door” exists and the “logs were unchinked, and one end of the cabin was partially removed” (40).

The ruin of the home atmosphere reflects the ruination of the women's minds, Mrs. Chalmers' looks, and the children. Both mother and daughter “look contemptuously upon [Bird's] desire for information” on the simplest of knowledge, such as what day it is (44), indicating their total lack of desire to cultivate any sense of knowledge of what is happening outside of their daily ennui. And, by the depiction of Mrs. Chalmers herself, one may assume that the harsh existence has taken its toll on her mind and body: “She looks like one of the English poor women of our childhood-- lean, clean, toothless, and speaks, like some of them, in a piping, discontented voices . . . she is never idle for one minute, is severe and hard, and despises everything but work” (47). Although “work, work, work, is their day and their life,” the Chalmers have nothing to show for their time (48). The prevailing myth of the day, of the west as a land of limitless opportunity for prosperity and happiness, is countered by Bird's depictions of the harsh reality of the Chalmers' existence. The prevailing idea that women are the moral guides in society and the

model for appropriate behavior also is undermined throughout Bird's description of this family, for the children, like the parents, lack “courtesy and gentleness of act or speech” (47). This depiction highlights the west as a place where those with the propensity for brutishness become further brutish, where civilizing influences are minimal and therefore “Sunday clothes” seem to not exist (48), and where the residents become stuck in a perpetual cycle of fruitless work.

Bird's description indicates that the Chalmers were quite the unscholarly, unrefined crew before they arrived in Colorado and that the wilderness only furthered their brutishness, but the harshness of settling and trying to make a living in the region also takes its toll on people that Bird feels much more kindly toward. The Hughes, neighbors to the piggish Chalmers, live in a small house that Bird describes as having “a delightful resemblance to a Swiss chalet” with a vegetable garden, irrigating ditch, barn, and cowshed (51). However, although they are much more successful than the Chalmers, the Hughes are barely able to supply their own basic needs. Bird explains that the Hughes are exactly the kind of people who should not come to Colorado—well educated, genteel, who did not have any knowledge of farming before they sought to become farmers (66). According to Bird, they bought their Longmount claim “rather for the beauty of the scenery than for any substantial advantages, were cheated in land, goods, oxen, everything, and, to the discredit of the settlers, seemed to be regarded as fair game. Everything has failed with them, and though they 'rise early, and late take rest, and eat the bread of carefulness,' they hardly keep their heads above water” (66). Bird soon adds, “It is the hardest and least ideal struggle that I have ever seen made by educated people” (66). Mr. and Mrs. Hughes thus represent the refined, educated English man and woman who, because they are honest in their dealings, are cheated out of their chance at prosperity and must learn to survive as best they can. This couple, according to Bird, would “shine” in the East but are barely able to

survive in the west.

Bird gives several hints as to the particular reality of Mrs. Hughes, who, though still a refined, educated lady, must endure the hardship of the land where she and her husband have settled since his battle with consumption. Mrs. Hughes has not only helped to build their house but is responsible for making “all of the clothes required for a family of six, and her evenings, when the hard day's work is done and she is ready to drop from fatigue, are spent in mending and patching” (66). She has a Swiss girl who is their servant and works as diligently as Mr. and Mrs. Hughes, but, even with this help, there is no end to the work: “The day is one long *grind*, without rest or enjoyment, or the pleasure of chance intercourse with cultivated people. The few visitors who have 'happened in' are the thrifty wives of prosperous settlers, full of housewifely pride, whose one object seems to be to make Mrs. H. feel her inferiority to themselves” (66-7).

Although Bird knows that Mrs. Hughes is a superior lady in taste and refinement, the objective of the neighborhood ladies is to treat her as though she is of lower social standing, and Bird gives every hint that the “prosperity” of these women is due to the dishonest character of themselves and their husbands: “Smartness,' which consists in over-reaching your neighbor in every fashion which is not illegal, is the quality which is held in greatest repute, and Mammon is the divinity” (69). Thus Mrs. Hughes not only has the difficult daily work with which to deal with every day but also the lack of true friendship to aid her and lift her spirits.

Mrs. Hughes' presence in Bird's text probably came as no surprise to her readers at the time, but, because the overall story of western settlement until the last few decades has focused on men and their accomplishments, women like Mrs. Chalmers and Mrs. Hughes now revise our historical understanding of western wilderness settlement.<sup>80</sup> Bird represents Mrs. Hughes as a

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<sup>80</sup> Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, editors of the 1987 book *The Women's West*, state that their collection of essays “represent pioneering efforts to reexamine the West through women's eyes,” in order to add to the “recent”

gentile lady from the east who, although struggling with life in the west, reads poetry to her family and Bird “with a voice of large compass and exquisite tone, quick to interpret every shade of the author's meaning, and soft, speaking eyes, moist with feeling and sympathy” (68). In this moment of rare domestic happiness, they can forget about the harshness of the environment and people (68). Mrs. Hughes's gentility sharply contrasts with her surroundings, but she has also endured, even to the point of learning how to build a house. She is a testament to the women who diligently worked to make an honest life in the west, and her presence in Bird's text highlights the existence of women whom Bird and others never met or wrote about and whom people's favoring of a masculinized narrative of western settlement erases from historical memory.

Bird's depictions of the families undermine the myth of the frontier as a place of independence for men as well, for Mr. Chalmers and Mr. Hughes are also caught up in the same cycle of work as their wives. Thus both the women and their husbands highlight the all-too-often reality of westward settlement juxtaposed against the imagined west full of limitless opportunity, wealth, and independence. Evelyn Schlatter argues, “What the real West most offered men was the most difficult for women to attain-- independence . . . The West, even though it claimed to offer a taste of freedom for all, was a [white] man's world” (335). The reality of Chalmers and Hughes, however, contradict this sweeping statement, for their opportunities are limited to their little spheres, as their work is necessary for their survival, and their survival is dependent on their

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work by western and women's historians “to address the omissions of the older western history” (3). This history is one in which “[w]omen have been virtually absent” (3). Ten years later, in *Writing the Range*, they again seek to create a more inclusive history of the west through a project that includes documenting the lives of western women. Their work produced “an exciting variety of new histories of women and people of color” (4). Jameson and Armitage's work show how recently (1987) was the historical shift away from what Armitage terms “Hisland,” which she describes as thus: “In a magnificent western landscape, under perpetually cloudless western skies, a cast of heroic characters engages in dramatic combat, sometimes with nature, sometimes with each other. . . . these heroes are diverse: they are mountain men, cowboys, Indians, soldiers, farmers, miners, and desperados, but they share one distinguishing characteristic—they are all men. . . . This mythical land is America's most enduring contribution to folklore: the legendary Wild West” (“Through Women's Eyes” 9). Their 1997 introduction to *Writing the Range* sums up “Hisland” as “a mythic place perpetuated in western history texts and survey courses, where seldom was heard a discouraging word, and never a woman's voice” (3).

work. Armitage, moreover, notes that the “traditional frontier history has been a success story; we do not know much about the 'failures' or about the pressures and anxieties that everyone, male and female, encountered” (“Through Women's Eyes” 13). Bird's text shows that stories of “failure” often existed and alludes to the fact that, unless one has the mindset that living off the land or in poverty constitutes freedom, as is the case with Jim Nugent, only men like Evans, who have the wealth to travel and hire help for their land and resources, really can claim the promise of freedom that the west of the cultural imagination purported.

Bird's sketches of Mrs. Chalmers and Mrs. Hughes highlight her overall feeling that the west does more harm than good to the lady settler, but Bird, of course, is exempt from this judgment since she is a traveler or tourist who will never make this land her permanent home even as much as she says she loves it. Mrs. Hughes represents for Bird what sort of woman should not remain a settler-- a woman of refined taste and cultivation, of gentle spirit and social grace. Whereas Mrs. Chalmers represents what a woman who lives in the west and adopts the overall attitude of the west can and will become, Mrs. Hughes represents what a woman endures who fights against the brutishness of the west. Both women followed their husbands to Colorado because their husbands were ill, and both remain faithful to their husbands when they decide to stay, but neither woman prospers or seems to belong in this uncomfortable land. Unlike Bird, who does belong because she is only a tourist and does not plan to stay long enough for the land and people to truly affect her, these women are ultimately represented as being stuck, as motionless, in a relentless cycle of trying to stay afloat, with little to look forward to from day to day that will cultivate their higher faculties or help them to prosper.<sup>81</sup> With both families, the

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<sup>81</sup> Bird's text does, however, contain a certain amount of stereotyping of the women she encounters. The west has either turned a woman like Mrs. Chalmers into a more piggish brute than she was when she began her life there, or the west becomes the brutal backdrop to the gentile lady's attempt to make a life for her family. These stereotypes highlight Bird's lack of overall positive depiction of the western woman in America, a result, I would argue, of her

tenacity and self-reliance, so often claimed as the results of life in the west, are tenuous at best, and, though certainly courageous and full of fortitude despite the daily grueling existence, Mrs. Hughes eventually loses her battle, as Bird, in a footnote, informs the reader that she eventually dies in childbirth (65).<sup>82</sup>

### Money and Mobility: Power and Performance

Bird's relationship with Mrs. Hughes illuminates how Bird's money and consequent mobility ensure her freedom to take on different subject positions. The potential for those without the money to prosper is extremely limited, as both the Chalmers and the Hughes families show, but those with money may garner the full freedom that the west offers, including choosing one's role. Bird's leisure provides her with opportunities to reach out to help Mrs. Hughes and simultaneously experience the reality of the woman's daily life in the west in more depth. Bird's sympathy for Mrs. Hughes' grueling lot extends to the point that Bird decides to take on the role of servant for a day in order to give both the Swiss servant girl and Mr. and Mrs. Hughes some time to rest. Taking on the role exhilarates her. As she tells her sister in her September 23<sup>rd</sup> letter,

To-day has been a very pleasant day for me, though I have only once sat down since 9A.M, and it is now 5 P.M. . . . I undertook to do the work and make

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recognition that the harsh way of life hinders the woman's ability to be womanly or to cultivate her mind. It is rare, for example, for Mrs. Hughes to be able to spare a few moments to read poetry. And Mrs. Hughes, after many rough years of toiling on she and her husband's homestead, dies of childbirth, only to be replaced by her hired girl in her husband's affections. Although there are many positive depictions of women's life in the west found in pioneer journals, other travel writers' work, or other texts, Bird does not, after many weeks of interacting with these women, see the impact of the west on the pioneer woman as anything but deleterious.

<sup>82</sup> Thus the "demythologizing" of the west that writers in the past twenty to thirty years have emphasized was already being done by writers like Bird who were willing to discuss in detail the harsh realities of people's western lives, especially the reality of women, one people group often unable to attain the supposed freedom that the west offered to its settlers. Her work suggests another point of departure for those who want to explore how women's narratives of the west, wilderness, or frontier may complicate the masculine paradigm of westward exploration, settlement, and expansion. As more journals, travel narratives, and letters of women travelers and settlers become available, we will, to use Imbarrato's words in referring to early American settlement, continue to piece together a "more inclusive, textured, and diverse account" of our America (4).

something of a cleaning. . . . After baking the bread and thoroughly cleaning the churn and pails, I began upon the tins and pans, the cleaning of which had fallen into arrears and was hard at work, very greasy and grimy, when a man came in to know where to ford the river with his ox team, and as I was showing him he looked pityingly at me, saying, "Be you the new hired girl? Bless me, you're awful small!" (69)

Bird leaves the reader unaware of how she responds, if at all, to the man's assumption about her being the hired help. Although she is mistaken for a servant, her silence implies her contentedness with the mistake, for she does not attempt to correct or inform him of her gentlewoman status or of the fact that she is simply helping a friend. His mistaking her for the help validates that she has taken on the role well: she must appear as though she has been working all day, and she must be wearing a working woman's clothes and give every other necessary indication that she is her chosen role.

Bird is able to choose her own subject position, taking on the role of servant and helper as it benefits her to do so, and seamlessly moving back into her original role of traveler or tourist when her time to leave arrives. The man's comment validates her ability to enter into this chosen subject position seamlessly, and, for the time that she chooses this life for herself, Bird enjoys the work. During the course of her visitation to the Hughes' residence, Bird labors to the extent that she is able to say that her preference is for "field work to the scouring of greasy pans and to the wash tub, and both to either sewing or writing" (69). Thus when she has her preference and desires to take on the role of worker, Bird interestingly chooses the most tiring, grueling labor of fieldwork over the domestic labor, a testimony to her love of the outdoors as well as to her desire to even take on the labor that is usually taken up first by the men of the pioneer households.

As a woman free from the constraints of society and well supplied with money, Bird can choose to take on her tasks with diligence and fortitude, but the reader has enough information about the Hughes' life to recall that Mrs. Hughes does not have a choice and must work both field and home, never to take up the role of traveler. Thus while Bird accepts the role of servant, and does so heartily, Bird can do so freely because she has the power, or, in other words, the money, to construct her own identity within the freedom-driven space of the west. Jenkins argues, “By definition, travel produces looking-relations with those different from oneself, and such alterity is essential for the construction of subjectivity. The resulting tensions between self and other are necessary . . . to establish the 'limits of acceptability—even intelligibility' upon which cultural identities of race, gender, and class depend” (20). Jenkins concludes her thought with the assertion that the “female spectator” “must differentiate herself from another woman to establish her subject position. Identity is most secure for the traveler or colonizer by establishing and maintaining difference” (20). Interestingly, unlike many women travel writers who refuse to traverse class boundaries that may make them appear less ladylike, Bird is willing to do so for the sake of being helpful. In the name of good deeds, Bird chooses to heartily delve into the subject position of servant for a day, not content in this case to “establish” and “maintain” a “difference” between her and another woman of a lower class. Nor does she shun helping those that she particularly dislikes, such as the Chalmers, but Bird ultimately chooses when that adopted position ends and her travel and adventure resumes, thus keeping the power to identify herself as a “lady” no matter what role she temporarily appropriates.

With her financial situation relatively secure, Bird moves seamlessly among her chosen subject positions, but when she runs out of money and thus becomes much more like the unfortunate Mrs. Hughes, Bird finds herself feeling oppressed rather than exhilarated by her



surroundings, and the solitude that she once relished now becomes a harsh daily reality. A few months after leaving the Hughes and after a long horseback riding trip around Colorado, Bird finds herself out of money and back at Estes Park awaiting funds that Evans, the owner of Estes Park, owes her. Her circumstances are clearly less than ideal, highlighting to what extent wealth makes her feelings of freedom in the west possible. When Mountain Jim meets her to lead her to Evans' cabin, he informs her that Evans is not at Estes, that “the cabin was dismantled, the stores were low, and two young men” were at the cabin looking after the cattle until Evans' return (201). Bird willingly makes an “arrangement” with the two men who are staying at the cabin to split the work, but even though the cooking and cleaning is split evenly, and even though Bird first states that she actually enjoys “roughing it” (201), the arrangement is meant to only last a few days. Instead, the situation “extend[s] over nearly a month” (201). During that time, the novelty of the situation wears off and Bird's exultation in the solitude that she feels at Estes Park begins to be replaced by feelings of being completely trapped and overwhelmed by that solitude. She indicates her feelings through a new view of the mountains:

But there is something very solemn, at times almost overwhelming, in the winter solitude. . . . When the men are out hunting . . . or at night, when storms sweep down from Long's Peak, and the air is full of stinging, tempest-driven snow, and there is barely a probability of any one coming, or of my communication with the world at all, then the stupendous mountain ranges which lie between us and the plains grow in height till they become impassable barriers, and the bridgeless rivers grow in depth, and I wonder if all my life is to be spent here in washing and sweeping and baking” (208).

The solitude on which she once thrived has now become her biggest obstacle to happiness.

Whereas before the solitude allowed her to eschew the ennui of most women's daily existence and to avoid most of the demands of society upon her person, here, in this lonely place, she has now taken on the daily tasks of the women of the region, and the impassable mountain traps her, forcing her to remain in this role. Travel has become an impossibility because Bird is without money and the weather has reached a point too dangerous to risk travel.

A few days later, after a horseback ride, Bird, coming back toward her cabin, writes, “The park never had looked so utterly walled in; it was fearful in its loneliness, the ghastliest of white peaks lay sharply outlined against the black snow clouds, the bright river was ice bound, the pines were all black, the world was absolutely shut out” (212- 13). Within this sort of solitude Bird cannot have the adventures that she craves, and thus she asks her sister in her letter, “How can you expect me to write letters from such a place, from a life 'in which nothing happens'?” (213). At this point in time Bird and the young men with whom she shares the chores have been at the park for five weeks, and Bird, due to the solitude, her lack of money, and the weather, is completely tapped out of ideas and adventures to write about. As Root comments, Bird most certainly felt the full weight of the fact that “her role had changed, her identity been altered” by these new circumstances (270). Root continues, “Her daily life was centered . . . on her daily living, on a repetitious round of mundane routine. If you stay too long in one place you can no longer call yourself a transient or a traveler. You've become an inhabitant and you spend your time learning how to dwell there, day by day . . . For Isabella Bird, it was frustrating and unacceptable” (271). A few letters later, toward what Bird discerns is the end of November, she and some others take a ride, about which Bird says the following: “I felt like a servant going out for a day's 'pleasuring,' hurrying 'through my dishes,' and leaving my room in disorder” (219). Her comment speaks to the degree to which she is trapped in this lifestyle. Although she would

never call herself a servant, she is closer to one now than she ever has been. Unlike when she made a choice to be a servant for a day in order to do good for Mr. and Mrs. Hughes, taking on the role of the servant is now a daily, expected necessity. Like many women in the west who also are without money and therefore mobility, Bird has become trapped. At this time, more than at any other point in time during her trip, Bird is the working woman of the west: her “playing” servant has given way to a forced, necessary servanthood based on financial hardship and other unforeseen circumstances. Thankfully for her this servanthood does not last all winter.

#### Bird: Mountaineer Adventurer

Bird's money and mobility, in addition to allowing her the freedom to become servant for a day in the west without inciting criticism, allows her to take on the role of adventurer or explorer to climb Longs Peak, a feat that few people, male or female, had done by the 1870s. When Jim Nugent, or “Mountain Jim” says that he will guide Bird and two men up Longs Peak, Bird eagerly takes on the role of mountaineer, testing the limits of her own physical ability in order to see the grandness and sublimity of the view that only the rugged climb will make possible. Because she is taking up what is usually a man's experience, Bird carefully constructs her gender identity, characterizing herself as weak and feminine throughout the experience yet continuing to embrace the opportunity to gain the mountaintop view that far fewer women than men have seen.<sup>83</sup> Bird's experience, moreover, greatly transforms her: for the rest of her traveling

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<sup>83</sup> Bird hints that a woman climbed the mountain shortly before her, even though it was climbed for the first time only five years earlier, in 1868 (84). Having worn her own boots out, Bird borrows a pair of Evans' boots. She discovers that the boots will not provide her with a foothold but thankfully finds a smaller pair, more fit for a woman, underneath a rock. She hypothesizes that the boots were left there by “the Hayden exploring expedition” (93). Robert Root argues, “In fact, as she must have known, little more than two weeks earlier, on September 13, the lecturer Anna E. Dickinson had ascended in the company of Ferdinand V. Hayden's geological survey team. . . . Isabella may have mentioned Dickinson's climb in her original letter to Henrietta, now lost . . . It's unlikely that she was unaware of Dickinson's ascent; the lecturer's travels and performances received considerable attention in territorial newspapers in September 1873, and she had stayed at the ranch and met Evans and Rocky Mountain Jim.

experience, she embraces extreme physical challenges that even many men would not attempt, thus making her abilities rather than her illness the focus of her self-identity.

Bird emphasizes her frailty and weakness in her mountaintop climb not only because the experience is the most challenging of her travels thus far but also because she must balance her own desires with social expectations of her femininity. Bird thus tempers the fact that she is taking on a masculine role with her utter dependence upon Mountain Jim for her safety and actual attainment of the peak. Highlighting her fear after beginning her venture, she writes to her sister, “Never-to-be-forgotten glories they were, burnt in upon my memory by six succeeding hours of terror” (94). She then clarifies: “You know I have no head and no ankles, and never ought to dream of mountaineering; and had I known that the ascent was a real mountaineering feat I should not have felt the slightest ambition to perform it. As it was, I am only humiliated by my success, for 'Jim' dragged me up, like a bale of goods, by sheer force of muscle” (95). Like many Victorian travel writers of the time, her concern to appear womanly affects her representation of her adventure, and Mountain Jim becomes for Bird in the time of mountain climbing her advocate and enabler.

Undoubtedly Bird was both tired and weak from the difficulty of the climb but is able to continue on because of Mountain Jim. Additionally, in her recounting of the events, she is able to appear wholly feminine through her careful representation of herself and Mountain Jim. Karen M. Morin notes that “Bird's . . . and other Englishwomen's narratives about hiking, horseback riding, taking rail or stage excursions, or in other ways experiencing mountainous landscapes of the American West in the late nineteenth century exhibit highly complex, ambiguous, and often

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It may have been Dickinson's climb that put the idea of her own ascent into her thoughts” (132-3). Although Dickinson is often credited with the first ascent of Longs Peak, two other women, Addie M. Alexander and Henrietta Goss, who we know little about, appear to have climbed it earlier in 1871 (Root 132). It is also possible that the boots belonged to some other nameless woman, for “it is recorded that when the Hayden party [which included Dickinson] came down from the summit another group getting ready to ascend included several women” (Root 135).

contradictory or paradoxical representations of themselves as gendered individuals” (50). This moment exemplifies Morin's statement, as Bird downplays her own abilities in order to appear more feminine as she did what was considered an unwomanly feat and emphasizes Jim Nugent's strength. Whereas an “unfeminine” woman of the time might glory in her conquest of the peak, Bird does not frame her adventure as a conquest but rather an experience only made possible by the strength and endurance of her mountain man guide “Jim.” She is intent to imply and fully show that being in a very harsh environment, in other words, has not masculinized her. Despite the clear danger and the physical strain on her body, Mountain Jim insists on her continued climb. She says, “My fatigue, giddiness, and pain from bruised ankles, and arms half pulled out of their sockets, were so great that I should never have gone half-way had not 'Jim' . . . dragged me along with a patience and skill, and withal a determination that I should ascend the Peak, which never failed” (95). Jim, she even claims, “always said that there was no danger, that there was only a short bad bit ahead, and that I should go up even if he carried me!” (96). Jim's manliness contrasts her own feminine weakness, allowing her to maintain her feminine identity yet embrace her wilderness adventure.

Although the last part of the climb is overwhelming, Bird is thankful for the experience, for she experiences a sublimity often connected to the mountaintop view and, by embracing her full experience, even as one who needs help, she encourages other women to do the same, therefore challenging the fundamental idea that only men can and should experience the physical challenges that the outdoors offer. The view from several spots on the mountain is breathtaking. At a place called “The Notch,” several hours from the peak, Bird is awed by the view and states, “Nature, rioting in her grandest mood, exclaimed with voices of grandeur, solitude, sublimity, beauty, and infinity, 'Lord, what is man, that Thou art mindful of him? Or the son of man, that

Thou visitest him?" (94). This exclamation reminds one of the response that others have of similar experiences, such as Thoreau's well-known response to the grandeur and awe-inspiring view atop Mount Katahdin in Maine in 1846. In this moment, the awesomeness of the view causes Bird to dwell upon her smallness in God's grand world and to dwell on the wonder of God's attention to humanity in light of the extraordinary, beautiful expanse of earth that He created. This moment before even reaching the pinnacle highlights the three stages of the sublime as Christine L. Oravec outlines them:

The three stages were, first, apprehension, in which the individual subject encounters an object larger and greater than the self; second, awe, oppression, or even depression-- in some versions fear or potential fear-- in which the individual recognizes the relative greatness of the object and the relative weakness or limits of the self; and, third, exultation, in which the individual is conceptually or psychically enlarged and the greatness of the object is realized and the individual identifies with that greatness. (67)

Bird experiences elements of this sublime elsewhere in the climb as well. The mountain itself, for example, brings forth Bird's apprehension, as she quickly recognizes her weakness in relation to the mountain as object that she wants to conquer. She outlines for her reader her feelings of inadequacy as well as her overall fear:

At "the Notch" the real business of the ascent began. Two thousand feet of solid rock towered above us, four thousand feet of broken rock shelved precipitously below; smooth granite ribs, with barely foothold, stood out here and there; melted snow refrozen several times, presented a more serious obstacle; many of the rocks were loose, and tumbled down when touched. To me it was a time of extreme

terror. I was roped to “Jim,” but it was of no use; my feet were paralyzed and slipped on the bare rock, and he said it was useless to try to go that way . . . I wanted to return to the “Notch,” knowing that my incompetence would detain the party . . . . (95)

In these moments Bird is faced with the obstacle of the mountain that, because of its size and danger, makes her fear for her life. She recognizes that the ascent is extremely dangerous, as well as her own limitations and inadequacies in relation to the looming challenge.

Thankfully, however, Jim refuses to ascend without Bird, and she experiences the “exultation” which is the third aspect of the sublime at the aforementioned “Notch” as well as the peak. At the peak, she says, “From the summit were seen in unrivalled combination all the views which had rejoiced our eyes during the ascent. It was something at last to stand upon the storm-  
rent crown of this lonely sentinel of the Rocky Range . . . ” (98). Then, with the flair of poetic inspiration, Bird outlines her exultation: “Uplifted above love and hate and storms of passion, clam amidst the eternal silences, fanned by zephyrs and bathed in living blue, peace rested for that one bright day on the Peak as if it were some region” (98). Bird's pinnacle moment, therefore, is defined by the peace that she experiences as she looks across the vast expanse of earth from the mountaintop. The power of the experience is also indicated in her letter when she later reflects upon her entire experience and says, in retrospect, “I would not now exchange my memories of its perfect beauty and extraordinary sublimity for any other experience of mountaineering in any part of the world” (101).<sup>84</sup> Because Bird has experienced the

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<sup>84</sup> Unfortunately the original letters that Isabella wrote to Henrietta about her mountain climbing experience have never been found (Chubbuck 143), so we are unable to compare her initial thoughts with those that she chose to publish. Although a comparison between her unpublished and published letters of this experience would be ideal, we can only count on the fact that the way Bird presents herself and her experience in the published account is how she wants to represent herself. For a few key comparisons between Bird's published and private letters, see Robert Root, *Following Isabella: Travels in Colorado Then and Now*. (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2009) 253-80.

mountaintop and has grown from the experience, or, to use Oravec's language, has become “conceptually or psychically enlarged as the greatness of the object is realized” (67), she now embraces her experience as an integral part of her self, something that could never be replaced.

Additionally, Bird's experience of climbing the mountain begins a trend in her life of pushing her physical limits, inciting for herself a new identity in both the public and her own private realm. It is as if the experience, as well as the reward of the experience (the view and the memory), brings forth a recognition in Bird that she has a right to experience her physicality, to push the limits of her physical abilities in order to experience the pleasure of seeing the world in unique ways. Lee Rozelle notes that the “sublime transports literary figures [or people] from an apprehension of the natural world to a fear of its greatness and finally a newly acquired identification with that 'world'” (3). The mountaintop experience adds to Bird's “identification” with the “world” of both nature and travel, both of which afford the gorgeous views and solitude that she craves. This experience also gives Bird a certain amount of control over her body that she has perhaps not experienced before and, therefore, a new sense of self-identity. Susan Roberson, like other critics, points out that the travel experience transforms the individual who crosses both physical, social, and psychological borders: “The experiences and knowledges gained from travel transform the person traveling and hence bring into question self-identity” (21). Known as an invalid even to herself, Bird shows the world exactly what an “invalid” can do.

Although Bird cannot prevent herself from becoming ill, she can control how much physical exertion she endures and thus, by extension, redefines her own identity and how she is seen by others. In her discussion of women travelers climbing mountains, Morin contrasts the “willed control of the body to perform exceptional deeds . . . with a more traditionally feminine way of controlling the body through sickness, anorexia, neurasthenia, or even wearing corsets,”



arguing that the “medical discourses of the Victorian period . . . feminized suffering itself, to the extent that overcoming suffering through arduous mountaineering might have had more discursive purchase for women climbers than men” (78). Morin ultimately sees Bird's conquest of the peak as “a mastering of the *self* rather than [a mastering of] Estes Park” (78), or, in other words, a “conquest of her own frailty” (78-9), and I would agree with her conclusion. Bird may verbalize her frailty, but she acts as one determined to achieve the peak in spite of her weakness and fatigue. In her adventures in the west, Bird can claim the mountaintop view, or the pinnacle view, that is most often a man's achievement. Furthermore, her actions highlight that she is not content to allow her physical limitations to keep her sedentary. If she could have written freely to other women attempting the same thing, she might have said, “Go ahead, and even let the men help you. Climb on their shoulders to get to the top, and enjoy the view, it's amazing!”

In fact, based on Bird's generally stubborn character, I believe that Bird felt the right to experience grand vistas and to see interesting scenery long before her mountain climbing venture and that her mountaintop experience only reinforced those feelings of entitlement and solidified her yearnings for novelty. It was characteristic of Bird, for example, to stubbornly do what she pleased, despite even family members' contrary views. When she first wanted to visit America, her cousins in Canada warned her against doing so, citing the “dangers of traveling alone and the threat of cholera” (Kaye xxi), yet Bird did as she wanted. She also traveled up three volcanoes in Hawaii despite the dangers and possibly, therefore, believed that this feat of climbing Longs Peak would be just as feasible. Also, Bird's later letters shows her stubborn resolution to do as she wishes when she decides to travel in the middle of a very dangerous snowstorm in order to make it to Longmount to find Evans and hopefully regain her money: no amount of Jim's chastisement or cajoling could change her mind (231). Finally, Bird shows her personality best

herself when she writes to her sister, “In traveling there is nothing like dissecting people's statements, which are usually colored by their estimate of the powers or likings of the person spoken to, making all reasonable inquiries, and then pertinaciously but quietly carrying out one's own plans” (74). Her gendered representation of herself as weak and incapable is thus complicated by both her assertion that she would not trade her experience as well as the fact that, as bold, stubborn and assertive as Bird was in order to do what she desired, she uncharacteristically allows Jim to make the decision for her and to lead her despite her many verbal “weak entreaties to be left behind” (95).

Bird's words on her mountain climbing venture thus assert her feminine weakness and inability, but her actions highlight a woman who utilizes all resources at her disposal to accomplish her desire. In this adventure, of course, her main resource is the strong, masculine, yet gentlemanly Mountain Jim Nugent, who is always ready to assist her physically as well as assuage any stated or perceived fears: “Jim' always said that there was no danger . . . and that I should go up even if he carried me!” (96). Bird highlights that many female British travel writers “reinscribed themselves as feminine, domestic subjects in wilderness environments, yet they also explored and contested the powerful inscriptions of domesticity that arose out of hegemonic (masculinist) versions of Victorian femininity” (Morin 52), for Bird emphasizes her own weakness yet endures, using all that she can to attain her goal.<sup>85</sup> She even at one point “climb[s] on the shoulders of one man” to then be “hauled up” by another (96).

Although Bird was so exhausted after her mountaineering experience that Jim had to lift her off of her horse and carry her in blankets to her sleeping area (100), the overall experience of

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<sup>85</sup> For an excellent reading of seven women travelers' experiences of climbing mountains in the Rockies, see Karen Morin, *Frontiers of Femininity: A New Historical Geography of the Nineteenth-Century American West*. (New York: Syracuse UP, 2008). Although many connections exist between what I argue and what Morin discusses, Morin looks at seven women, making the scope of her work much broader and leaving a lot of room for an in-depth reading of each of the seven women she discusses, Isabella Bird among them.

physical extremes interestingly invigorated rather than enervated Bird throughout the rest of her life. Just as the danger of the storm at sea that Bird experienced on her way to the Hawaiian islands enlivened her, as well as her volcano exploration, the extremes she embraced both during and after her Rocky Mountain travels did the same. Speaking specifically of Bird's view at the peak, Steffoff says, "For Bird, these moments of supreme beauty and freedom were the essence of travel. They were rare and hard to achieve, but they were the happiest moments of her life" (33).

Bird's moment of extreme terror and awe atop Longs Peak encouraged her desire to continue to search for these beautiful and interesting places for the rest of her life; her assertion that she would not trade her experience for any other place attests to the impact of this experience on her person. Root's analysis supports mine, as he argues that although Bird had always been resourceful and determined in her travels, "in the American West circumstances demanded more of her physically and revealed levels of resourcefulness she hadn't known she'd had (294). Colorado, he notes, especially "confirmed her confidence in her ability to stay in motion. As memorably as she was able to preserve her Colorado for us, it wasn't Colorado she took with her when she departed, but rather a new sense of self" (294).

Despite her ongoing physical weaknesses, years later Bird would take a "daring ride across treacherous, snow-filled passes and through flood-swollen streams" to experience the remote Himalayan kingdom of Ladakh (Steffoff 37). In Persia, she would also spend "six months riding with a caravan for about 1,000 miles . . . through Kurdistan" (Steffoff 37-8) and risk her life in remote areas of China, where the people were hostile to foreigners, in order to experience the largely untraveled, unexplored region (Steffoff 39). She also would become the first woman to "travel up the Yangtze River and overland through the mountains to China's border with Tibet" (Kaye xx). She would become one of the most well-known travelers of her time, becoming the

first woman accepted to the Royal Geographical Society and publishing ten books of travel throughout her life (Kaye xx).<sup>86</sup> Bird indeed traveled and explored after her mountaineering experience as though nothing scared her, thus pointing to her transformation through her mountain-climbing adventure: although beginning her venture fearful and frail, Bird's courage, resourcefulness, fortitude, and persistence ultimately won her a mountaintop view that reinforced her desires and encouraged her future decisions to embrace extreme physical challenges, to the point that she became known for the extremities to which she would go during her travels.

#### Bird and the Native American “Other”

Bird's experiences with settlers and mountaineers of the west highlight her ability to maneuver amongst certain subject positions, all the while being careful to construct her identity to align with a feminine ideal of weakness, passivity, or selflessness, especially when she is doing something that would be considered masculine, such as mountaineering, or associated with the lower classes, such as taking the role of servant. Bird's willingness to embrace certain subject positions also highlights, however, those subject positions that she refuses to appropriate throughout her travels. Although traversing class boundaries or challenging gender boundaries is something that Bird does willingly, sometimes even joyfully, she maintains a strict adherence to the social boundaries that define racial relations, thus often further “othering” the Native American people that she sees, encounters, or hears about throughout her journey. Instead she attempts, albeit unsuccessfully, to maintain the more objective distance of an outside observer or tourist, never advocating for the Native American people but, nonetheless, highlighting the contestation of the west through what she does mention.

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<sup>86</sup> Lila Marz Harper notes eleven travel books (133). Bird also, according to Kaye, published “scores of articles and two books of photographs” in addition to her ten travel books (xx).

Critics have not looked closely at Bird's attitude toward the Native American people. If people who study Bird mention the Native American people at all, it is usually to note, as Morin does, one instance in which Bird sees Native Americans at a train station, to argue, as Pat Barr does, that Bird was not interested in the Native American plight, or to note, as Armitage does, that she ignored the Native Americans. Barr writes that by the time Bird arrived in Colorado, the “raids and equally brutal massacres” of the previous decades were mostly over and, although “. . . isolated outbreaks occurred in the 1870s, . . . by that time, the Indians were cowed with defeat and loss” (61). However, “Isabella evinced little interest in these grim scraps” because, Barr argues, she was more interested in her own experience of the Rockies (61-2). Although I must agree with Barr that Bird was more interested in her own adventures and experiences than in the actuality of the Native American people's lives, this is not to say that her entire work avoids discussion of a whole group of people or the tensions present between the Native American people and others in the country. I can also agree with Armitage who writes that “Bird spent no time with the Indians” but am far from agreeing that Bird “was not, in fact, particularly interested in them” or that “[h]er opinion is brief and brutal: 'the Americans will never solve the Indian problem,' she states, 'till the Indian is extinct'” (“Another Lady's Life” 34). Bird could not “ignore” the Native American people, for they were everywhere—present in the towns and the wilderness—and, additionally, their battles for their land and the buffalo, their encampments, and some tribes' hostility to trespassers dictated her traveling boundaries. The tensions between the Native American people and the settlers can be discerned through careful analysis of what is written as well as what Bird purposely avoids in her letters. Moreover, Bird says enough to show that her opinion extends beyond the simple declaration that Armitage quotes. What Bird does, however, is keep her discussion of the Native American people to a minimum, usually to short,

pithy, matter-of-fact comments that leave today's reader with enough to see Bird's prejudices and biases but also enough to piece together some of the history of the region and show consequences of westward colonization that the pervading myth of Manifest Destiny conceals.

Unlike her willingness to integrate herself fully in the role of servant for a day, ranch hand, or mountaineer, Bird keeps her distance from the Native American people, maintaining a tourist/subject relationship with them that results in a cursory understanding of the Native American experience at the point in time in which Bird visits Colorado. Bird's overall habit is to include the Native American people in the description of the scenery of whatever place she visits. Never are the Native American people explored in depth, but her descriptions either highlight her belief in the race's eventual doom, natural savagery, or their degraded state that is a result of the white man's presence on the plains.<sup>87</sup> Her inclusion of the Native American people in her work, however, also highlights the west as a contested space, furthering our historical understanding of westward settlement and the concept of "Manifest Destiny" which undergirds our cultural myth of the wilderness. Bird's text highlights the brutal reality that the cultural myth of the western frontier attempts to ignore in its celebration of expansion, freedom, self-sufficiency, and wilderness conquest: the war, the destruction of resources like the buffalo, and the consequent degradation of the Native American people that ensues from both the buffalo killings as well as interaction with the white emigrant pioneer.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> When Bird visited the Rockies, the devastation of the Native American people was evident most everywhere. According to Morin, "By the late 1870s, all native peoples were effectively under American sovereignty" (141). Bird's visit coincided, therefore, more with the end of the wars between the colonizer and the colonized, although there were still pockets of war resistance. By the late 1870s, the "survival of many tribes depended upon government payments from the sale or lease of land and on government rations . . . With the exception of some tribes in the Northwest, Southwest, and Oklahoma, by the end of the nineteenth century, most Indian nations could no longer feed or clothe themselves without federal aid," Morin adds (141).

<sup>88</sup> Morin argues that "Bird rarely mentioned Native Americans" in her book (150). However, Bird mentions the Native American people much more than Morin indicates. Although usually pithy and sporadically situated throughout her work, her notes nonetheless can be gathered and ordered to provide a picture of Bird's character in relation to the "other," as well as to show how her vignettes highlight the west as a contested space and therefore re-

Bird often mentions Native American people in her descriptions or discussion of her surrounding landscape. In her September 8<sup>th</sup> letter's description of the scenery of Cheyenne, Wyoming, a place with which Bird is not pleased at all, she includes images of the “utterly slovenly-looking and unornamental” town as well as her vision of the plains beyond: “the railroad tracks are nothing but the brown plains, with their lonely sights- now a solitary horseman at a traveling amble, then a party of Indians in paint and feathers, but civilized up to the point of carrying firearms, mounted on sorry ponies, the bundled-up squaws riding astride on the baggage ponies” (27). Her depiction of the Native American people highlights her concept of what “civilized” means: an adoption of the English or white man's ways makes the Native American people she sees in a distance less uncivilized, but the savageness of the people is still present, as illustrated by the fact that they are wearing “paint and feathers” (27). To use Mary Louise Pratt's term, Bird highlights in this moment the result of the “contact zone” of the west between the Native Americans and the white “civilization.” A “contact zone,” according to Pratt, is a “space of imperial encounters, a space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (8).<sup>89</sup> Here is a direct physical, visible result of the contact zone on this group of Native American people—they now carry the guns from the white man, guns that also make the “intractable conflict” between the Native

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integrate into our historical understanding of westward settlement the contestations and violence between the Native Americans and the white colonizer.

<sup>89</sup> Pratt clarifies further, “The term 'contact' foregrounds the interactive, improvisational dimensions of imperial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and 'travelees,' not in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, and often within asymmetrical relations of power” (8). “Contact zone” is appropriate to my reading because I seek to discuss the Native American people's presence in Bird's work to fill in the absences that Bird's descriptions create because of they are so brief and leave much unsaid even as they hint at the brutal reality of westward conquest and the presence of a multiplicity of races. Although Bird sees her experience in the west from the subject view of the colonizer, her descriptions and comments merit a closer reading to show how her particular biases and prejudices affect her writing and how we today can critically analyze what is both said and unsaid to piece together a fuller understanding of the west as a contested space.

American people and others more visible. Embedded in this simple image of the Native American people on the plains is an undeniable history that we as present-day readers cannot ignore and an undeniable reality of the west during that time—the “contact zone” was often a hostile space.

After mentioning the Native Americans with guns, Bird describes several other groups, or types, of people that one could see on the plains, yet Bird tries to impress upon her reader that Cheyenne, Wyoming is only a space that groups traverse to get to someplace more adequate or desirable. Bird quickly replaces the image of the partially civilized Native Americans with another “lonely sight” of the plains, that of “a drove of ridgy-spined, long-horned cattle, which have been several months eating their way from Texas, with their escort of four or five much-spurred horsemen, heavily armed with revolvers and repeating rifles . . .” (27). Again the gun imagery tells plainly of the potential violence that westward travelers encounter. She ends her list with the image of “a solitary wagon, . . . probably bearing an emigrant and his fortunes to Colorado” (27). All of these images, Bird writes, “sugges[t] a beyond,” and she presents the different groups as if they travel in a procession, never meeting: “now a solitary horseman . . . then a party of Indians . . . then a [cattle] drove . . .” (27).

Bird's depiction of the landscape of Cheyenne, Wyoming as only a space to travel through lacks proper evidence and is colored by her own feelings; yet, by including so many types within the space, Bird highlights how highly contested the west was at that point in time. The fact that Bird thinks that Cheyenne is hideous affects her perceptions, for she could not have known that the people she saw from her vantage point were not settled or settling the near country. By juxtaposing images as she does and by suggesting that the land is not worth settling, Bird suggests that the Native American people, ranchers, and emigrants do not come in contact.



However, the guns, clear evidence of Native American acculturation to white man's ways, as well as the guns of the ranchers, bespeak the truth. Bird's choice to describe several types of people on the plains, who are all clearly concerned with their wellness and prosperity, highlights how highly desirable and contested the western space was in general. Furthermore, even if the groups she describes are all looking to settle or claim land elsewhere in the west, they would eventually come into contact. Bird's description of the background scenery thus highlights the potential for contact, for cultural assimilation, as well as violence that may be incited, between workers, settlers, and Native American people as they meet and are subsequently changed in the west.

The placement of the information about Native Americans illustrates that the interaction between the settlers and the original peoples is of minor importance to Bird and her personal goals; at the same time, however, pithy mentions of the Native American people create a textual landscape in which their presence cannot and will not be denied in spite of attempts to destroy them. Mentions of the Native American people often come at the end of or in the middle of Bird's letters as brief, usually objectively-voiced vignettes about the Native American people's latest movements, fights, or communications. On October 9, 1873, Bird writes that the "Denver banks have all suspended business" as a result of a "financial panic" that has made its way "out West" (119). Adding to the money panic is the panic created by the American Indians: "The Indians have taken to the 'war path,' and are burning ranches and killing cattle. There is a regular 'scare' among the settlers, and wagon loads of fugitives are arriving in Colorado Springs. The Indians say, 'The white man has killed the buffalo and left them to rot on the plains. We will be revenged'" (120). Without saying that the Native American people are justified in their retaliation against the "white man," Bird yet does not allow the Native Americans' violence to go without explanation, supposedly quoted from the Native Americans themselves.

By including the quote from the Native American people, Bird forcefully shows that the violence is not one-sided, for the white man has attempted to kill off the Native American people by killing their main food supply; thus, the Native American people retaliate by destroying the white man's food supply of cattle that were brought to replace the buffalo and harming the white man's livelihood further by burning down the ranches that house the workers and owners. Bird also mentions this violent dynamic between the ranchers and the Native Americans in a letter dated September 10th, approximately one month earlier, in which she says, “We saw a convoy of 5,000 head of Texas cattle . . . They were under the charge of twenty mounted vaqueros, heavily armed, and a light wagon accompanied them, full of extra rifles and ammunition, not unnecessary, for the Indians are raiding in all directions, maddened by the reckless and useless slaughter of the buffalo, which is their chief substance” (34). Bird never goes so far as to say that she agrees with the Native American people's violence or the violence of the ranchers—given her overall character as it is portrayed in her personal letters and biographies, if asked, she would state that she believes the violence on both sides to be atrocious – but her presentation of the facts and the Native American voice in this situation allows the “other” side to be heard outside of the violence in which they partake. It is not a blind violence, in other words, in which the Native American people act, but a very calculated counter-attack in a war for their right to live and live off of the land and its provisions. Most often in her discussion of the Native American people, Bird attempts to remain objectively voiced, but her word choices of “reckless” and “useless slaughter” in the case of the buffalo do, however, hint at her feelings concerning the whites' behavior toward the buffalo.

Violence between different Native American tribes as well as violence between the white settlers and Native Americans is always present as a backdrop to the history of the region that

Bird travels in as well as a present reality that she must be careful to avoid. The Native American presence is always lingering through the fact that they were the first inhabitants of the land that Bird explores, and the fact that violence pushed them out of the region is a well-known, although not stated, fact. In a September letter written in a nameless region in the Rocky Mountains, for example, Bird notes, “This is 'The Great Lone Land,' until lately the hunting ground of the Indians, and not yet settled or traversed . . .” (53). The Native Americans are now pushed out of the region, but their presence still lingers through the historical reality of their use of the land. Later on her journey, in a letter dated October 29<sup>th</sup> at the Great Gorge of the Manitou, Bird says, “This is a highly picturesque place, with several springs, still and effervescing, the virtues of which were well known to the Indians” (155). The use of past tense in her statement says more than any commentary: the Native Americans, although still in Colorado, no longer know the springs as they did, for they have been ousted of their land.

Those Native Americans who do continue to try to remain on Colorado's fertile land must be willing to make war with other tribes and the white settlers in order to keep that land. Several times Bird mentions the violence between Native Americans in North Park, a region that she would have liked to visit for its beauty and which she claims is one of the “most important” valleys of the region (105) but which is not accessible due to violence. In her September letter from an unknown region in the Rocky Mountains, Bird notes, “Not many miles from us is North Park, a great tract of land said to be rich in gold, but those who have gone to 'prospect' have seldom returned, the region being the home of tribes of Indians who live in perpetual hostility to the whites and to each other” (57-8). Later, while staying several weeks at Estes Park, Bird tells of a particular act of violence: “Two Englishmen of refinement and culture camped out here prospecting a few weeks ago, and then, contrary to advice, crossed the mountains into North

Park, where gold is said to abound, and it is believed that they have fallen victims to the bloodthirsty Indians of the region” (113). It is a little more understandable in this instance of her countrymen being attacked that Bird would resort to name calling: her “refined” and very “cultured” countrymen have been supposedly killed by the savages thirsting for blood. Her description shows that she recognizes in her countrymen the same refinement and culture of her background and that the Native American “other” must be the opposite of cultured and refined in order to murder two men simply because they are searching for gold.

Her biased impression of the Native American people as bloodthirsty savages is especially evident when Bird meets Comanche Bill, for Bird considers him to be a gentleman despite his bloodthirsty revenge. On a horseback ride across the country, Bird is joined by a gentleman for ten miles. She says, “There was nothing sinister in his expression, and his manner was respectful and frank . . . I found him what is termed 'good company.' He told me a great deal about the country and its wild animals, with some hunting adventures, and a great deal about Indians and their cruelty and treachery” (172-3). To Bird, Comanche Bill, a stranger at that point, is nothing but a gentleman even though he has a very unusual number of weapons, including a rifle, two pistols, two revolvers, a knife, and a carbine (172). Afterward, a woman who saw the two together says to Bird, “I am sure you found Comanche Bill a real gentleman” (173). Bird's opinion of him does not change even though she admits that he is “one of the most notorious desperados of the Rocky Mountains, and the greatest Indian exterminator of the frontier—a man whose father and family fell in a massacre at Spirit Lake by the hands of the Indians, who carried away his sister . . .” (173). His life, she notes, has since been dedicated to killing Native Americans anywhere he finds them and to finding his sister (173). Bird's subject position as a white woman makes her more open to hearing and interacting with the white men of the country,

even though she, as a tourist, can take the liberty to speak to most anyone. Thus the great discrepancy is highlighted when Bird, without any sign of disgust, tells of Comanche Bill's extreme brutality and violence against countless innocent Native Americans yet cannot sympathize with the Native American people, like those in North Park, who try to protect their land and families from trespassers and those who care nothing for their humanity.

When Bird's opinions of the Native American people do arise or when she does take the time to discuss them more extensively, she, like many white people of her time, depicts them as an inferior, savage race that is dying out; therefore, although her discussions of the Native American people throughout her text makes their existence undeniable, she does not advocate for them. Her very first experience of Native Americans is in California, mentioned in a letter dated September 2<sup>nd</sup>, when she sees the "Digger Indians," who take up four cars, at the train station in Colfax. The image of the people juxtaposes images of wealth, industry, and plenty: she notes the "gaudy engines" with an ample abundance of logs for fuel, the "quantity of polished brass-work, comfortable glass houses, and well-stuffed seats for the engine-drivers," as well as fully loaded baggage car carrying the important bundles of passengers and people (5). Two other cars are loaded abundantly with peaches and grapes, and yet another car is full of workers for the railroad (5). All of these images indicate the wealth or industry of the region; only the Digger Indians (and the poor Chinamen) appear out of place. In one of her few clearly opinionated commentaries, Bird writes that the Native Americans "are perfect savages, without any aptitude for even aboriginal civilization, and are altogether the most degraded of the ill-fated tribes which are dying out before the white races" (6). She describes their stature as "diminutive" and their clothing as "a ragged, dirty combination of coarse woolen cloth and hide, the moccasins being unornamented" (6). These people thus have not even a hint of the cleanliness or desire for artistry

that Bird would have recognized as elements of a superior civilization. Morin notes that we can see the discourses of scientific racism and “the Victorian quest for cleanliness” at play in Bird's comments in the fact that the Digger Indians were hunter and gatherers, therefore appearing to Bird as “further down the chain of being than either their more noble ancestors or Euro-American immigrants” (151). Bird in this moment upholds racist assumptions that Native Americans are a dying race in the face of a superior nation, or, in her words, “a most impressive incongruity in the midst of the tokens of an omnipotent civilization” (6).<sup>90</sup>

More than once in her travels Bird has the opportunity but chooses not to delve into a deeper understanding of the Native American people by seeking to learn or tell their stories and thus give them a voice in her work. At least two opportunities for learning present themselves, one in Denver and another in the plains outside of Denver. Before she begins a 300 mile horseback trip exploring the Colorado region, she stops in Denver, where two acquaintances, Governor Hunt and Mr. Byers of the *Rocky Mountain News*, argue that she will be “quite safe” on horseback and convince her to travel by horse to see the country rather than take the railroad. (138). In a letter dated October 23<sup>rd</sup>, Bird writes that the Native Americans she sees in Denver “belonged to the Ute tribe, through which I had to pass, and Governor Hunt introduced me to a fine-looking young chief, very well dressed in beaded hide, and bespoke his courtesy for me if I needed it” (139). The extent of her interaction with the young chief ends here, however. The fact

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<sup>90</sup> Morin articulates ways in which “the contexts for the production of the travel texts were racialized and gendered” and explores “the multiple subjectivities of both women travelers and Native Americans that resulted” (139). She focuses on railway travel because railroads often were a contact zone for the Native American people and the white settler, colonizer, or traveler. She argues that the “presence of poverty-stricken Native Americans at train stations symbolized the degradation suffered by masses of others, and in particular signaled the failure of the reservation system. Native American peoples begging, performing feats of skill, or offering 'peeps' at their babies for a nickel or dime at train stations . . . provided ample evidence that federal Indian policies had produced disastrous outcomes. Unfortunately, their presence also served to reinforce popular attitudes about the need for those same policies” (141-2). Bird's encounter with the Digger Indians at the train station does not incite any discussion of the government's role in their situation. It may point to some growth in her understanding of the government's role in the degradation of the Native American people, therefore, when she, a few months later, delves into a diatribe against the Bureau of Indian Affairs, but this is mere speculation as there is not enough evidence in her published or private letters to show that her beliefs toward the Native American people as a whole changed during her stay.

that Governor Hunt introduces her to the chief illustrates that interaction between whites and Native Americans in Denver was common and that the opportunity existed to speak in depth to the Native Americans in the region. Bird chooses instead to remain as uninvolved as she can under the circumstances.

In Denver she sees more people groups than she had mentioned seeing in the background scenery of the Wyoming plains in her September 8<sup>th</sup> letter; thus, the potential for interaction alluded to in her description of travelers on the Wyoming plains is brought to fruition in Denver, but Bird does not speak to any of the people she describes because she is intent to keep the objectivity of a tourist and is also overwhelmed. Denver appears to be one of few places in her travels in which the Native American people and the white settlers interact on a regular basis, where two cultures meet and engage in business, for the Native Americans have stores there, according to Bird's account (140). The whole motley crew of Denver is made up of asthmatics who are gathering supplies for heading into the mountains to try the camp cure, invalids who are too weak to travel into the mountains (138), hunters and trappers, “men of the Plains with belts and revolvers,” “teamsters,” “horseman,” “Broadway dandies in light kid gloves,” “rich, English sporting tourists,” as well as “hundreds of Indians on their small ponies, the men wearing buckskin suits sewn with beads, and red blankets, with faces painted vermilion and hair hanging lank and straight, and squaws much bundled up, riding astride with furs over their saddles” (140). The town is full of business and engagement, a place of exchange, where disparate people meet and are potentially changed by their interactions, but Bird does not delve any deeper than her descriptions. Upon her parting she hints that the conglomerate was overwhelming when she says, “Town tired and confused me, and . . . I was glad when a man brought Birdie [the horse] at nine yesterday morning” (140). She leaves, feeling better once again in her solitude.

Another opportunity to speak to Native Americans, this time in their own encampment, occurs only a few weeks later, and one may assume that this is the encampment that, in her October 23<sup>rd</sup> letter from Denver, she states she will have to traverse during her travels and whose chief she met in Denver through Governor Hunt's introduction. As she takes a shortcut over the plains during her journey to reach Denver, Bird passes an encampment of "Ute Indians," which she describes as "about 500 strong, a disorderly and dirty huddle of lodges, ponies, men, squaws, children, skins, bones, and raw meat" (183). This description ends her depiction of the camp and the people. Morin notes that many women travel writers expressed interest specifically in "indigenous women's lives and work that was not obvious from the train station" where they usually would see Native American peoples (152). Once these women entered into Native Americans' camps, they could see the lives of the people differently, for their lives did not appear as "deteriorated" the more they removed themselves from the "proximity to white settlements" (152). Although Bird shows immense interest in the working women pioneers, she, unlike many other women travelers, takes no discernible interest in the Native American women she sees, and, in the case of this excursion, she mentions neither women nor men. She does not stop to talk to anybody in the camp or take the time to describe the people or camp as she does with many other sites throughout her travels.

Even the sketch of the Indian encampment found within her published work titled "An Indian Camp" uncovers the superficiality of Bird's interactions with and discussion of the Native Americans. The image shows six tents set in the foreground and midground of the scene, and distant mountains in the background. In between a few of the tents is what appears to be meat drying on sticks. No people are present in the sketch. Her image, in fact, depicts an encampment that could in reality be abandoned, yet in her written description of the camp she claims it to be



“about 500 strong” (183). Common sense would indicate that an English woman traveling alone could not travel through a Native American encampment of 500 people and not be questioned, or even spoken to. Chances are that her introduction to the young Chief benefitted her in her attempt to traverse the encampment, yet she shares no indication that a single person interacted with her or even noticed her presence. Even in the middle of an overwhelming number of Native American inhabitants, therefore, Bird refuses to discuss them.

Bird does take the time, however, to speak in depth about the failure of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in her November 9<sup>th</sup> letter, which shows her belief in the inferiority of the Native American people yet the complicity of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in their current degraded state. She writes, “The Americans will never solve the Indian problem till the Indian is extinct. They have treated them after a fashion which has intensified their treachery and 'devilry' as enemies, and as friends reduces them to a degraded pauperism, devoid of the very first elements of civilization” (184). She continues, “The only difference between the savage and civilized Indian is that the latter carries firearms and gets drunk on whiskey” (184). Her comment indicates that she sees the Native American people as uncivilized before Europeans' presence; however, the white man's main influence is his gun, which promotes violence and is therefore not very civilizing. Her hints that the American people lack any truly helpful, peaceful civilizing influence, therefore, also shows her recognition of the tenuous dynamic between the Native Americans and the colonizers.

Bird's accomplishments and personal growth attained through her travels to the Rocky Mountains are thus counterbalanced by the fact that her class privilege and race color her perception of the Native American people in the usually biased ways of the nineteenth century. Morin points out that much of the current scholarship about British women travel writers abroad

explores the traveling woman's participation in imperialism, outlining her complicity in the “exploitation” of both the non-white “other” and the land and resources (52); this scholarship, Morin adds, contrasts sharply with earlier scholars' work on Victorian women travelers, which often “ignored” the travelers' “racism, classism, and sexism” in order to “valorize” the woman traveler for her ability to use travel to free herself from oppressive “social norms” (52-3).

Although Bird accomplished much as a woman gaining the freedom of the west, she did not advocate for Native American rights. She, like many of her time, was blinded by her own prejudices or ignorance and rhetorically positioned Native American peoples as others did, depicting them as “uncivilized,” or as “vanishing Americans.” However, despite her biases, Bird looks discerningly at how the government has functioned in the lives of the Native American peoples and boldly speaks out about the corruption and greed of the people in government.

Bird's next comments show the Bureau of Indian Affairs' responsibility for the current situation, making clear that the agency is corrupt and has not done its job for the benefit of the Native Americans:

The Indian Agency has been a sink of fraud and corruption; it is said that barely thirty per cent of the allowance ever reaches those for whom it is voted; and the complaints of shoddy blankets, damaged flour, and worthless firearms are universal. “To get rid of the Injuns” is the phrase used everywhere. Even their “reservations” do not escape seizure practically; for if gold “breaks out” on them they are “rushed” and their possessors are either compelled to accept land farther west or are shot off and driven off. (184)

She concludes her diatribe against the Bureau of Indian Affairs by arguing that the corruption of this organization reflects on other government agencies and America as an entire entity:

“Americans specially love superlatives. The phrases 'biggest in the world,' 'finest in the world,' are on all lips. Unless President Hayes is a strong man they will soon come to boast that their government is composed of the 'biggest scoundrels' in the world” (184).<sup>91</sup>

Although Bird does not write about the Native American people in detail or talk to them and include their voices in her text, she also does not remain silent about accusations of wrongs committed against them by the government and the American people in general. Bird does not advocate for the Native American people, but she does provide more of a discussion than many accounts of Americans settling the west. As Imbarrato says, “Generally speaking, migrating travelers expressed a sense of entitlement to these lands, evident in their assumptions of ownership and in their lack of concern for indigenous peoples. . . . travel accounts virtually ignore the Native American's plight” (14). Imbarrato argues that women's accounts do not tend to discuss “real estate ventures, land rights, or financial issues” that were the man's responsibilities, but instead focused on “setting up a new home” (14). Usually the woman's focus is “driven by what has been left behind [home] rather than by an appreciation for what lies ahead” (15). As traveler and tourist, Bird sees the Native American plight more clearly and openly than other accounts, for she depicts the reality of the west as a contested space, if only through the mention of the wars happening outside her realm of travel.

Bird's discussion of the Bureau of Indian Affairs is the longest commentary on the Native American people's situation found in her text. This and the vignettes strewn throughout her work give a range of images of the Native American people, including tribes at war with whites

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<sup>91</sup> Morin argues that British women travel writers of the nineteenth century were influenced by the “site” of their encounter with the Native American. From aboard a fast moving train, for example, the Native Americans in the distance “became ugly or aesthetic objects,” but those that the woman writer “encountered 'intimately' (face-to-face) at the many train stations along the railroad route oftentimes became subjects of the women's philanthropic reform doctrine, to be saved from the unscrupulous, greedy Americans” (6). This moment in Bird's text is the closest she came to this sort of moment that Morin describes, yet Bird's rhetoric still does not take a clear stand for the Native American people. Rather, she focuses on the greed and misconduct of the Bureau.

settlers, tribes warring with other tribes, and Native Americans living peacefully with settlers and conducting business in town and stores. She provides the image of the groups of Native American people riding on the plains, traveling further westward or toward some resting place where they will, like the Native American people in the “North,” either have to fight for their land or be forced to leave, and she also depicts the Digger Indians on the railroad. We have many images of the Native American people in their “degraded” state, but we also have a description of a young chief who is dressed elegantly in his nation's ware.

But ultimately Bird describes the Native American people as a tourist only. Unlike when she becomes a servant for a day, or takes up the role of cattle driver, Bird does not seek a close encounter with the Native Americans in order to better understand them or Colorado, to help them, or to “be useful.” Her observations remain cursory. The short comments and depictions in Bird's work particularly highlight their continued resistance to white colonization, to white hostility against themselves and their chief source of subsistence, the buffalo, and even to white and Native American assimilation as the disparate groups came in contact throughout different areas of the west and the wilderness.

## Conclusion

So what was Isabella Bird was doing in the Rocky Mountains in the year 1873, despite the fact that, as she says, it was not a place for women? Bird is a wonderful example of a woman who knows what she wants and reaches for it. Perhaps it is true that she was ill for most of her life but “found herself,” as well as mental and physical vigor that she never knew she possessed, in Hawaii. If so, the United States western territories were a perfect place to test out this newfound strength and sense of freedom, or to stretch the limits of it. Under the excuse of

continued illness, Bird seized the opportunity to travel to the magnificent Rocky Mountain wilderness. Once there, however, her focus turns to desire for solitude, magnificent vistas, and adventures, which lead her to seek out Estes Park, climb Longs Peak, take on roles of mountaineer, cowpoke, servant, and explorer, and venture out on horseback for a 300 mile tour of Colorado. With an adventurous spirit and ceaseless determination, she climbs a mountain and explores a region that few others, men or women, have had the opportunity to experience.

Despite her depictions of women who have settled in the west and who clearly do not have the freedom to leave or even explore the wilderness, Bird overwhelmingly depicts the west as a space of freedom for herself, where she, as an upper-class woman with money and mobility, may transgress certain gender expectations in order to gain her desire of living in solitude, taking solitary horseback excursions, and climbing a mountain. Bird embraces the rampant freedom of the western wilderness for herself despite that the country, and, therefore, by extension, its freedom, is overwhelmingly claimed by men. The opportunities that her class situation allows are closed to many settlers of both sexes, therefore highlighting the huge disparity between the west of the cultural imagination with its unlimited opportunities and the reality of poverty and failure in westward settlement and expansion. Her description of the women settlers especially shows the harshness of frontier life, for the freedom that Bird gains is denied to Mrs. Chalmers and Mrs. Hughes. Only when she runs out of money and a snowstorm keeps her immobile does Bird begin to experience the domestic reality of the women settlers of the west.

Finally, Bird's decisions about which roles to adopt during her journey, such as servant or mountaineer, and which people to keep at a distance, including the desperado figure and the Native Americans, reinforce Bird's continuous focus on reinforcing her identity as a lady. Knowing that her ability to appear feminine to her reading public depended on her own depiction

of herself, and knowing that she was already testing the boundaries of accepted female behavior by traveling alone, seeking solitude and escape from society, and remaining unmarried, Bird took every opportunity possible to show that she was fully feminine in her behavior, her dress, and even in others' perceptions of her. Bird's careful negotiation between her desire for the freedom found in the wilderness and social expectations is best illustrated when she emphasizes her feminine weakness during her mountain climbing adventure yet utilizes the stronger men in the party to gain her desire of reaching the pinnacle. Yet this experience also changed her, showing her that the physical limits that she and society had placed on her sickly body could be overcome and leading her forward on a life of adventure defined by the testing of personal limits. Bird also uses other opportunities to show her feminine character, like taking on the role of servant for a day to highlight her helpfulness and charity toward others in need, or describing her friendship with people like Desperado Jim to highlight her purity when she refuses his love for her and her Christian character when she pities his lost, sinful state. It is also most likely this need to focus on proper female behavior that incited her lack of deep discussion of the Native American people and the political climate of the west at the time. Although her short vignettes of the Native Americans function merely to interest the reader, they also make it impossible for the reader to ignore the fact that the west or frontier is a contested space, for the vignettes highlight the presence of those often ignored or erased from the white masculine myth of the western frontier's settlement. By implication, knowledge of this erasure demands a response, which women like Muriel Rukeyser, whom I will discuss in my next chapter, take upon themselves to provide.

“There is also, in any history, the buried, the wasted, and the lost”<sup>92</sup>:  
Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*:  
Uncovering and Recovering History in the American Wilderness

The destruction of the wilderness resulting from the anthropocentric belief that wilderness should be subdued, the racism against Native Americans resulting in the destruction of both peoples and their resources, and the greed which coincided with westward expansion and spurred on the “closing” of the frontier all made new representations of wilderness and American identity connected to wilderness necessary moving into the twentieth century. Some middle to upper-class white women of the nineteenth century like Elizabeth Temple and Isabella Bird accepted the prevailing notion of the wilderness as a masculine realm while yet integrating themselves into the wilderness for their own adventures, therefore reinforcing the white masculinist paradigm of wilderness in all of its manifestations, including the idea of Manifest Destiny, the idea of the white male adventurer “taming” the wilderness, and the idea that other people, like the wilderness, are wild and must be subdued or perish. Their focus on themselves and their utilization of their femininity to work within the dominant ideology ultimately continued to obscure the reality of those subjugated in society. Although present in Cooper's *The Pioneers* and Bird's journal of her travels, the “other,” including the African-American, the slave, the Native American, or the working-class servant, does not figure prominently into the narrative or overall experience of the white woman adventurer.

The move from Elizabeth Temple and Isabella Bird in the nineteenth century to Muriel Rukeyser in the early twentieth century changes from women working within the myths of wilderness to attain their individual goals or desires to a woman revisioning history and

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<sup>92</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1974) 88.

overhauling the myths rooted in the American consciousness in order to highlight the contributions of those erased from history. In the 1930s Muriel Rukeyser, an upper-class Jewish author, wrote *The Book of the Dead*, which responds to her contemporary moment with its focus on the laborer during the Great Depression. Her text undermines the wilderness myth by revisioning history in the wilderness to include the “other,” by making women creators of a new American identity which rejects the nostalgic or romantic stories of the past, and by imagining a future in which a healthy, mutually beneficial relationship exists between the laborer and the land. Through its presentation of American history pertaining to wilderness exploration, Rukeyser's work acts as a corrective to narratives of discovery and development that exclude the “other,” such as the laborer and the racial minority. After exploring West Virginia's history, Rukeyser connects the past disregard of humanity to the present-day subjugation of people in a relatively remote area of West Virginia called Gauley Bridge, thus showing how the degradation of the “other,” a reality obscured by romantic adventure stories of white men in the forests, manifests in the present.

To further counter and correct the wilderness myth, Rukeyser grants women at Gauley Bridge a prominent place in her text, using their testimonies to show how they advocate for the oppressed and thus help to create a new American nation which includes the stories of those forgotten in its culture memory. Finally, Rukeyser's text integrates hope into the devastation at Gauley Bridge by showing the potential of a mutually beneficial, healthy relationship that could exist between laborers and the land and between laborers and those who benefit from their work. Implied in these relationships are the ideas that one need not dominate and destroy the wilderness as was done in the past but that a beneficial co-existence is possible, as well as the idea that laborers should be valued for their contributions to society. Rukeyser thus uncovers and



begins to rectify both past and present injustices by revisioning history in the wilderness and highlighting the contributions of those severely undervalued in society.

As a book of poetry that speaks to the present situation of worker abuse and neglect, Rukeyser adds to an important body of literature that began to gain prominence and influence toward the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Between 1880 and 1930 the subjugated worker became an important focus in both American culture and American literature as muckraking and other social justice texts like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* brought class issues into keen focus by highlighting the effects of filthy, hazardous working environments on laborers. Authors like Sinclair sought national reform through their focus on the relationship between the environment and those who are “othered” in society because of race, class, or both. In particular, authors would sometimes highlight the workers' disconnectedness from the health and beauty of the natural world in order to contrast this absent environment with the workers' working environment, which destroys both the laborer and the natural world through its pollutive effects and its commodification of the worker.<sup>93</sup>

The simultaneous destruction of nature and abuse of people often occurring throughout different phases of America's development gained public visibility in the Depression era as the documentary became a popular way to present the reality of those struggling, such as the desperate workers who braved horrendous living conditions and dangerous work environments in order to meet their basic needs. Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) and Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor's *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939), for example, are two photo-texts produced in the 1930s that vividly

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<sup>93</sup> We must not forget that the connection between a destroyed laboring “other” and industry was nothing new: Chinese hired from 1865-1869 to help build the trans-continental railroad are one example of people subordinated because of both race and class. Their work, including blasting sides of mountains during construction, cost many lives whose stories were rarely told. Not until the social muckraking texts became popular, however, was the issue put forth so prominently.

capture the poverty and other struggles of the time through photographs with captions and stories, including oral accounts. Also inspired to use the documentary, photographer Nancy Naumberg and poet/journalist/activist Muriel Rukeyser traveled to West Virginia in 1936 to record the testimonies of victims who were a part of a large industrial disaster. Rukeyser and Naumberg planned to “gather informants' testimony, gain firsthand experience of the region, and take photographs to strengthen the [workers'] case against Union Carbide for the congressional hearings,” and Rukeyser also planned to “write a long poem about the scandal” (Rowe 138). The result, *The Book of the Dead*, was published in 1938 as a part of her second book *U. S. I.* Initially Rukeyser planned to use Naumberg's photographs in her work, but the photographs unfortunately did not survive.<sup>94</sup> Yet Muriel Rukeyser was still inspired to write and publish her sequence of poems, which includes the testimonies of men and women most affected by the work-induced silicosis at Gauley Bridge, West Virginia in the early 1930s.<sup>95</sup> At Gauley Bridge workers were building a tunnel through a mountain for a hydroelectric project that included diverting the path of New River through a mountain. When silica was found in the tunnel, the work was extended to mine the deadly dust for the electroprocessing of steel. However, the companies in charge, Union Carbide and their contractors Rinehart and Dennis, took no precautions to ensure worker health, and hundreds of men died after contracting silicosis from

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<sup>94</sup> Rowe suggests the possibility that Rukeyser and Naumberg planned to “collaborate on a poem accompanied by photographs, in the manner of” well-known documentary texts of the time, such as that by Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell or James Agee and Walker Evans, and that we should therefore look at Rukeyser's work in relation to the work of others working in the documentary mode (232, footnote 8). Rukeyser had also planned to help Paul Botha, a British documentary filmmaker, “make a documentary film of the events the poem depicts, but the deal fell through” (142). Because the deal fell through, however, Rukeyser’s goal instead became gathering evidence to strengthen the workers' cases against Union Carbide (143).

<sup>95</sup> The connection between the degradation of workers and destruction of nature makes Rukeyser's work a medial text between muckraking and social justice texts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the environmental justice texts that stem from the social justice movement of the 1960s and 70s. A concern for people and the places they work and reside is the impetus of the environmental justice movement in the United States. Although this movement's name was not coined until the 1980s, its base is social justice, making people of the past, whose concern for both people and land came together through myriad forms of activism, precursors to today's organized movement.

dust inhalation. The tunnel being excavated was called the Hawks Nest Tunnel, and the location was Gauley Bridge; therefore the incident became known by several names, including the Gauley Tunnel tragedy, the Hawk's Nest tragedy, or the tragedy at Gauley Bridge. The incident resulted in months of lawsuits and measly compensation to the victims and their families.

*The Book of the Dead* combines personal testimony with myth, lyric with document, reader and writer with worker, and the power of nature with the power of human potential or its denigration, in order to transform understandings of history, nation, and self. Writing during the modernist period, when writers were especially engaged in (another) call to define America through its literature, Rukeyser reenvisioned the past to build a more equitable future for all people through her response to the historical American wilderness: she presents to the role of the “other” in the history of wilderness exploration and uses this knowledge to fight the present subjugation of people still working the land. Rukeyser challenges the traditional, dominant view of America's development, showing that the Anglo-Saxon male explorer is neither the only key player nor the only one to have a relationship to wilderness. She also highlights a communal American exploration and development without obscuring the also present power hierarchies, racism, classism, and greed. As Gerd Hurm argues, Rukeyser's sequence of poems “assume[s] the shape of a 'national allegory'” as Rukeyser uncovers “the ways in which the power of American nature could have been misused against its people” (193). Although critical attention to *The Book of the Dead* has multiplied within the last twenty years, no one has yet focused on Rukeyser's combination of history, nature, and the worker through an ecocritical lens in order to highlight how *The Book of the Dead* supports her goal of social justice. In the following discussion, I will highlight the importance of these elements in her work and add a new, ecocritical reading to current critical discourse. Rukeyser responds to the Gauley Bridge atrocity

by providing a national narrative that shows the integral roles that Native Americans and African Americans, servants, women, and even the land played in America's development, in addition to highlighting the abuse of people and land in the past and present. In the sequence, Rukeyser also connects the American wilderness and history of exploitation to the present and future, transforming the reader and encouraging activism for social justice.

### Rukeyser's Poetics and *The Book of the Dead*

In asking the reader to become an advocate for justice, Rukeyser does not ask for something that she herself has not been willing and able to do. The whole nature of Muriel Rukeyser's vision as a person and poet was political and rooted in activism, and she traveled all over the world in order to document injustice and incite social change. As she focused on recording the truth, her poetry followed suit, reemphasizing her worldview. According to Jane Cooper, Rukeyser “believed in the test of the spirit through action; . . . She wanted to be *there*. One way of witnessing was to write. Another was to put her body on the line, literally. She was, almost from the first, deeply committed to the cause of social justice” (7). Before Rukeyser was even twenty-four years old, she “had already tried to cover the Scottsboro trials for a student newspaper and contracted typhoid in an Alabama jail, given street corner speeches in New York, made her investigative journey to Gauley, West Virginia, and studied congressional reports of the miners' deaths there for her long poem in *U.S. 1* and witnessed the first fighting of the Spanish Civil War” (Kertesz 50). Her activism even landed her in jail when she, in her old age and battling diabetes and other health issues, protested the Vietnam War (Cooper 7). And her battle for human rights led her in the early 70s to South Korea, where she supported and intervened for Kim Chi-Ha, a poet who was in prison and sentenced to death (Green 402). Her poetry reflects

her lifelong commitment to activism and social justice as well: her time in Spain covering the anti-fascist Olympic games inspired her 1938 poem “Mediterranean,” and years later, in 1978, her work “The Gates” was inspired by her support for poet Kim Chi Ha. The impetus for her art is also her goal of and belief in the readers' and, subsequently, society's ability to change: “She wrote always about war and violence, our twentieth-century continuum, and about peace—not as a vacuum, the absence of war, but as a possible city of the future” (Cooper 7). Rukeyser's deep commitment to human rights, always evident in her work, made passivism in the face of injustice impossible.

Rukeyser's goal for her life and work in general and for *The Book of the Dead* in particular was ultimately to inspire individual and social change, and she uncovers America's historical exploitation of people and its connection to the present atrocity at Gauley Bridge in order to build community and advocate for change. Martin Cherniack's 1986 historical account of the disaster notes that even though the Gauley Bridge disaster “was believed to have caused a great but unquantified loss of life, the disaster has remained a legend” because “time and a deliberate and impressively successful attempt by the corporations involved to obliterate all traces of the occurrence have frustrated attempts to produce an account that could claim either authority or completeness” (2)<sup>96</sup>. Rukeyser's text combines document and authoritative voices of the past and present with the participation of the reader to create an account that both provides a more complete rendering of history and encourages the reader to never forget what the corporations tried to obliterate from history. Testimony from hearings, personal stories from

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<sup>96</sup> It is unclear, for example, how many men actually died from silicosis, as Union Carbide attempted to hide the truth from the beginning. Doctors purposely misdiagnosed illnesses, and dead bodies were secretly buried in a nearby cornfield. According to Cherniack, the local newspaper's lack of discussion of Gauley Bridge was due to widespread racism, as well as “hostility toward migrants from the South” (52). Although the tunnel was the “largest construction project in the history of Fayette County,” in “all of 1931, the principal year of the tunnel drilling, only three sizable stories on the largest construction project in the country's history appeared in local papers” (52-3).

interviews, history books, stock quotes, letters, and even photographs inspire *The Book of the Dead* because Rukeyser believed that all parts of history are worth exploring and utilizing in poetry. According to Herzog, “Rukeyser adopted a suspicious stance toward the totalizing, inevitably limiting narratives promulgated within traditional historical discourse. Her probing of history's unlit corners and unmarked passages, along with her insistence on poetry's engagement with history, resulted in both a poetics and a body of poetry profoundly marked by historical reconsideration” (40). Rukeyser herself clarifies that “in any history” there exists “the buried, the wasted, and the lost” (*The Life of Poetry* 88). It is precisely this “buried” history that *The Book of the Dead* uncovers.

Just as the powerful corporations instigated the erasure of the Gauley Tunnel tragedy from historical memory, the powerful critics and individuals who defined good poetry during Rukeyser's time set the precedent for the general lack of critical praise of Rukeyser's work before the 1960s. Rukeyser's body of work in general and *The Book of the Dead* in particular has been largely understudied and under-appreciated until recent reassessment of her texts and revaluing of her poetics. One reason she has been undervalued for so long is that her poetics did not line up cleanly with the New Critics, whose influence on the definition of worthwhile literature was a stronghold until the 1960s reassessment of literary worth.<sup>97</sup> Kalaidjian argues

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<sup>97</sup> For excellent discussions of Rukeyser's poetics and its reception, see Kate Daniels, “Muriel Rukeyser and Her Literary Critics,” *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers*, ed. Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996) 247-63. Daniels focuses on Rukeyser's decision to publish poems that “were simultaneously tied to the apolitical and highly aesthetic tradition of high modernism and to a self-conscious left-wing political identity derived from Marxist theory” (250). She also discusses how New Critics' “stranglehold on literary opinion” as well as Rukeyser's own personal decisions influenced the decline of Rukeyser's “literary reputation during the 1950s” (256). For a helpful discussion on how the New Critics' aesthetics affected Rukeyser's critical reception, especially the reception of *The Book of the Dead*, see Michael Thurston, *Making Something Happen: American Political Poetry Between the World Wars* (Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 2001). Thurston in his introduction articulates the assumptions driving literary values of the New Critics and notes how political poetry has been undervalued and understudied, despite better understanding of the politics behind the literary judgments of different groups. For a good summary of *The Book of the Dead's* reception, see Michael Thurston, *Making Something Happen*, 173-5. See also Louise Kertez, *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser*. (Baton Rouge; Louisiana State UP, 1980) 112-3.

that “[p]ostwar scholarship on high modernism has largely silenced the century's complex and contentious social context” (2).<sup>98</sup> Because the academy narrowed its focus on modernist poetry to only a “select group of seminal careers,” we have a “lapse” in “cultural memory” (2). Rukeyser, too long a lost voice herself as a poet, adds other lost voices of the oppressed, poor, and working class, to America's cultural memory to make them a part of the fabric of the nation. Historical tragedy as her focus was also devalued, however, as the idea that good poetry is not overtly political colored reception of Rukeyser's work until the 60s, and people are still working to overcome this bias. Anne Herzog, for instance, explores Rukeyser's complex relationship between politics and literature in order to articulate a “revisionary critical assessment” because past reviewers have been largely unable “to imagine literature and politics in relation” and have thus left behind “a history of critical assessment that is painfully myopic” (33).

Rukeyser was criticized by critics spanning the political spectrum through what Kalaidjian states are “idealizing, totaling arguments against” her work (163). Those vying for the definition of “good” poetry during her time did not value her use of history shown through experimental modernist forms. Critics on the right, for instance, although unable to “politically dismiss Rukeyser's project tout court—resisted the work's partisan content as somehow unfit for poetry's more traditionally universal and timeless humanism” (163). Some important critics of Rukeyser's time, like Willard Maas, gave partially negative critiques, according to Kalaidjian, based on ideals that anticipated the “later, New Critical divorce of formal lyricism from extrinsic history” (163).<sup>99</sup> Despite this criticism, Rukeyser, in her own words, refused to do anything less

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<sup>98</sup> This “repression” of other voices has been so strong, moreover, that he and other critics assert that we are no longer aware of the “history of the poetry of the first half of this century” ( Kalaidjian 2).

<sup>99</sup> Criticism for or against Rukeyser and her work runs the gamut of possibilities. She was too proletarian for some of the conservative critics, and too experimental or modern for the critics on the left. Some criticism of her work stemmed from sexism, such as that of John Wheelwright, who depicts her as “another well-intentioned, but frivolous, female author” (Kalaidjian 164). Criticism of her work turned into personal attack as well when editors from the *Partisan Review* “clashed” with other critics, F. O. Matthiessen and Rebecca Pitts, ultimately over Rukeyser's

than “to show continually the lives of our own people under the times they carry” (qtd. in Herzog 32). Her unwillingness to divorce her poetry from history as she used high modernist techniques incited New Critics' rejection, which pushed her to the margins of the literary canon for so long.

Yet proletarian critics also often disliked her work because she used high modernist forms to frame her poetry's political and historical focus. Rukeyser's use of modernist experimentation, such as her use of photography and cinema to inspire her imagery and her purposeful ambiguity and choppy forms offended the sensibilities of those critics looking for clear and unambiguous forms inspired by Realism. John Rowe states that Rukeyser's goal was to “attempt to overcome the ideological limitations” of both the “dogmatic leftists and the conservative Right”; however, the consequence of her poetic ingenuity, of adhering to both sides partially yet neither side fully, left both sides criticizing her work (137).<sup>100</sup> Because Rukeyser's work defies definition, it garnered no acceptance in established camps looking for work that adhered to specific, limited standards. As Green argues, although Rukeyser was “one of the most poetically dynamic and politically efficacious poets in the nation” during her time and *The Book of the Dead* was about “an industrial disaster of epic proportions” the fact that “it defies discursive boundaries” has led to its obscurity (386).<sup>101</sup> Thus Rukeyser's focus on politics and history kept New Critics from fully accepting her work, and her modernist techniques repelled proletarian critics.

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allegiances, in what is now known as “the Rukeyser Imbroglia,” and, again, a sexist attack was made against her by William Phillips and Philip Rahv, the *Partisan Review* editors (Kalaidjian 161). David Wolff and William Carlos Williams both gave Rukeyser positive reviews for her “technical mastery,” however, even though they failed, according to Kalaidjian, to dwell on the “ideological effects” of her work (170-1). For a fuller understanding of Rukeyser's reception, see Walter Kalaidjian, *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism & Postmodern Critique* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993) 161-71. For more information about what is known as the “Rukeyser imbroglia” see Louise Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1980) 175-6. See also Kate Daniels, “Muriel Rukeyser and her Literary Critics,” *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers*, ed. Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996) 247-63.

<sup>100</sup> Green also suggests that the academy's “history of censoring radical poetics and actively leftist politics” has kept Rukeyser's work from being studied and appreciated in the academy (392).

<sup>101</sup> Daniels' assessment concurs with Rowe's and Green's, as she calls Rukeyser “an individualistic poet whose work fails to entirely conform during... her lifetime to the critics' prevailing notions of what good work is-- who fails to fit



Positive criticism has multiplied rapidly within the last twenty years as more critics are recognizing and celebrating rather than devaluing the complexity of Rukeyser's work and vision. In 1980 Louis Kertesz published the first book study of Rukeyser, *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser* (Leader 22). Kertesz's engaging yet short reading of *The Book of the Dead* showed the potential for much more scholarship, and criticism increased rapidly in the 90s as essays by Davidson, Hartman, Kadlec, Kalaidjian, Minot, Thurston focused especially on the sequence of poems (Hurm 195). In 2003 Tim Dayton published a book-length study aptly titled *Muriel Rukeyser's The Book of the Dead*, in which he outlines the historical significance of the disaster and literary significance of Rukeyser's work. Moreover, today's critics, unlike Rukeyser's contemporaries, see that her topic and form work together in the work. Kadlec, for instance, argues that "Rukeyser used the penetrating gaze of the X-ray to bridge high-modernist with more politically acute social-realist aesthetics" (27), and Michael Thurston argues that Rukeyser's work "inter[weaves] the salient strands of American culture circa 1929-- modernism and documentary-- [and] the Communist Party's popular front," yet believes that it "ranks with the milestones of high modernism in complexity, accomplishment, and aesthetic bravery" ("Documentary Modernism" 61).

In general, Rukeyser "took to bind herself to collective experience and memory. She insists on the vitality of poetry as communal as well as individual" (Goldensohn 71-2). Poetry thus is not extrinsic from the material or created to be viewed as an entity separate from the material reality that inspired its creation. Thus *The Book of the Dead* depends upon and is rooted in the history of a region and its inhabitants. Additionally, even the form that Rukeyser chooses is rooted in the "collective exchange springing from more than one nation or one language and

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completely and neatly into a category that has been critically recognized, defined, and canonized," whether that category be proletarian or modernist (247).

freely shaped by both literary and extraliterary sources” (Goldensohn 69-70). She, for example, uses pieces of transcript from the Congressional subcommittee hearing,<sup>102</sup> testimony she gathered from witnesses during her time in West Virginia, and even stock quotes, among other sources; Rukeyser herself notes that photographs, articles from newspapers and magazines, and letters also figure in as sources for her sequence of poems (Shulman 182). The victims' voices are recorded, intermingled with court documents, myth, and other voices, such as those in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* in order to create a polyvalent, transhistorical text that both claims authority and moves our nation toward a “completeness” as it continuously makes alive the stories for each new generation and transforms the readers.

For Rukeyser, poetry encourages remembering the past and changing the future, for poetry can intermingle known fact with “human document” and charge the reader with the sympathies necessary to quicken action.<sup>103</sup> A purely historical or journalistic account of the tragedy would be hindered by the fact that so much information concerning Gauley Bridge was never verified or discovered, but a lack of accurate numbers of the dead or other statistics does

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<sup>102</sup> According to Davidson, “The company's attempts to conceal its illegal drilling practices became the subject of a federal investigation, from which numerous testimonies in the poem are derived” (142). Although the investigation unfortunately did not do much for the men of the Gauley Tunnel incident, it did help to bring awareness to the issue of work-induced silicosis, thus spurring on laws and regulations that helped future workers.

<sup>103</sup> I use this term as William Stott in *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* explains it. Stott notes two meanings for the term “documentary” in the 1930s. The first, more common understanding of the term is defined as “presenting facts objectively and without editorializing and inserting fictional matter, as in a book, newspaper account, or film” (5-6). This understanding of documentary stems from impersonal documents like bills, social security cards, etc. that supply the public with information, items that “can be used to furnish decisive evidence or information,” in other words (6). In the second form of documentary that Stott articulates, the personal is much more emphasized (6). The phrase “human document” is “still used” to describe this type of document, but the use of this term was especially prevalent in the 1930s (6). Stott adds in a footnote that the “adjective 'human' recurs throughout thirties literature as a synonym for emotional or touching or heartfelt” (6). The “human document” is thus “the opposite of the official kind; it is not objective but thoroughly personal. Far from being dispassionate, it may be 'a document that is shattering in its impact and infinitely moving,' ... Even when temperate, a human document carries and communicates feeling... [but] [s]uch a document gives some information that would be found in an impersonal document” (7). Finally, the “human document” emphasis “feeling” and depends on the reader being able to connect with the “self” that the document “reveals” (8). I would argue that this “self” may be the people or entities with which the work itself is concerned or the individual who is reading the work and being changed through the process of experiencing the document. It's also important to note the connection between this second form of document with its emphasis on the personal as well as emotion, and Rukeyser's poetics, which also emphasizes emotion. The documentary was thus a fitting form for Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*.

not diminish the power of a poetic account. Although Rukeyser was also a journalist and could have easily used this genre for her work, she “decided against publishing her response to the Hawk's Nest outrage in the form of a newspaper or magazine article. ... For the Hawk's nest material she wanted to use the specific power of the poetic, arguing in a concluding note to *U.S. I* that 'poetry can extend the document'” (Hurm 197).<sup>104</sup> Thus although Rukeyser “forfeits” the “immediacy of impact, accessibility, and the presumption of objectivity” that comes with journalism, poetry affords other advantages, such as “a more challenging or searching treatment of the subject” (Dayton “Lyric and Document” 225). Her poems “extend the document” through their purposeful incitation of feeling, which a journal article does not necessarily attempt. According to Rukeyser, “A poem invites you to feel. More than that: it invites you to respond. And better than that: a poem invites a total response [...] reached through the emotions. [...] you will reach [the poem] intellectually too – but the way is through emotion, through what we call feeling” (*The Life of Poetry* 8).

Although Rukeyser defined her poetic many years after writing *The Book of the Dead*, the principles she believed in were already present. The poems in *The Book of the Dead* thus bridge the Gauley tragedy to both past and present through the reader's or witness's intellectual and emotional connection to the past and the workers, thereby challenging the reader to act for the future. Because consciousness is the first step to larger change, one of Rukeyser's goals is to make the reader experience her text as a fully conscious participant in the described events with

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<sup>104</sup> Rowe clarifies that in “The Bill,” for example, Rukeyser “virtually restates the congressional mining reform bill that was the result of the hearings” (143). Although the actual bill only recommended rather than demanded reforms, Rowe claims that “Rukeyser's poetic version goes beyond the bill to 'vindicate' the dead miners both by publicizing Union Carbide's crime and by reminding us of the legal, political, and moral power that remains in the miners' surviving wives and mothers” (142). This is just one example of how Rukeyser “extends the document.” Another example is discussed by Michael Thurston who discusses Rukeyser's choice to turn the testimonies of Philippa Allen, Mrs. Jones, and Mr. Charles Jones into one testimony belonging to Mrs. Jones in “Absalom.” Thurston argues that Mrs. Jones's “final resolution to 'give a mouth to my son' draws its power, at least in part, from Rukeyser's careful work to extend the congressional document in these lines” in order to create one powerful voice from the three found in the historical record (“Documentary Modernism” 80).

the hope that the reader will be transformed.<sup>105</sup> Herzog argues, “For Rukeyser... poetry was an untapped source of 'strength' that could be summoned up to meet the many crises faced by the United States during the twentieth century. Specifically, she believed in the transformative potential of poetry to 'further humanity'” (34-5). Rukeyser also insisted that poetry is a dynamic “process” rather than “an object,” and the reader's active engagement is critical to the process (186), for as the reader begins to see the world anew, their new consciousness makes change possible (*The Life of Poetry* 185).<sup>106</sup>

Rukeyser's poetry fosters emotion, intellect, and imagination, as well as remains relevant to each new generation through images, which Rukeyser describes as “those declarations, evocative, exact, and musical, which move through time and are the actions of the poem” (31). The “image” for Rukeyser is not “static” but living throughout time, changing as times and readers change (34). Whole lives can become an image, moreover, so that one's “whole life [. . . reaches] backward and forward in history, illuminating all time” (34) These lives can be well known, such as the lives of Buddha, Lincoln, Gandhi, or Saint Francis, or personal, such as the life of “that living person whose daily meanings carry most to you,” and the lives both “reach us as hope” and, in certain points in history, help people to “feel the moment of crisis...” (34). Rukeyser cites John Brown, a reoccurring figure in *The Book of the Dead*, as one who “spoke to many lives” (36) and lists other lives and “gestures” that have given “hope” and “impetus to many kinds of people,” a list that includes people like those at Gauley, such as “miners,

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<sup>105</sup> Thus, as Gardinier states, Rukeyser “continued a poetic tradition that insists on including within its scope the workings of power and history, that does not accept the given world as it is, injustices intact, but insists on transformation” through individuals moved to action (Gardinier 90).

<sup>106</sup> Rukeyser's definition of poetry, as Lowney points out, “is explicitly opposed to the formalist terms of the New Criticism, which, she argues, diminished the emotive impact of language in its analysis of the poem as static object,” explaining even further how much her vision differed from that which had a literary stronghold for so long (*History, Memory, and the Literary Left* 40)

anonymous women, those suffering and poor, [and]... those gifted with insight so that they understand the beauty of unconditional love..." (36).

Through its use of images, especially of the images of the lives of people, *The Book of the Dead* encourages the emotion, intellect, and imagination, but the reader also must change thought into action in the real world.<sup>107</sup> Rukeyser clarifies that poetry "will not answer" all of the existing social needs. As she says, just because you "imagine" love or brotherhood does not mean that you have "loved" or "made brotherhood" (23-4). For imagination to become action, that imagining must become an integral part of one's identity, "or you will be left with nothing but illusion" (23-4). Herzog points out that Rukeyser writes a "poetry of witness": in other words, the audience is not just a group of readers but people who "witness," that term implying responsibility to that which is witnessed (35).<sup>108</sup> And whether we fulfill that responsibility can be seen in our own lives: Rukeyser ends her discussion of the gestures and lives of people, the image, and the reader to a close by asserting that "our lives are our images" (40). Our challenge as readers is thus to be changed, to allow the power of connection in poetry and the lives of others to move us so deeply that we cannot be the same and our lives, too, become some sort of "gesture" in history that is worthy of another poem. And one of Rukeyser's "gestures" in history

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<sup>107</sup> In regards to Rukeyser's audience, Shulman writes, "Rukeyser assumes a fully human audience, an audience as responsive to imaginative leaps as it is to the dignity of women like Mrs. Jones or to African-American workers like George Robinson...She does not talk down to her readers. She assumes a degree of literacy and imaginative curiosity that implies a politically as well as poetically engaged and empowered audience" (184). With this assessment I would agree. Rukeyser's work is meant to be political but utilizes high modernist techniques and forms, in addition to the documentary form. This odd mix made her work resistant to labels, confusing to some, and infuriating to others. Her contemporary John Wheelwright noted, in regard to her work, that "revolutionary writing in the snob style does not reach a proper audience" (qtd. in Shulman 185). But, as Shulman argues, who is to say what constitutes a "proper" audience? As Shulman articulates, "...what is impressive is that Rukeyser's 'snob style' combines with a politically charged content in ways that continue to make us see and feel. Rukeyser does so as a writer committed to the Popular Front, because... she is grounded in the concerns of this movement. In her fusion of high art, left politics, and the innovative documentary, she reminds us that the Popular Front had a high culture dimension that has faded from our memories" (185).

<sup>108</sup> Herzog thus asserts, "the responsibility she associated with an art obligated to witness was not limited to the artist alone but also extended in a much larger circle to include the witnessing audience" (35).

is the twenty-poem sequence collectively called *The Book of the Dead*, an outgrowth of her desire to help the Gauley Tunnel victims.

### Revisoning History in the Wilderness

One way Rukeyser advocates for the victims of the Gauley Tunnel tragedy in her sequence is through her revisoning of America's historical development as it is tied to people's exploration and use of the American wilderness and, even more specifically, the use of New River. Three threads within the twenty-poem sequence connect Rukeyser's response to the Gauley Bridge incident to the larger context of American history. One thread, located in the poems at the beginning and end of the sequence, involves the exploration of wilderness as well as history: these poems critically engage the reader as traveler and discoverer of history in order to respond to and begin to rectify a history of both human and land exploitation. The second thread involves the personal testimony of victims: located mostly in poems throughout the middle of the work, the personal testimony poems record the stories of the victims, highlighting their pain yet collective strength. These poems also encourage sympathy that prompts advocacy for past and present victims of exploitation. The final meaningful thread within the poems is, surprisingly, hope: despite the atrocity in Gauley, the victims as Rukeyser portrays them maintain and encourage a certain amount of hope. Also, throughout several of the poems hopefulness is exhibited through the potential for beneficial relationships between worker, earth, and technology. Through the tragedy Rukeyser envisions a more equitable future in which the worker is valued for his craft, and in which technological creation, made possible by the generosity of nature, harmonizes with rather than destroys nature, thus making all of our lives better.

Rukeyser's historical accuracy and attention to details that were known concerning the tunnel incident, as well as her ability to render the victims' more intimate version of history, account for some of the work's current authority concerning the incident. The poems accord with historical accounts in regard to the details of the Gauley Tunnel Tragedy at Hawks Nest, West Virginia. In the early 1930s, the Gauley Tunnel Tragedy, also called the Hawk's Nest Disaster, killed between 476 and 2,000 workers (Thurston 59), most of whom were African American.<sup>109</sup> The men were working on a larger, three part project developed by Union Carbide Company in West Virginia, which, as Patricia Spangler clarifies, included a dam constructed across the New River at Hawks Nest, “the erection of a hydroelectric power plant at the base of Gauley Mountain,” and “the excavation of a tunnel connecting the dam at Hawks Nest with the hydro plant,” (xiii). The workers excavated the tunnel through Gauley Mountain. And as Mary B. Leader notes, the plan to create hydroelectric power “took advantage of the fast water of the north-flowing New River, just after this waterway has gone through a deep natural gorge that increases its velocity and just before it loops up to Gauley to merge with the smaller south-flowing Gauley River to form the west-flowing Kanawha River. This flow, already rapid, would be diverted into a tunnel driven straight through Gauley Mountain” and would increase even more as it traveled through the tunnel (30-1). When the men began to drill through the mountain,

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<sup>109</sup> Nobody knows for sure how many men died in the tragedy because Union Carbide sought to keep the deaths from silicosis a secret, going so far as to hire the local undertaker to bury bodies quickly and quietly in a nearby cornfield (Thurston “Documentary Modernism” 61). Most of the workers were migrant men from the south, as well, making it more difficult for deaths to be identified and cataloged. After the trials were over, moreover, Union Carbide was able to procure the prosecution's evidence and destroy or hide it from the public record. According to Cherniack, part of the out of court agreement that was reached for the settlement of the silicosis victims included “a particularly crucial requirement of the agreement—that the plaintiffs' lawyers surrender all their case records to the defense” (65). This requirement, Cherniack notes, was allowed to remain despite the discovery that the plaintiffs' lawyers “had secretly signed a contract with...the vice president of Rinehart and Dennis” for another twenty thousand dollars in return for their agreement “not to engage in further legal action” (65). This agreement between lawyers and Rinehart and Dennis made any future attempts to research the number of deaths or possible deaths from silicosis nearly impossible.

huge deposits of silica were “discovered” and plans were altered so that the silica, highly valuable yet dangerous to extract, could be mined.<sup>110</sup>

Rukeyser's attention to historical accuracy is exemplified in the third poem of *The Book of the Dead*, which draws upon an actual account of Philippa Allen, a social worker in the area during the summer of 1934, to provide some other important details of the Gauley Tunnel tragedy. The poem, taken from her testimony, clarifies that “2,000 men were / employed there” (12-3) for a time of “about 2 years / drilling, 3.75 miles of tunnel. / To divert water (from New River) / to a hydroelectric plant at Gauley Junction” (14-7). The “rock through which they were boring was of a high / silica content. / In tunnel No. I it ran 97-99% pure silica” (18-20) and, as the speaker supposed to be Philippa Allen makes clear, “The contractors” Rinehart and Dennis, had “30 years experience” and therefore “must have known [of the] danger for every man” (21, 23-4) yet “neglected to provide the workmen with any safety device...” (25). The silica was eventually used “in the electro-processing of steel” (48). Additionally, the company in charge, New Kanawha Power Company, a subsidiary of Union Carbide, had supposedly been developing the electricity that would be produced for the public from the dam that was to be built, but “in reality,” as Spangler points out, New Kanawha Power Company “was simply a legally-construed vehicle created to facilitate acquisition of a permit from the WV Public Service Commission for the purpose of constructing [the] dam across the New River near Hawks Nest” (xiii). Union Carbide eventually transferred New Kanawha to another subsidiary and dissolved New-Kanawha

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<sup>110</sup> Evidence indicates that the developers knew beforehand that silica existed in the mountain but kept silent to avoid safety mining regulations of the time, which necessitated the use of masks (Cherniack 41-5). According to Cherniack, the company New Kanawha, a subsidiary of Union Carbide, “requested exemption from supervision by the Department of Mines” by arguing that they were “constructing a tunnel, not a mine” (50). But not only Union Carbide is to blame for the lack of safety but also the West Virginia Public Service Commission, who, according to Leader, “cooperated with Union Carbide every step of the way” in the project (32). With its eye on production and profit, the Public Service Commission “issue[d] all necessary permits” and also “classified the project as 'construction' rather than 'mining,'” an act which sidestepped the Department of Mines in their efforts “to monitor safety conditions” (32-3).



in 1934. In other words, both the general public and the workers of the tunnel were shorthanded by Union Carbide, for New-Kanawha never operated as a public service utility, and many men digging the tunnel for Union Carbide's overall project died from the silica that was used in steel processing.

Rukeyser's text includes not only facts and figures but also a much more intimate rendering of the tragedy, utilizing the experiences of the workers and the families who suffered from the abuse of Union Carbide and Rinehart and Dennis. Rukeyser explores the history that led to the tragedy, the pain and sadness of those who suffered from silicosis, the effects of the loss of life and income on entire families, the disease's toll on the human body, and even responses from people not directly involved in the tragedy.<sup>111</sup> She integrates sections of court hearings and doctor reports, in addition to statements from victims and the committee that was formed to research the tunnel incident. By doing so, Rukeyser provides both an objective and subjective understanding of the tragedy and creates a multi-voiced, multi-authored, transhistorical text in which the workers themselves speak and the readers become discoverers of the present and past Gauley Bridge area.

Rukeyser's focus on past and present exploitation of nature and worker, therefore, creates a transhistorical text in which the reader, learning about and witnessing the past, is challenged to be a present-day advocate for justice.<sup>112</sup> Rukeyser uncovers the ugly truth that America's

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<sup>111</sup> Leader has a clear and simple explanation of silicosis: "The disease results from the inhalation of silica dust, a dust full of microscopic shards of glass, so that the lung tissue, having repeatedly received minute cuts, becomes scar tissue. Scar tissue being rigid, the lungs lose their capacity to expand and contract, and eventually, death results directly from suffocation or from complications such as fatal pneumonia" (33-4).

<sup>112</sup> Rukeyser sought from the beginning of her career to create poetry that necessitates the active engagement of the reader. As Kertesz makes clear, Rukeyser's first book of poems *Theory of Flight* (1934) represents Rukeyser's "first and lasting commitment to a poetry of process which accepts no restrictions on its exploration and which invites other minds to their own creative expanding and inclusiveness" (97). Kertesz aptly quotes Whitman, whose words seem to have inspired Rukeyser's vision for her first work: "I seek less to state or display any theme or thought, and more to bring you, reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or thought—there to pursue your own flight" (97). The reader's active participation integral to Rukeyser's goal of active reader participation in *Theory of Flight* extends

national identity was and is dependent upon the victimized, laboring body of the “other” and the exploitative practices of capitalism. Rukeyser also bridges the past to Gauley Bridge through the focus on place, resource, and worker abuse. Rukeyser maintains a focus on the land and river to undermine America's mythic national narrative of Manifest Destiny, showing that people who worked the land suffered and were controlled through fear, enslavement, or other means. Her emphasis on the historical wilderness also reminds the reader that the Gauley tunnel workers died, not working in a factory, but working in the earth, not in a city but in a relatively remote area of West Virginia that carries with its geographic landscape the scars of past wars, the labor of the enslaved, and the pollution and destruction of the present tunnel excavation. Landscape and location, including the wild, “unexplored” land of the past, the partially developed small town, and the river, play prominently in Rukeyser's work and therefore deserve closer scrutiny. Framing the reader as a journeyer, Rukeyser makes the reader an active participant in historical discovery and recovery, as well as a witness who sees history culminating in the present destruction of both land and people.

The very first lines of *The Book of the Dead* focus on America's continued development both physically and in the cultural imagination, with an emphasis on the reader's active role in that development. Rukeyser writes, “These are the roads to take when you think of your country / and interested bring down the maps again,/ phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend, / reading the papers with morning inquiry” (1-4). The very first line indicates that the focus is a better understanding of one's country through inquiry that may lead to further knowledge through travel. Pulling down “maps,” calling the “Statistician,” asking a friend, and reading a newspaper

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into her future books of poetry, including *U.S. 1*, of which *The Book of the Dead* forms a part. Rukeyser's choice to bring the reader in as character in *The Book of the Dead* highlights most poignantly her desire for the reader to explore for oneself the history and present situation at Gauley Bridge, for the ultimate goal of social change and justice will only be attained through the reader's decision to act, or to take up one's own flight, in pursuance of justice, and to do this with others with similar goals.

should continue to incite the traveler's interest and all indicate that at least certain aspects of our country are already known: resources exist to consult and the “country” is presently physically mapped; routes that the narrator wants the reader-traveler to take exist and physically lead to the narrator's desired location, making adventure possible. Yet there still exists a sense of the unknown, for although the reader is assumed to be interested and fully invested, consulting all available resources, one must also be willing to move past the circle of one's “tall central city's influence” in order to take this journey (73). If one wants to truly know America, the poem implies, one must be willing to venture beyond what is known into unfamiliar territory.

This invitation to enter unfamiliar country comes just at the right moment as well, for Rukeyser's title of her book, *USI*, plays off of the Depression Era emphasis on building new roads as well as writing new books that accompany the travel on the new highways. According to Kalaidjian, “over 650,000 miles of new road construction [was] undertaken between 1935-43 by the Works Project Administration (WPA)” and there were “378 books and pamphlets published in the American Guide Series of the Federal Writers' Project” (166). These books and pamphlets encouraged tourism by providing the traveler with information about the most important or meaningful areas of the states, providing history and notes of interest in addition to information about recreational areas, major states and cities, and scenic routes (166). Monty Penkower notes that the guides would serve the hurting economy as well as map an “uncharted America” (25). He adds, “In 1935 alone, 35 million vacationers took to the nation's highways. The guides would serve the rapidly growing number of visitors to national parks, as well as the newly emerging

youth hostel movement, the American Camping Association, and the Scouts. They could also help in the rediscovery of historic landmarks and scenic wonders” (25).<sup>113</sup>

A guidebook titled *U.S. One Maine to Florida* and published in 1938, the same year as Rukeyser's *U.S. 1*, was a part of this project.<sup>114</sup> *U.S. One Maine to Florida*, however, differs somewhat from other guidebooks in its attention to the local or particular details of a route more than to the well-known historical markers or history of the region. As the “Notes on the Use of the Book” states, “This is a mile-by-mile description of US 1 and most of the short routes branching from it. Descriptions of the more important side and cross routes and large cities have been omitted” (ix). In text's preface note, the writers state that this “is a new and exciting kind of guide. It not only gives the tourist in a hurry all he needs to know about the route, but takes time out to tell things about the country and places along U. S. #1 that only natives know things that strangers might have to spend weeks or months in a place to find out”(n. pag.). A quick perusal of the book illustrates more clearly what this means, as sites of schools, creeks, and farms are noted, as well as sites where resources such as clay for pottery are secured. The text highlights details about a region that would easily be overlooked or unknown if one did not take the time to research well and care to know. Rukeyser's title for her larger work, *U.S. 1*, which includes *The Book of the Dead*, is therefore especially fitting for the sequence, for, like this travelogue, *The Book of the Dead* highlights for readers the little known yet important particulars of a region. It documents the people and places that might have remained nameless and silenced in our history had Rukeyser, her friend Naumberg, and others not cared to write them down.

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<sup>113</sup> For a wonderfully detailed history of the creation of the guidebooks and the impact on the writers and people of other occupations who contributed to its creation, see Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1977).

<sup>114</sup> The “Forward” of the text clarifies how it fits into the overall Federal Writers Project publications: “This volume is part of the American Guide Series of regional, State, and local guidebooks, and second in a series of interstate route guides. The entire series of guides, when completed, will highlight the history, resources and points of interest in an area of more than three million square miles” (iii).

At the same time, however, Rukeyser's sequence of poems is also a correction to the purposeful forgetfulness that the Guidebook Series espoused. The guidebooks, in general, were meant to uplift Americans during the Depression but, like many of our historical narratives, that uplift came with the price of obscuring that which did not fit neatly into the agenda. According to John Lowney,

the highway guides sought to reclaim an optimistic image of the road from the more distressing images of social suffering associated with the Depression. The national symbol of the road as a medium for democratic opportunity and westward expansion had been displaced by the stories of dislocation, destitution, and homelessness documented by Depression-era reporters. The American Guide Series—and the highway route series in particular—redefined the road as a site of a progressive national history through its emphasis on purposeful movement.

*(History, Memory, and the Literary Left 49)*

Rukeyser's work begins by enticing the tourist who is ready to explore, and the beginning also incites the feeling of going on a journey for an important national purpose of discovering one's country; that discovery, however, no longer includes quaint farmhouses and lily-covered fields but rather the suffering of human beings in the present moment. In this way, Rukeyser's work revises not only the dominant national narratives of exploration and expansion found in history books but also the attempt of the Guidebook Series to obscure the present-day suffering of individuals in the Depression era.

Although *The Book of the Dead* is clearly more than a travelogue, Rukeyser chooses to begin the work by framing the reader as a traveler, adventurer, or tourist in order to fully engage

the reader in the experience and the knowledge that one will uncover through travel.<sup>115</sup> The journey also depends upon the traveler's will and is taken for the sake of the traveler's growth, not simply for pleasure. Once in a vehicle, the journeyer must be prodded on by desire and embrace traveling past the crowded city:

your wish pursuing  
past the junction, the fork, the suburban station,  
well-traveled six-lane highway planned for safety.  
Past your tall central city's influence,  
outside its body: traffic, penumbral crowds,  
are centers removed and strong, fighting for good reason. (7-12)

The journeyer must purposefully move past the “influence” and “safety” of the city because only “these roads” outside of the influences of the majority and the everyday, “will take you into your own country” (13), or, in other words, present the traveler with a realistic view of the land and people. Implied is a future discovery of something that the journeyer already is a part of but of which he or she is currently unaware. The “penumbral crowds” are the majority who live in only a half-truth, unaware of the reality of others outside of their own circles, especially of those who

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<sup>115</sup> The introduction to *U.S. One Maine to Florida* notes, “The chronicle of *US I* is directly related to the history of transportation in America” (xiii). Thus here exists another connection that Rukeyser makes between her and this text, as she begins the sequence of poems in *The Book of the Dead* with a history focused on the exploration of the region and river which would make transportation of people and goods more easily accessible. Another connection between the guidebooks and *The Book of the Dead* is that the creation is a communal affair. Penkower makes clear that the guidebooks were written by people in a variety of occupations who needed a job during the depression. The proposal of “June, 1935, called for: ‘writers, editors, historians, research workers, art critics, architects, archeologists, map draftsmen, geologists, and other professionals...’” (58). The uncovering and integrating of history into the American consciousness that happens in *The Book of the Dead* could not be done without the active participation of the reader, who becomes the traveling “you” in the sequence. The communal effort ensures that the history of Gauley Bridge is never forgotten or omitted from future history, unlike the many purposeful and accidental omissions within the guidebooks, which, according to Penkower, often “resulted from a strict adherence to the chamber of commerce tradition” (78). These omissions included, for example, whole groups of people, such as African Americans, as well as atrocities such as “[t]he massacre of Indians” (78). Additionally, “Political machines in Kansas City and Memphis and the Socialist character of Milwaukee’s government went unnoticed. Project employees covered up the sordid history of the Dutch government of New York as well as the bawdy saga of Dodge City...,” just to name a few types of information that were purposely ignored in the guidebook series (78).

are suffering to make their lives comfortable. One desiring full knowledge of the country must travel beyond these crowds who, “fighting for good reason” and “strong,” suppress the full truth and exert a particularly deadening influence on the individual's growth.<sup>116</sup> Rukeyser's tourist is reminiscent of the tourist utilizing the aforementioned American Guidebook series being published in the 30s through the Federal Writers Project, but only on the surface. Rukeyser frames the poem to give the impression that the reader must be like a typical tourist of the time, with the desire to really know the country, but that the person taking this particular journey must also be atypical, ready to resist the safety of one's usual sphere of influence, to push past the typical tourist attractions and monuments, and to resist keeping to a well-traveled road, or a “six lane highway” (9). The reader soon learns through subsequent poems that one must be willing to venture both backward in time and into the more remote areas of the country in order to really discover present-day America and must be willing to learn about a tragedy that the current Guidebook Series would probably never include as an important piece of information concerning the region.

From the beginning of the sequence, the reader must take a physical and mental journey intimately connected to self as well to metaphysical and physical aspects of the country. The narrator asserts three times within the first poem that the reader, “you,” has an intimate relationship to the area of travel, through the assertion that the “road” or the “country” is “your” road or country. Several stanzas into the poem, the narrator reasserts, “These roads will take you into your own country” (13). The use of the words “your own” indicates an even deeper, more intimate connection to the land through emphasis on both individual as well as communal

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<sup>116</sup> Rukeyser's “penumbral crowds” also alludes to people fully imbedded in the consumerism of the time and who are completely disconnected to the methods of production. These people enjoy the fruits of past and present people's labor without wanting to confront the wrongs committed against the workers; their consumerism has blinded them and numbed them, making them unwilling to act against injustice and unable to empathize with the suffering.

ownership; with ownership comes responsibility, and the poem hints that the individual and community have the power through choice and ability, as well as a responsibility, to act on the discovered knowledge of the country. Finally, toward the end of the poem, the narrator says: “Here is your road, tying / you to its meanings: gorge, boulder, precipice. / Telescoped down, the hard and stone-green river / cutting fast and direct into the town” (33-6). This “road” clearly refers to the physical entity of travel. But this “road” also represents Rukeyser's poem itself, which will “tie you” to the “meaning” of the physical space of the Gauley Bridge area in all its fierceness (25), with its “gorge, boulder” and “precipice” (34). The “meaning” of the town and the poem itself, therefore, stems from the landscape, from the gorge, boulder, precipice, and powerful river “cutting fast and direct into the town” (25). And, indeed, the potential power that the “stone-green river” contains for the region, as it is associated with travel and commerce, initially lures men to the region and leads to the Gauley Bridge atrocity. Eventually in the sequence of poems, Rukeyser will transition from past to present exploitation, and the reader must confront the fact that the history of West Virginia in particular and America in general culminates in the disregard for the Gauley Bridge workers.

In the second poem in the series, “West Virginia,” Rukeyser presents a broad history of the discovery of West Virginia to show that the power and potential of the river spurred a long history of oppression and tension between people in America's development. Celebrating Rukeyser's life and literature, Cooper notes that Rukeyser “cared enormously about history, especially American history” (5) Asking and discovering what “the particular nature of the American imagination” was “would always have been” one of Rukeyser's questions and goals, Cooper adds (5). In fact, according to Lowney, instead of the final version of *The Book of the Dead*, “Rukeyser originally intended to write a more expansive historical poem about the



Atlantic coastal region that highway U.S. I traversed” (*History, Memory, and the Literary Left* 36). The first two poems, as well as the last poem of the sequence, best reflect this original goal (36).<sup>117</sup> “West Virginia” begins the process of challenging the pervasive romantic view of American history as predicated on the entrepreneurial spirit of the self-made white man, a view which, although partially true, overlooks other people's contributions and obscures even nature's role in America's formation. Thus Rukeyser transitions from the first poem's focus on the reader-journeyer to a focus on the river's historical influence.<sup>118</sup> Unlike the first poem, the narrator no longer addresses the reader but rather adopts a more objective, authorial voice of a historian recounting the forming of a nation through the battles over and hopes centered around the “stone-green river.” Properly named New River, the water is a powerful resource eventually effectively manipulated to divert into the Gauley Tunnel. Thus the river becomes the focal point of history, including in its role the ability to inspire man's creative and beneficial work as well as to incite war and man's greed and desire for power.

Throughout the recounting of West Virginia's history, Rukeyser also makes sure to highlight the role of the oppressed or “other,” showing that they have an integral role in the development of the nation despite the fact that their contributions are too often ignored. The poem begins, “They saw rivers flow west and hoped again. / Virginia speeding to another sea!”

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<sup>117</sup> According to Lowney, Rukeyser made a note for the initial publication that said the following: “*The Book of the Dead* will eventually be one part of a planned work, *U.S.I.* This is to be a summary poem of the life of the Atlantic coast of this country, nourished by the communications which run down it. Gauley Bridge is inland, but it was created by theories, systems and workmen from many coastal sections—factors which are, in the end, not regional or national. Local images have one kind of reality. U.S.I will, I hope have that kind and another, too. Poetry can extend the document” (*U.S.I* 146; qtd. in Lowney *History, Memory, and The Literary Left* 36). Rukeyser's original scope was broad both “historically and geographically”— she planned to include “the earliest years of European settlement through the 1930s, from Maine to Key West,” and some of the texts that she studied during her planning phase in order to “organize this history” included “Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Frontier in American History* and Williams's 'The American Background.'” (36).

<sup>118</sup> According to Dayton, “Rukeyser works this section [“West Virginia”] up from a locally-published history, Phil Conley's *West Virginia Yesterday and Today*” (229). In a footnote he clarifies: “There is a page of notes on West Virginia history, in Muriel Rukeyser's handwriting, in the papers held by Rukeyser's son, William Rukeyser, headed 'The Book of the Dead,' followed by the publication information for Conley's book” (229, footnote 15).

(37-8). Immediately the narrator clarifies who “hoped”: “1671-- Thomas Batts, Robert Fallam, Thomas Wood, the Indian Perecute, and an unnamed indentured English servant / followed the forest past blazed trees, pillars of God, / were the first whites emergent from the east” (39-43). The indentured English servant, nameless in Rukeyser's poem, can be identified by seeking information on the expedition of Batts, Wood, and Fallam; his name was Jack Weason. The choice to keep him unnamed in the poem, however, reinforces his class identification and connects him historically to the men in the Gauley Tunnel Tragedy, who also have remained nameless and voiceless in our history and whose work was predicated on their poverty during the Great Depression rather than on the ability to make a true choice. Dayton concurs with this reading: the unnamed servant “prefigures in his anonymity the workers who will become afflicted with silicosis in this same country two hundred and fifty years afterwards” (229). However, just as Rukeyser gives a voice to the tunnel workers through the creation of her text, her very mention of the servant Weason and the Native Perecute asserts their presence and importance in the historical narrative.<sup>119</sup> This nation was not formed, the narrator alludes, by just the white English explorers and adventurers but by those on whose labor and experience they depended. As the narrator says, “They left a record to our heritage,” a statement that may allude to the written record of the white men but also makes sure to include the Native and the indentured servant in that creation of the nation.

As the narrator continues to uncover West Virginia's history as it centers on the exploration of the wilderness and New River and builds to the Gauley tragedy, we see that the rendering of history is not that of a nostalgic past which many want to remember but rather the reality of dislocation, war, slavery, and worker abuse that also formed the country. A history of

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<sup>119</sup> Dayton mentions, “In histories of the expedition other than Conley's *West Virginia Yesterday and Today* [in which the servant remains nameless], the indentured servant is named as Jack Weason or Jack Neeson” (229). Thus we are not sure of his name, perhaps another reason that Rukeyser keep his anonymity.

genocide, slavery, and misuse of the land, nothing to tout in America's development, was followed by the erasure of the mistreatment from our dominant histories and cultural memory; the stories of those who suffered at the hands of the powerful are minimalized or erased from history, and in their place the history books celebrate the white male explorers as the courageous men who made America possible. Rukeyser, however, revises the cultural narrative of "discovery" to show clearly the disregard for the "other" who had to be controlled and subdued as the wilderness was dominated. The narrator asserts that the Thomas Wood expedition contained "the first whites emergent from the east" (43) and that they not only "left a record to our heritage" but are also responsible for the "breaking of records" (44, 45). Part of the nation's heritage as it was being formed included, then, the destruction of another "record." The celebration of the entrepreneurial spirit of the American explorer and their "discoveries" of America, the poem asserts, is misleading and obscures the oppression that was a part of America's development; what the first explorers found were already formed communities and nations of people occupying the land: "Found Indian fields, standing low cornstalks left, / learned three Mohetons planted them; found-land / farmland, the planted home, discovered!" (54-6). Being led through the country by a Native, the explorers would not have been surprised that the country was occupied, yet the exclamation point at the end of the line is ironic in that it clarifies that what was obvious to the white explorers is no longer obvious to those who think about America's history. Thus Dayton's assessment is worth noting: "The utopia of the New World stands under two clouds in" Rukeyser's poem: "the oppressions that immediately accompanied discovery and exploration, as well as the poet's knowledge of the history that was to unfold in America, such as the historical tragedy of the collision of European and native Americans" (229). What the white explorer discovered was the already agriculturally-managed land of the Native American people,

and this land had to be fought for, bartered, or stolen from the native people over a long period of time to form the America that we know today.

The war for land extended beyond battles between America's growing Euro-American population and the Native owners of the soil to include the Revolutionary and Civil wars, battles over the definition of America that often included brothers battling brothers. The present-day America that the reader/journeyer sees in his or her travels is the physical, cultural, and moral product of those wars; thus, the narrator says that this land is "War-born,": The lines "The battle at Point Pleasant, Cornstalk's tribes, / last stand, Fort Henry, a revolution won" point to the first and last battle of the Revolution, a fight for independence but also over the land that defines that independence. The narrator also highlights other atrocities that helped to form our nation, such as slavery and John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry, which was a catalyst for the Civil War; the Civil War, too, is mentioned in the poem, framed like the others as a battle for land ownership and the resulting power to define our nation:

Flood, heavy wind this spring, the beaten land  
blown high by wind, fought wars, forming a state,  
a surf, frontier defines two fighting halves,  
two hundred battles in the four years; troops  
here in Gauley Bridge, Union headquarters, lines  
bring in the military telegraph  
Wires over the gash of gorge and height of pine (63-9)

These lines show that nature itself, including the river's flooding and the storms that wreck and build the landscape, are responsible for a part of the nation's formation; the other part is attributable to men through war, oppression of others, and mastery over nature, as indicated

through the image of the “military telegraph/ wires” 68-9) that men are able to situate within the harsh landscape, even bridging gorges and stringing them over the lofty pines. Wires through the rugged terrain of Gauley Bridge during the Civil War creates power through the ability to communicate, which helps to win the war; the communication in this historical example, however, also sets the stage for future poems in the sequence in which Rukeyser utilizes images of post offices, letters, or other communication and images of travel such as buses, roads, bridges, and cars, in order to link the situation at Gauley Bridge with the rest of America to imply the necessity of human community and communication in fighting the present-day battle against the greed of capitalist developers who destroy human lives.

The catalyst behind all the historical events in Rukeyser's “West Virginia” is summed up in the next line: “It was always the water” (70), and the last three stanzas clarify and re-emphasize the centrality of the river in the formation of the country, show how the past history culminates in the Gauley Tunnel Tragedy, and questions how those still living and thus still able to make history will utilize the knowledge of the past:

But it was always the water

the power flying deep

green rivers cut the rock

rapids boiled down

a scene of power

Done by the dead.

Discovery learned it.

And the living? (70-7)

These discoveries, atrocities, and historical developments have always been dependent on the water, dependent on it being, in other words “a scene of power” (74) in both its present state of existence and in the imagination of its potential in the mind of explorers and entrepreneurs. As Kertesz states, “The central fact in all this history is the power in nature” (100). All over America, Rukeyser's poem asserts, and specifically in West Virginia, expeditions discovered the sources and ends to the rivers to use them for commerce, wars were fought over the land nourished by these waters, slaves cultivated the same land and rebelled against their oppressors, and people domesticated the land around the river through power lines and other technology. The river as “a scene of power,” therefore, takes on multiple meanings as human beings throughout history have used their varying degrees of power and influence to tap into or use the power inherent in the flowing water and the land it nourishes. With the construction of Gauley Tunnel, human control over the environment grew to a new level as developers planned to divert the powerful river itself in order to change its energy into electricity.

The lines, “Done by the dead. / Discovery learned it. / And the living?” connect the past, present, and future most poignantly within the poem; these lines simultaneously allude to the collective history previously outlined and highlight the specific event of the Gauley Tunnel tragedy by continuing to define the “scene of power.” The early explorations and wars were “done by the dead.” But the line “done by the dead” also points to the workers who died in the silica tunnels, which were to create a new “scene of power” for the developers. In keeping with the ability of these lines to speak to general and specific history, the line “Discovery learned it” alludes to the general history of West Virginia, which was dependent upon the initial “discovery” of and continued claims to and utilization of the river; but the lines also refer specifically to mostly obscured or ignored Gauley Tunnel tragedy. This line also refers to Rukeyser's discovery

of this tragedy, in addition to the immediate reader's discovery that Rukeyser's text itself uncovers for us. Finally, the question "And the living?" bridges the past, present, and future. What, the narrator asks, are those still living, who have discovered this history, going to do with their discovery? The question pulls the active, journeyer reader back into the poem and implies the moral responsibility to live differently because of the discoveries.

The transition from the first to the fourth poem begins with a general description of the country with a broad American history and ends with the specific locale and history of Gauley Bridge. "The Road" situates the reader as journeyer and witness and begins the movement toward West Virginia and Gauley Bridge specifically. "West Virginia" challenges the reader with a new understanding of history as the narrator wants the reader to see it: as a history of America linked integrally to the wilderness landscape and the oppressed and lower class whose labor and resources have been exploited for America's growth and as a history which is intimately connected to and culminates in the present at Gauley Bridge. The third poem, "Statement: Philippa Allen" outlines the Gauley Tunnel tragedy thoroughly for readers, providing a specific history and critique of the situation through the testimony of Allen, a social worker invested in helping the workers. The poem using Allen's testimony provides a history of facts and figures concerning the tunnel project and the deaths of the workers, and the next poem, "Gauley Bridge," provides a strong, realist visual impression of the town and its people to thus illustrate how capitalist exploitation of the tunnel workers affects the town life.

The poem "Gauley Bridge" at first appears to be nothing but a realistic, depressing impression of the town at Gauley, a town fragmented by both class and race differences but also by silicosis and the capitalist endeavor that caused the workers' deaths. The town is depicted as empty even though people live there: Rukeyser describes it as "a street of wooden walls and

empty windows,” with “doors [that] shut handless in the empty street” (77). As Thurston says in his commentary on this poem, “The town is doubly empty: no one moves in the streets or buildings, and the actions that do occur are described in terms that reinforce, rather than contradict, the impression of emptiness” (*Making Something Happen* 176). If the hands that shut the windows are attached to bodies, we do not see them. Instead, the “handless” shutting of the windows allows the narrator to focus on the object that the people, closed tightly in their houses, shut out of view: “the deserted Negro standing on the corner” (77). The initial image of the “deserted Negro” makes one especially aware of both race and class in this particular space, and alludes to the ways that the African-American worker had been “deserted” by America at large as they worked for poor wages and died in the mining operation at Gauley Bridge.

Just as Rukeyser's historical poem “West Virginia” alludes to the larger history of America in general, “Gauley Bridge” highlights the connection between this specific locale of the tragedy and the rest of America. Rukeyser's fragmented image of the town includes enough anonymity to be any town; for example, there exists a “commercial hotel,” a “post office window” and a “bus station” with a “coast-to-coast schedule on the plateglass window” of a restaurant where a “yellow-aproned waitress” serves people (77). Like many other American towns, this town also boasts a movie theater and a “beerplace” (78). The movements within the town as well, including the construction workers working on the road, people coming in and out of the post office, “the hand of the man who withdraws, the woman who reaches her hand” (77), and a boy running with his dog (77) are activities that one may see in any town. Gerd Hurm argues that “throughout *The Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser intends to evoke a strong sense of poetic and political totality. She therefore presents the places and events involved in the Hawk's Nest scandal as a spatial *pars pro toto* for American society. The town of Gauley Bridge stands for a



prototypical American community” (198). The effect of the decision to maintain enough anonymity to represent larger America is that the reader can connect more fully with the images presented, making the kind of personal connections to one's own experiences which are usually necessary to make something memorable and meaningful.

What is particular about the images of the town and people presented in “Gauley Bridge” however, are the hints of sickness, indicated through both the people's actions and the images of glass. The post office of Gauley contains constant movement of people in and out, gathering their “private” correspondence out of their “private boxes,” yet there is also a “tall coughing man stamping an envelope” (77). There is nothing abnormal or obscure about a tall coughing man in a post office, yet those who know the effects of silicosis on the body understand this subtle reminder to them that Gauley is a particular locale whose workers are the victims of capitalist exploitation. Later the narrator reveals another image of sickness and a warning: “The man on the street and the camera eye: / he leaves the doctor's office, slammed door, doom, / any town looks like this one-street town” (78). Again, a person visiting a doctor is not an oddity, but the assertion of “doom” that follows the “slammed door” indicates that this is not a usual visit. The almost one-hundred percent certainty of death with silicosis leads one back to the fact that this particular town of Gauley Bridge is plagued with industrial disease, and Rukeyser provides a strong warning that this “doom” can happen anywhere, for “any town looks like this one-street town” (78).

Finally, images of glass permeate the poem, functioning to both highlight society's progress and reinforce class and race boundaries extant in society. For example, in the “commercial hotel (Switzerland of America) / the owner is keeping his books behind the public glass” (77). The glass allows anyone to see inside the ritzy hotel yet keeps the Negro and the

poor from entering into this space. Also, the “coast-to-coast” bus schedule is “on the plateglass window,” allowing anyone to see possible travel experiences yet simultaneously limiting that travel only to those who can afford it. The glass is a constant reminder of the rate of progress in society yet also reminds the reader of the fact that not everyone, specifically the poor worker or the minority, is able to utilize or take advantage of that progress. The images of glass even more specifically remind the reader of the human lives destroyed in the name of capital and progress, for glass is a specific, well-known, often-used product made from silica. The specific allusions to illness, and silicosis specifically, therefore, coupled with the fragmented imagery connecting Gauley to “any town” (79), implies that the death and disease particular to Gauley Bridge could very easily plague the reader's own hometown.

Just as Rukeyser's earlier history of our nation and particularly West Virginia uncovers the obscured oppression and destruction of people and nations done in the name of progress, “Gauley Bridge” highlights the fate and treatment of the “deserted Negro” and the unidentified sick individual who is surrounded by progress yet is trapped by his economic, cultural, or physical limitations. The “coast-to-coast schedule” indicates that a person can hop a bus to anywhere from the town of Gauley, yet the African American is suspiciously unmoving. Images of progress or movement abound, yet there is a pervading sense of entrapment for the African American and the sick man leaving the doctor's office.<sup>120</sup> A “little boy” crosses the path of the African American, “up the street to the bridge over the river where / nine men are mending road for the government” (77). The narrator also mentions that there are “railway tracks here” (77). Images of the road and railway point to the town's commercial progress and the freedom that

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<sup>120</sup> Although nothing in the poem itself indicates for sure that the “deserted Negro” was or is a tunnel worker, because the large majority of tunnel workers were black and migrant, one can assume that this particular man was somehow connected to the tunnel. Often when the developers figured out a worker was sick, they would fire that individual, leaving that person with no funds to leave and no job for which to stay.

stems from being able to travel to other locations. Unlike the “nine men” who are “mending road for the government,” however, the “deserted Negro” appears to have no work. We may assume that he has either been fired from his job in the tunnel or has had to quit because of silicosis, and other poems support this assumption. As George Robinson in a later poem titled “George Robinson: Blues” clarifies, “When a man said I feel poorly, for any reason, any weakness / or such, / letting up when he couldn't keep going barely, / the Cap and company come and run him off the job surely” (14-7). Perhaps because he is sick or because he has no money, the nameless African American in “Gauley Bridge” has no ability to move on. He can only “watch” the train, which whistles and “comes from a long way away” (78). Furthermore, the many images of glass remind readers that silicosis traps and kills him while simultaneously making progress possible for the wider American public, progress that the victim's work enables. As the speaker of “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones” says, “hundreds breathed value, filled their lungs full of glass” (19): the workers literally breathed in the silica that people value for its role in making steel, glass, and other life-enhancing products.

### The Personal Testimony Poems

Rukeyser moves from her general history of America, particular history of West Virginia, and her fragmented imagery of the Gauley Bridge area to an intimate rendering of particular individual's stories through their own testimonies in order to connect the reader more fully to the workers' pain and humanity. Speaking of Rukeyser's use of imagery in “Gauley Bridge,” Leader argues, “To move poetry along imagistically creates an effect of a more personal or private authenticity, a sense of being convinced by seeing, through the eyes, with the heart. It is an authoritative difference between image-- 'I was there' – and text – 'I looked this up'” (109). If

“Gauley Bridge” is crafted to make the reader personalize the location through a sense of being present (or the sense that the town of Gauley is “any town,” as the poem says), then Rukeyser's later poems, constructed from the testimonies of victims, further enhance this personal connection, making the victims no longer strangers but neighbors. As Leader writes, “Up to now [“Gauley Bridge”] in *The Book of the Dead*, the local people have been *figures*, which is mimetic of how tourists first perceive them, while the main *characters* in the sequence have consisted of the poet, the photographer, and the social worker *cum* congressional witness” (118). All these “characters,” Leader notes, have “come from the outside” (118). The reader as character also is an outsider, but Rukeyser's goal is to make the reader personally connected and therefore invested in the tragedy, no longer a stranger, tourist, or outsider but a sympathizing advocate for justice. With the fifth poem in the sequence onward, therefore, “we begin to gain detailed representations of the people who do 'live here” (Leader 118).

A number of poems in the middle of *The Book of the Dead* focus on the personal stories and testimonies of a myriad of people connected to the Gauley Tunnel tragedy, including workers, a mother of workers, doctors, lawyers, and even a Rinehart and Dennis company worker who testified for the company yet later contracted silicosis. The goals of these poem are multiple, but linking them all is Rukeyser's attempt to allow the voices of the dead, forgotten, or ignored to speak and be heard, and therefore to humanize the tragedy, thereby building the reader's sympathy and transforming the reader's mind toward justice and change for present-day workers. “Mearl Blankenship” is one such poem that personalizes the general picture provided in “Gauley Bridge,” allowing the reader to associate the nameless, coughing sick man in the post office or the “doomed” man leaving the doctor's office with a real individual. The poem, written from the viewpoint of Blankenship, a sufferer of silicosis, includes a letter. Blankenship attempts

to make public the information that Union Carbide and its contractors Rinehart and Dennis attempted to keep private and secluded: "I have written a letter," Blankenship says, "Send it to the city, / maybe to a paper / if it's all right" (13, 14-6). He also makes clear that, like the man in "Gauley Bridge" leaving the doctor's office, he is doomed: "J C Dunbar said that I was the very picture of health / when I went to Work at that tunnel," he says (36-7). Now, a "married man" with a "family" (45), he not only has been cheated by the lawyers who helped him sue the company the first time but also knows that he is going to die: "I have lost eighteen lbs on that Rheinart ground / and expecting to lose my life" (39-40). The individual stamping a letter in "Gauley Bridge," and the one given a diagnosis of death at the doctor's office, therefore, become personalized with Blankenship's testimony and letter. Rukeyser thus transitions from a general picture of the town, connecting it to "any town" through its fragmented, general imagery, to the specific individual of Gauley who is killed because of the silica, fostering the reader's connection with the tragedy through personal connection and sympathy with the suffering individual, a connection that is essential, moreover, for future advocacy for justice. As Thurston aptly states, Blankenship, "[w]ith his testimony and his carefully constructed representation, ...provokes the collective response necessary to encourage social change," and the readers' "sympathy" for Blankenship forms a part of that response (*Making Something Happen* 181).

Thurston points out that Blankenship, Robinson, and Vivian Jones are the three most important male voices in the sequence because they, in addition to a few other poems, "make the human costs compellingly clear" for readers ("Documentary Modernism" 72). Women's voices and presence in the poems, although less prominent, extend the reader's understanding of the human cost of the tragedy as well. A few poems in particular bring the reader face to face with the pain and strength of women who were overlooked or ignored especially because, not

themselves afflicted with silicosis, they were not considered to be a part of the tragedy of the male workers. By including women's roles and voices in the sequence of personal poems, Rukeyser illuminates the larger consequences of the tragedy for families as well as the strength, fortitude, and unswaying presence of the women who nurse and fight for their loved ones. The doctors in their testimony of events claimed, "The women are not affected" ("Praise of the Committee" 21), but Rukeyser shows not only that women are deeply affected by the tragedy but also integral in the battle for justice and change. "The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones" and "Mearl Blankenship" write women back into the history by highlighting their roles in their loved ones' lives; in "Absalom," Rukeyser moves from rewriting women into the history of the tragedy to showing their power and potential for changing the future by connecting the mother and the dead with the power of myth; these poems bring women into the battle against the greed of big corporations, ultimately clarifying that women, although also victims of the Gauley disaster, are also potentially powerful advocates for justice and social change.

Depicting the man and worker Vivian Jones as he thinks about his life on the job, "The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones" opens the sequence of personal poems and highlights the human emphasis first in its title. Kertesz observes that, in terms of the overall structure of Rukeyser's work, "[u]p to now, we have received mostly bare facts. Here [in "The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones"] the poet creates a human voice to respond to them" (101). The poem highlights Vivian Jones's memories and important influences in his life, including his "girl," whose importance is indicated by a photo in his pocket. The unnamed woman in the photo represents what Vivian Jones worked so hard for: to provide for the one he loves. This poem is about one man's memories of working on the tunnel; according to Wechsler, this poem is "a lyrical recasting of the story from the point of view of a railroad man who transported silica ore from the mines"

(78). The title, however, reflects the larger consequences of the tragedy from the man's point of view: when he looks at the dam and upon his work, he sees only his own and others' destruction and is reminded of his obligation to his loved one, whose picture remains in his pocket.

The main character in the poem, Vivian Jones, travels out of town to a familiar “place up the gorge where he can see / his locomotive rusted” from disuse (2-3) and spends an hour remembering his work and those people who “went into the tunnel-mouth to stay” (16). For the majority of the poem he laments for his fellow workers and the fact that their work may never be put to use: “Never to be used, he thinks, never to spread its power, / jinx on the rock, curse on the power-plant, / hundreds breathed value, filled their lungs full of glass” (17-9). The water's power and potential and the connection between literal glass in the lungs of the workers and the river once again connects human beings, human faces, and human work to the human creation that killed them: “the fallen mist, the slope of water, glass” (24). The workers were literally consumed by their work as the mined silica killed them by filling their lungs with glass and choking off their air supply. When the character sees the dam, he can only see “glass” (24) and its “death-work in the country” (27).

Any hope for the future is represented through the picture of the unknown woman. Before the dying Vivian Jones leaves, he “feels in his pocket the picture of his girl, / touches for luck—he used to as he drove / after he left his engine” during his typical work day (30-1). The end of the poem, therefore, hints at the importance of the woman in Vivian Jones's life and at the potential of her power. She represents what Vivian Jones worked so hard for: love and family; although never present with him on the job, she was always present with him in his mind and heart as he worked. Now as he faces his own sickness, and the end of his life, one concludes that the woman that he loves will be left behind; she also becomes a victim of the dam as her loved

one is consumed by his disease of glass. She, too, therefore, becomes a “face of the dam” yet one that has the potential to continue speaking and telling others what has happened. However nameless and voiceless the woman is in this poem, she has the potential to become someone like Mrs. Jones in “Absalom,” a poem that I will soon discuss.

Two important lines in “Mearl Blankenship” further highlight how women are affected in the tragedy and prepare the reader for the focus on Mrs. Jones in “Absalom.” Mearl Blankenship makes clear through his own words that his wife must be a present witness to his daily, even hourly suffering: “I wake up choking [at night], and my wife / rolls me over on my left side” (8-9). The woman must not only bear the emotional pain of seeing her husband suffer but also the burden of caring for him physically in his pain. Blankenship's wife suffers financially as well, for “when the lawyers got a settlement” they stopped talking to Blankenship. According to Kertesz, Blankenship “sued the company twice, but when the lawyers got a settlement they didn't pass it on to him” (102). Blankenship's fear is thus for his family's burden without him: “I am a Married Man and have a family. God / knows if they can do anything for me / it will be appreciated” (45-6).<sup>121</sup> This emphasis on family, specifically the family that is left to grieve and suffer when he dies, becomes the subject of the next poem, “Absalom.” Mearl Blankenship's wife highlights poignantly the suffering that those without silicosis must endure as well as the personal love and devotion of those who take care of the suffering. Through Blankenship's personal testimony, women are once again written into the tragedy at Gauley Bridge.

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<sup>121</sup> This poem is also integrally about communication. Blankenship has “written a letter” that he wants an implied listener to send to a paper or “to the city” (13-6). Throughout the poem it remains unclear who the implied “you” is, as well as who “they” are in this last line. “They” could refer to the paper's publishers, the city people, the committee formed to fight for the workers, or even the lawyers he mentions a few lines above. The pronouns are left without clear antecedents in order to once again assert that it is everybody's responsibility to help those who are oppressed and to emphasize that it is imperative to continue to share the stories of the people killed by unsafe mining practices.



In “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones” and “Mearl Blankenship” Rukeyser writes women into the history of the Gauley Tunnel tragedy by highlighting their presence and pain; “Absalom” continues to show their suffering but highlights women not only as victims but also as advocates for justice. Because of the tragedy that strikes her three sons and husband, Mrs. Jones, the mother in “Absalom” becomes a powerful agent of strength, truth, and change as she refuses to stop her fight for justice for her family. Her strength and bravery, moreover, become timeless, as Rukeyser links her to the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and the myth of Isis. “Absalom” most poignantly highlights women's suffering as they endure the sickness and death of loved ones and also the strength that those women find through the tragedy, seen in their resolve to continue to speak for the voiceless.

From the beginning of the poem, “Absalom” foregrounds the mother speaker as one who uncovers truth and advocates for justice through the powerful use of personal testimony. The first lines begin, “I first discovered what was killing these men. / I had three sons who worked with their father in the tunnel:” (1-2). By sheer experience of being a part of her family's life, Mrs. Jones realizes that the tunnel work is killing not only her family but also all the other men as well; ironically, America, thought to be a land of latent potential for hard workers, is now “discovered” by a woman to be a land that breaks apart families and kills young men. At the same time, however, through her assertiveness and boldness of her very first statement, Mrs. Jones presents herself as a woman of ability despite circumstance: she first uncovered what was killing her family. Claiming the first rights of discovery gives Mrs. Jones some control over how she presents the information and how she ultimately chooses to act, given her discovery. As the rest of the poem clarifies, she chooses to not passively suffer but to fight for her family through her continued testimony and action.

Mrs. Jones's testimony shows that women are affected deeply emotionally as well as financially when the male members of their families are affected by on-the-job disease, yet her story also highlights the strength that results when a family sacrifices for each other. The trouble that comes to Mrs. Jones and her family because of work-induced silicosis is clear: "My husband is not able to work," she says, because "He has it, according to the doctor" (15-6). She adds, "We have been having a very hard time making a living since this trouble came to us" (17-8). Mrs. Jones echoes many others who claimed to be run off the job at the first signs of sickness and unable to get another job due to this same factor. With all three sons now dead and her husband extremely sick, Mrs. Jones is aware that she will soon be the only one left to fight. Shirley, however, made her fight for all the victims possible even after their deaths, saying, "you will not have any way of making your living / when we are gone, and the rest are going, too" (45-7) as he urged her to use his body after he died as evidence in order to collect compensation. Shirley sought medical confirmation of the reason for his death and thus provided for his mother, and, while he was yet alive, Mrs. Jones sought the use of technology to provide her son with medical care, making the money necessary for X-rays by begging at the side of the road. Because of the x-rays, the lawyers were willing to take on Shirley's case, which, she claims, "was the first in a line of lawsuits" (52).

Mrs. Jones's situation shows that movement toward justice can result from the will to act out of love for another. Mrs. Jones must allow her son's body to be given over to science in order to respect his wishes, but despite the emotional toll this must have taken on her as a person, she maintains self-control that comes only from two souls dedicated to one end. Shirley knew what he was doing when he asked his mother to have the doctors examine his lungs: making possible a chance to guarantee his mother's financial security. In his assessment of Rukeyser's work, Rowe

argues that the “male workers... [fail] to take seriously their own laboring bodies and health,” are “disconnected by industrial capitalism from what are today standard considerations of the biomedical hazards of the workplace,” and are “powerless” (144). Although it may be true that the workers like Shirley were unaware of the health risks that they took by working in the tunnel, after they realized that their jobs were deadly, the men showed that they were very serious about their health: many of the voices of protest throughout the sequence of poems are male voices, for example, and Shirley in “Absalom” shows to what lengths the men went to fight Union Carbide and ensure the future of their loved ones. Allowing his body to be opened up and examined after his death, Shirley proves his cause of death and incites a long list of lawsuits. Both the male worker and the women in their lives, once aware of the workplace hazards, use what they can to fight against the system that is killing the men. Mrs. Jones and her son Shirley become one voice through the sacrifices of both: Shirley's bodily sacrifice for first his family and then to science and the investigation and Mrs. Jones's sacrifices and actions for her family. Through Mrs. Jones's continued fight for the truth and continued testimony after the death of her family, her family and others still have a voice against the powerful corporations that destroyed them.

The italicized parts of “Absalom” are almost exclusively taken from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* but function in this poem as multiple voices that point to a collective experience and movement toward justice for both the living and dead; the italicized portions reflect an unbroken unity between mother and son and assert ownership over one's self despite uncontrollable disease and impending death. The first italicized portion comes after Mrs. Jones's statement that “Shirley was my youngest son; the boy. / He went into the tunnel” (11-2). The next lines, “*My heart my mother my heart my mother / My heart my coming into being*” (13-4) reflects the natural rhythm and feel of a living, beating heart and asserts both the life of the young man and his

transformation or “coming into being” despite his death from the tunnel work; his transformation points to a continued existence through both a spiritual state and his mother's testimony. The hollowness and darkness of the tunnel that consumes his body cannot yet contain him: the darkness will not obscure his life; the tunnel walls will echo his heartbeat, and within this dark cocoon he will be transformed into a new “being” through his mother's testimony.

Furthermore, the voice in this italicized section is that of both mother and son. Dayton notes that the “purpose” of this particular section as it is presented in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* is to assert that the one who died is “one 'whose word is true' and who 'is holy and righteous,' attributes which Rukeyser assigns also to...Shirley” (235); thus, the lines from the Egyptian text can be connected clearly to the dead son. But whereas most critics argue that the italicized portion of the text are either the mother's words or the son's words, I believe Rukeyser creates a purposeful ambiguity in these portions of text in order to highlight the strength of the family union and love. Jan Johnson Drantell is one of few who also argues that, as in another poem titled “The Speed of Darkness,” in which the mother and child are “blurred,” the words in “Absalom” belong to both (145). She explains, “To die is to come into being. One way to come into being is to live to testify before the committee, even after the child of one's heart has died, even when doing so offers little real possibility . . . for change, . . . A mother has some hard truths to tell. Demeter is emerging” (145).<sup>122</sup> The connection to Demeter is especially fitting, as the

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<sup>122</sup> The connection to Demeter as the goddess of the harvest is especially fitting when read in relation to the speaker's statement in “The Cornfield” that the “harvest” is coming ripe as well as in relation to the mythologies of American development and identity centered around agricultural achievement. Mrs. Jones represents those people who do not allow the dead to remain buried and their stories obscured but who “harvests” them and shares them. A reading of “The Cornfield” will follow shortly. Rukeyser also presents a new mythology for America, one in which women play a prominent role. Jenny Goodman argues, for instance, that “Absalom” “establishes the mother's authority as a witness to history” but also “shapes the mother's experience into a myth of regeneration based in maternal love” through Rukeyser's decision to “feminize” two “religious narratives”-- that of Absalom in the Bible and the “dominant version” of the Isis and Osiris myth in which Isis pieces Osiris back together (274). Goodman says, “By paralleling Mrs. Jones with Isis, Rukeyser suggests that, in speaking for her son, the mother is contributing to the ultimate rebirth of her shattered community. Rukeyser will symbolically extend this community from Gauley Bridge

goddess Demeter is associated with both harvest and the cycle of life and death. Mrs. Jones takes control after her son's death, becoming his voice as well as the voice for all of the dead, such as those who were secretly buried in a nearby cornfield.

Further italicized lines highlight a strong spiritual mastery over self as well as unity with another. Lines that assert mastery follow Mrs. Jones's description of carrying her son "from his bed to the table, from his bed to the porch, in [her] arms" (25): "*My heart is mine in the place of hearts, / They gave me back my heart, it lies in me.*" (26-7). The oneness of the mother and son in the image of her carrying him is reflected in the lines used from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, as it becomes unclear whether the speaker of the italicized lines is the mother or son. What is obvious, however, is that the physical ills cannot overpower emotional and spiritual strength, a strength that only comes from the ability to let go of that which one cannot control and utilize what one can. Thus, through death, Shirley can claim, "*I have gained mastery over my heart / I have gained mastery over my two hands / I have gained mastery over the waters / I have gained mastery over the river.*" (48-51), and his mother, through her willingness to become an advocate for justice, also "gains mastery" over these same elements, a "mastery" that asserts and celebrates the power of human potential as one masters emotion, one's craft, and nature.

The power of testimony manifests in the final italicized portion of "Absalom," which once again reflects the strength incited by the love and unified front of mother and son; the last few lines also leave the reader with a clear understanding of the role of witness that the women who lost loved ones in the Gauley Tunnel tragedy continue to embrace. Mrs. Jones clarifies once again that Shirley "asked that we try to find out" what really was killing him and already killed his brothers, and it is because she and her husband sought the truth that "they learned what the

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to the nation and, finally, to the worldwide fight against fascism. Like the mother's, [Rukeyser's] purpose is to give a voice to the destroyed sons and to redeem their lives by allowing the nation to learn from their sacrifice and thus revive itself" (274).

trouble was” (73-4). The truth itself transforms the speaker, whether it be Shirley or Mrs. Jones: “*I open out a way, they have covered my sky with crystal / I come forth by day, I am born a second time, / I force a way through, and I know the gate / I shall journey over the earth among the living.*” (75-8). Once again, these lines reflect the unity between mother and son, as both are the speaker: Shirley is transformed through his passing from life to death and into a spiritual state, yet that change also transforms his mother, who continues to “*journey over the earth among the living*” (78) with the goal of attaining justice for her son and telling society the truth about how her family died. Mrs. Jones is the living witness to the atrocity, the voice for the dead, and the advocate for justice for both the dead and the living. Her goal is to speak for her son so that he and others will never be forgotten. Shirley “shall not be diminished, never;” and will always have a voice, as Mrs. Jones “shall give a mouth to [her] son” (79-80). Thurston points out that Rukeyser’s editing of the congressional testimony for this poem posits Mrs. Jones as the sole speaker of lines that historically belonged to Mrs. Jones, Philippa Allen, and Mrs. Jones’s husband Charles Jones,<sup>123</sup> but, as the sole speaker, Mrs. Jones becomes the powerful agent able to “[read] the dead into the record,” and, by doing so, “preserve their memory and ...give them new life” (“Documentary Modernism” 79-80).<sup>124</sup> Sharing her family’s story, Mrs. Jones advocates for justice and refuses to allow the truth to be forgotten. She becomes, through her testimony and Rukeyser’s inclusion of the mythical *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, a reverberating

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<sup>123</sup> Dayton clarifies even further the make-up of “Absalom”: “The poem is composed largely of testimony delivered before the House subcommittee investigating the Gauley tunnel tragedy. Of the poem’s seventy-eight lines, fifty-eight are taken from testimony, and twelve are taken verbatim from or are written in close imitation of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. Of the fifty-eight lines from testimony, thirty and one-half were spoken originally by...Emma Jones. Another twenty-two and one-half lines were originally spoken by Philippa Allen, and five by... Charles Jones, himself a victim of silicosis” (233).

<sup>124</sup> Thurston thus likens Mrs. Jones’s role to that of “Thoth, the Egyptian scribe god on whose book of the dead the structure of Rukeyser’s sequence depends” (“Documentary Modernism” 80). In other readings of the poem, Mrs. Jones is also compared to Isis, the goddess who pieces her loved ones back together.

voice of all the women throughout history who fought like her, and a powerful precursor to today's women who fight for social and environmental justice in their communities.<sup>125</sup>

Rukeyser covers women's roles in the tragedy, however, from both the “inside” perspective of Mrs. Jones and the “outside” perspective of “Juanita Tinsley.” “Juanita Tinsley” challenges the reader's understanding of national identity, specifically women's role in the nation, ultimately clarifying further how women can shape and build our national identity through their activism. Juanita Tinsley was a social worker who was so touched by the suffering of the Gauley workers that she volunteered her time and energy to help the victims. She was not from the area, nor was she related to any of the victims. The poem titled after her name highlights that women across the nation have a role to play in the public battle for justice for those who died in the Gauley Tunnel. Juanita Tinsley's work for the victims was endless and multiple: “Even after the letters, there is work, / sweaters, the food, the shoes... (1-2). Tinsley wrote letters to communicate the tragedy and suffering of the workers, testifying, like Mrs. Jones, to the truth to give the victims more public press and make Americans aware of Union Carbide's injustice. She also helped with the physical labor of collecting donations.

But an equally important aspect of Tinsley's advocacy includes recognizing the discrepancy between the reality of the present victims and the dominant narratives of history that focus only on positive elements of the past. Tinsley says, “I know in America there are songs, / forgetful ballads to be sung, / but at home I see this wrong” (10-12). Rather than maintaining a nostalgic view of history, or focusing on the “forgetful ballads” that obscure the “wrong” done in

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<sup>125</sup> The last two lines of the poem are Rukeyser's creation and not lines from the subcommittee testimony or the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* – as Dayton asserts, in the last two lines, Rukeyser “dramatically merges” the testimony before the House subcommittee and the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (235). The lines do not appear in the testimony, he notes, “while they strongly resemble (without being direct quotations from) lines in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. By merging testimony with myth, and giving Mrs. Jones the power to make the statement, Rukeyser gives Mrs. Jones the power that comes from mythic status and posits her as a creator of cultural memory through her power to speak her son's story.

the name of progress, Tinsley recognizes these two competing national narratives and cannot reconcile them. She adds,

When I see my family house,  
the gay gorge, the picture-books,  
they raise the face of General Wise

aged by enemies, like faces

the stranger showed me in the town. (13-7)

Tinsley acknowledges the discrepancy between the simple, happy upbringing in her “family house,” her childhood learning gained through “picture-books” and historical figures like General Wise, a Civil War Confederate Army general, and the “enemies,” such as the workers in the town whose faces are sunken and sickly from silicosis, that haunt those happy memories and dominant national narratives. The faces of the victims are ultimately the “enemies” of the competing national narrative, which says that slavery and oppression for African Americans and others ended with the end of the Civil War. The fact that the majority of victims of Gauley Tunnel were African Americans who had little to no choice in their work options highlights the lack of true freedom available to the poor in general and the African-American poor in particular. Goodman argues that Tinsley “negotiates her own identity in relation to the patriarchal icons and texts that have shaped her understanding of self,” including the ballads, books, portraits of General Wise, and “even the local geography...She rejects the narratives suggested by these former touchstones of her identity” (276). This rejection, Goodman argues, stems from Tinsley's understanding “that the images that have mediated her understanding of her own heritage have masked the underside of American capitalism. The 'gay gorge,' for example, is at once a beautiful



natural attraction and the site of the murder of the tunnel workers..." (276). The land, in other words, that should be the "land of the free" still reflects that bondage that the poor endure because they have little ability to choose another livelihood. Tinsley's poem encourages the reader to recognize the stories of America that obscure suffering, to truly face that suffering, and to help: Tinsley concludes this section of her monologue, saying, "I saw that [the faces] plain, and saw my place" (18). She chooses to stay to help the victims and to fight those that made them sick. Her "place" is in the present as an activist.

Tinsley's "place" is incited by her realization that the nostalgic past does not make sense of the present atrocity, and her choice to stay and help the victims begins first with an altered understanding of the world. She, and the reader, must recognize the competing narratives of our nation, namely the past of picture books versus the present reality of suffering and then make a decision about which narrative to live by. To ignore the present suffering of people and instead adhere to a nostalgic narrative of America's past and present is to perpetuate the suffering, but to become an advocate for those today, Tinsley suggests, is to make possible an ideal future, and to allow one to envision a "scene of hope" that is "ahead": "...next month with a softer wind, / maybe they'll rest upon their land, / and then maybe the happy song, and love, / a tall boy who was never in a tunnel" (20-3). Goodman argues that Tinsley "[transfers] her allegiance to the workers as the authentic symbols of the regional and national identity she now seeks to claim" (276). By doing so, Tinsley dreams of a different future for workers in America. The final scene of hope reasserts the need of the individual to work toward a future that one desires, and the poem as a whole asserts women's possible role in this new national narrative of possibilities. Mrs. Jones and Juanita Tinsley show readers that women are not just passive sufferers but, as women

who fight for safer working environments as well as recognition of the wrongs for the people they care about, they are active, engaged discoverers of truth and agents of change.

Worker and Nature in the Personal Poems:

The tenants of what we know today as the environmental justice movement were not documented until the 1980s, but Mrs. Jones and Juanita Tinsley, like many others throughout history, are clear precursors to women's activism in that movement. The movement, which focuses on safety and health within any living or working environment and fights against the targeting of minorities and the poor in relation to disposing of environmental hazards, allowing unsafe conditions, or other environmental-related situations, has also found its niche in the literary field. With the relatively recent turn toward ecocriticism in literary studies in the 1980s and the even more recent specialized emphasis within ecocriticism of environmental justice, however, I am not surprised to have found very little ecocritically-minded scholarship on Rukeyser's text. Part of this lack may be attributed to a concern that applying current theories to historical texts may skew the meaning of the text. Shulman's assertion that there exists a danger of "imposing current feminist and green values on 1930s literature rather than respecting the historically and politically grounded integrity of the earlier work (241) must, therefore, be taken seriously even as one explores Rukeyser's work in relation to environmental justice. At the same time, Rukeyser's work clearly demonstrates, long before the term "environmental justice" was coined in the 1980s, the fundamental fact that a correlation exists between the treatment of nature and the treatment of people, as well as the fact that minorities are most often the victims of unsafe working and living conditions.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> According to a note on the "Preamble" put together by "delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held on October 24-27, 1991, in Washington DC," the 17 principles of

Rukeyser's work anticipates the environmental justice movement through its deliberate connections between treatment of the worker and the land. The subduing, manipulation, or destruction of the natural world, especially in relation to the minority or working-class individual's suffering, is an integral aspect of her work and is used to highlight the injustice done to the Gauley tunnel workers and their families. Thus I agree with Rowe when he argues that "Rukeyser contends that the political and legal reforms demanded by the exposure of Union Carbide's deliberate endangerment of its workers must be accompanied by a broadly based reconceptualization of our social relations to the natural world" (141).<sup>127</sup> Rukeyser's sequence of poems as a whole shows that a society's healthy relationship to nature coincides with respecting and valuing humanity and cannot be disconnected from the human relationship. Only by respecting the worker and valuing the worker's life will a new societal relationship to nature develop. Rukeyser indicates society's need to rethink one's relationship to the natural world by asserting the need to review, rethink, and retell history with a specific goal of destroying the blinding cultural myths. She does this by highlighting corporations' greed and disregard for humanity, exploring the gift of the laborer's craft at Gauley Bridge, and positing ways in which

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Environmental Justice that were created and voted on at the summit "have served as a defining document for the growing grassroots movement for environmental justice" ("Principles of Environmental Justice") Numbers 8 and 9 are especially relevant to what Mrs. Jones, Juanita Tinsley, and others fought for and read as follows: "(8) Environmental Justice affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards" and "(9) Environmental Justice protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care." ("Principles of Environmental Justice").

<sup>127</sup> Rowe argues that "Rukeyser's mythic feminism" is a precursor to or "anticipates more recent ecofeminisms, for which there are few precedents in the 1930s" (141), and I would agree. However, Rowe's assessment becomes too myopic when his attention only focuses on the connection to ecofeminism. He argues, "Rukeyser allows the women who have connected their maternal care with political activism to take on the collective mythic identity of Isis and thereby to herald a utopian reconception of our social relation to nature" (142). Although he makes some excellent points and has an engaging reading, his critique does not take into account Rukeyser's whole sequence of poems and the ways that the human/nature connection is explored in multiple other ways. His work's narrow focus on an ecofeminist reading cannot be accounted for throughout the entire work, although it works well for "Absalom." As one of few scholars who chooses to read Rukeyser's text ecocritically, however, Rowe incites further exploration through his analysis, showing how fruitful a critical reading through the lenses of ecofeminism, ecocriticism, or environmental justice can be.

worker and nature are connected through both their degradation and potential. We cannot, according to Rukeyser's work, think about our relationship to the natural world without acknowledging the reality of people of both sexes in past and present subjection, against which people of diverse backgrounds did and do continue to fight, and without recognizing Union Carbide's or capitalism's disregard of human life in the face of money-making schemes.

Throughout certain personal testimony poems Rukeyser foregrounds the connection between earth and worker in order to highlight the disregard that Union Carbide has for the workers' lives. "Mearl Blankenship" most strongly highlights the intimate connection between the treatment of both worker and earth. The disregard that the developers have for the natural world is reflected in the way that they treat their workers, and the destruction of the body of the earth leads to the destruction of the human body as well. In describing the pain associated with silicosis, Blankenship projects his pain onto nature, giving nature a voice against the destruction that also is claiming his own life. In his testimony Blankenship says, "I wake up choking, and my wife / rolls me over on my left side; / then I'm asleep in the dream I always see: / the tunnel choked / the dark wall coughing dust" (8-11). The letter that Blankenship writes, moreover, provides a clear image of the unhealthy work conditions brought about by the destruction of the mountain. He claims that "it was so dusty you couldn't hardly see the lights" in the tunnel (20). His particular job was to "nip steel for the drills," "lay the track in the tunnel," and drill "near the mouth of the tunnel" (21, 22, 23). Blankenship did not have the unhealthiest job in the construction of the tunnel—that job, dry drilling inside the tunnel, was most often reserved for the African-American migrant worker. But Blankenship clarifies that those in charge of the workers did not value their health or lives, regardless of race: "& when the shots went off the boss said / If you are going to work Venture back" (24-5). The overseers were so focused on

finishing the tunnel within their allotted time frame that they forced workers to go back into the tunnel immediately after blasting, instead of allowing the dust to settle. And their way of manipulating these workers was to reassert their power of employment: if the worker is going to “work,” and, henceforth continue to keep a job and measly pay, the only option he has is to “Venture back” into the destruction and clear the tunnel of debris despite its dustiness.

Rukeyser reinforces the intimate connection between worker abuse and nature's destruction by also using imagery that melds earth and human body. The result of the developers' forced unhealthy practices, such as coercing the workers to enter the immediately-blasted, dusty tunnel and forcing workers to dry drill without masks, is that workers inhale the deadly dust, literally consuming the destroyed earth. Rukeyser depicts the consequences of this consumption through her description of Blankenship, another worker dying of silicosis, as he stares at the river. The river itself becomes a visual reminder of Union Carbide's greed that kept the company from issuing safety protocols, thus causing Blankenship's impending death:

He stood against the rock  
facing the river  
grey river grey face  
the rock mottled behind him  
like X-ray plate enlarged  
diffuse and stony  
his face against the stone. (30-6)

The destruction of the mountain and its ensuing dust has sickened both the worker and the river, turning both “grey,” and the “mottled” rocks from the excavation laying behind Blankenship resemble the worker's lungs mottled from silica dust, both of which are exposed and destroyed

through technological advances. Thurston argues that Blankenship is “a metonymy for the region itself” and the Blankenship “effectively performs the 'case history' function in Rukeyser's poetic documentary. Through his testimony and his carefully constructed representation, the figure of this individual worker provokes the collective response necessary to encourage social change” (*Making Something Happen* 181). The connection between worker and nature, therefore, serves to reinforce the truth that the reader has already come to discover in the history laid out in the earlier poem “West Virginia”: progress is built upon the destruction of the poor, the laboring, and the minority, as well as the utilization, and often destruction, of earth and its resources. That the reader will ban together with others in response, therefore, is the goal of the poem and the sequence as a whole.<sup>128</sup>

Other poems in the sequence also reinforce the intimate connection between worker's bodies and nature in order to highlight the abuse and destruction of both and elicit the communal response necessary for change. In the poem “The Disease,” which outlines how silicosis affects the body, the speaker, looking at an x-ray of a victim, says, “Between the ribs. These are the collar bones. / Now, this lung's mottled, beginning, in these areas. / You'd say a snowstorm had struck the fellow's lungs” (10-2). Later, in “George Robinson Blues,” the speaker, George Robinson, recounts the tunnel work: “When the blast went off, the boss would call out, Come, let's / go back, / when that heavy loaded black went white, Come, let's go back, / telling us hurry, hurry, into the falling rocks and muck...” (27-30). Robinson also says that the area “... [l]ooked like somebody sprinkled flour all over the parks and groves”(36) and that “the white dust really looked pretty down around [their] ankles” (38). The image of the snowstorm that covers both the

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<sup>128</sup> Technology, however, as the series of poems illustrates, can be used to destroy or to heal, as the technology to divert a river destroyed the workers yet the x-ray technology served to provide vital evidence for the case against Union Carbide and thus begin the healing process for the victims and their families by making the truth known about how and why these men died.

lungs of the worker and the external world melds inside and outside, worker and world, together. The silica dust covers everything, and its deadly pollution becomes part and parcel of the environment. In “George Robinson: Blues,” for instance, the speaker also says, “The water they would bring had dust in it, our drinking water, / the camps and their groves were colored with the dust, / we cleaned our clothes in the groves, but we always had the dust” (31-5). The silica has penetrated so deeply into everything that it touches that “it stayed and the rain couldn't wash it away and it twinkled” (38). The poem “Alloy” highlights how deadly this pollution is to worker and world, stating that the town of Alloy, where the silica was carted off to be used in the process of making steel, “is the most audacious landscape” (1), more dangerous, even, than a gangster with his smoking gun (2-3).

Central to Rukeyser's depiction of nature and the worker's laboring body is their inseparability. The workers' ill health attests to the destruction of nature, and nature also testifies to the workers' destruction in that it bears scars on its surface, which, as aforementioned, visually resemble the workers' internal scars. In “Absalom,” Mrs. Jones says, “the whole valley is witness” (63). Witnessing includes not only being present but also, like a witness on stand, testifying to the truth. The “whole valley” includes the people who inhabit the land, who see for themselves the destruction of the earth and the workers. Historically many of the townspeople of Gauley and the surrounding areas, however, would not testify to the truth, despite seeing the workers' illnesses, because of their loyalty to Union Carbide and the jobs it brought to the region. But the “whole valley” also includes the land itself, which clearly does not lie and, as the narrator makes clear in the final poem of the sequence, is “mirrored in these men” (78). As an outward manifestation of the workers' internal destruction, the land is a true witness; it is not only present

as the workers are destroyed but, destroyed itself, becomes a visual testimony to its own and the workers' abuse.

The pollutive silica dust that covers everything as it is extracted from the mountain threatens workers of all races, but that threat provides a reason for all workers to band together. Rukeyser's depiction of men covered in silica dust points to the need for worker solidarity and advocacy despite racial differences. In "George Robinson Blues," Robinson points out how the dust turns all workers, black and white, the same color: "As dark as I am, when I came out at morning after the tunnel at night, / with a white man, nobody could have told which man was white. / The dust had covered us both, and the dust was white" (88). The silica dust, in other words, is a great equalizer in that it removes evidence of race from the bodies of the men. Men are no longer black or white but simply "workers" all affected by the silica in the tunnel. Silicosis's ensuing death has no color bias: both black and white men work in the silica, and both black and white men die because of it, although it is important to note that many more African-American men than white men died in this tragedy because more African-American men worked in the mine. As Gardinier says, Rukeyser in this moment provides the reader with "a vision of the bonds that tie these two different men together" (97). Because of the common disease and death from disease, the poem encourages worker solidarity. As Thurston says, "All are the same in death or in work that ends in death; all, then, should join against these circumstances" (*Making Something Happen* 185). The fact that more African-American men than Caucasian men worked the deadliest jobs in the operation and therefore were discriminated against more often shows that the claim "All are the same in death or work that ends in death" is not as simple as it appears. Yet Thurston's second assertion that all should join together to fight the situation is a fitting response to any and all of the laborers' suffering, and in response to this section of Rukeyser's



poem which seeks to highlight how silicosis does not discriminate based upon skin color but affects equally any laborer who breathes it in.

Moreover, the changing landscape due to the mass graveyard on a hill attests to the overwhelming number of deaths by silicosis and the need to actively seek worker solidarity to change conditions. According to George Robinson, “the graveyard's up on the hill, cold in the springtime blow, / the graveyard's up on high, and the town is down below” (87). The mass graveyard, an old cornfield where Union Carbide's hired undertaker covertly buried the dead, has changed the image of the town itself. It sits above the town, in plain sight, and is another part of the land that is a “witness” to Union Carbide's disregard for human life. Rukeyser therefore enforces the immediacy of the need for worker solidarity across race lines by showing that silica dust kills indiscriminately and that Union Carbide, so little regarding their workers of either race, covered their wrongdoing with more wrongdoing by burying the dead covertly in a nearby cornfield.

An irony still exists, however, in the dust's erasure of race: the dust turns the black body white while still denying the black the social rights and privileges given to the white body, and Rukeyser does not ignore this fact despite her emphasis on the need for worker solidarity and advocacy. George Robinson still represents the racialized body, or the “deserted Negro” present in “Gauley Bridge” who is deserted because of both his race and his social status. Because the majority of workers at Gauley were migrant black workers,<sup>129</sup> the tragedy did not receive the sort of press that was necessary; thus, he is deserted by America, which fails to give him justice.

Robinson attests to his desertion in his very first words: “Gauley Bridge is a good town for

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<sup>129</sup> According to Cherniack, the total work force “numbered nearly five thousand men” (17). The workers specifically for the tunnel part of the project numbered “nearly three thousand men,” and “75 percent [of these workers] were black” (18). Cherniack cites Union Carbide's own records when he asserts, “65 percent of the [total] workers were black....few of these blacks came from Fayette County [the local area]. Of the whites employed, some may well have been local, but only 738 whites ever worked inside the tunnel” (17).

Negroes, they let us stand around, they let us stand / around on the sidewalks if we're black or brown” (87). His idea of a good town is one that allows the “black or brown” individual to exist, even if that existence is unrecognized, a town, in other words, that is happy to ignore his presence even if it does deny his personhood. The town that ignores the black man's presence is also the same town, however, that ignored or turned a blind eye to their deaths. Because the majority of the black workers were migrant, the townspeople native to Gauley did not seek the real reason for their deaths. In fact, they often blamed the workers' deaths on a careless lifestyle that led to pneumonia, an explanation infused with racist stereotyping which further underscores Rukeyser's image of the deserted Negro, deserted also because people were willing to believe perpetuated lies based on racist stereotypes.

#### “The Cornfield”: Revising National Narratives

“The Cornfield” is a pivotal poem because it brings together several reoccurring motifs, including history, myth, the traveler, and the connection between earth and worker, in order to highlight the everyday and long term impact of Union Carbide's blatant disregard for human life. The reader, as traveler and discoverer, uncovers the horrific reality of abuse obscured by the myth of America as fruitful land of opportunity and realizes the extremity of Union Carbide's degradation of humanity. “The Cornfield” thus reinforces the connection between the development of America and the objectification of human beings, as well as the connection between the land and the worker while challenging the reader to discover, be transformed, and change the nation.

In the case of the Gauley Tunnel tragedy, the cornfield in the poem functioned historically as a burial ground for workers who died while on the job for Rinehart and Dennis,

Union Carbide's contractors. The numbers of those buried is itself unidentified: Hadley C. White, the undertaker who buried the men, claimed to have buried 33 bodies, but the "popular account," which "came to be widely and uncritically cited" but is "no longer identifiable," stated that White buried 169 men (Cherniack 60).<sup>130</sup> The poem is unique in Rukeyser's series of poems because it is the first and only poem that specifically focuses on a piece of agricultural land. The poem alludes to the agrarian past, the potential of the land, and the farming life that is displaced and ruined by the abuse of workers, which, in turn, the cornfield reflects. The poem shatters the myth of the American agrarian ideal and replaces it with the morbid reality of the workers. In doing this work, Rukeyser most specifically seeks to integrate into cultural memory the lives of the dead and what happened to them, including in that memory Union Carbide's purposeful obscuration of the truth.

In "The Cornfield," the broken-down state of the house and its garden is linked to the covering up or purposeful ignoring of the workers' deaths by both the American public and Union Carbide. Significantly, the two times in the sequence of poems that a house or home is presented, the image highlights the hidden labor upon which America was built, showing that both individuals as well as corporations are responsible for the subjugation of people. In "The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones" the narrator states, "The old plantation- house (burned to the mud) is a hill-acre of ground. The Negro woman throws / gay arches of water out from the front door." (9-11). Although the agrarian reality of our country (represented by the plantation home), built upon the backs of slaves, is supposedly over, indicated by the fact that the home is "burned to the mud," the African-American laborer is still subject to the old system-- the woman is still working in the house even though the house itself is destroyed. The author's use of both past and

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<sup>130</sup> Cherniack also recounts the rumor that the men had been buried without medical examination and several to a bag, but those rumors were countered by Hadley C. White, the undertaker, who under testimony claimed that each man had his own pine box (59-60).

present tense in describing this scene indicates the enduring hold that negative systems have upon the African-American laborer. Like “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones,” “The Cornfield” breaks down barriers between the hidden reality of the laborer's lives and public knowledge by highlighting the discrepancy between the two. The poem begins with an image of a “house, / wading in snow, its cracks are sealed with clay, walls papered with print, newsprint repeating...” (2-4). The house, representing any American-owned home, is insulated with the newspapers that families would often read and discuss around the hearth. Although plastering the wall with newspaper was an inexpensive way to insulate one's home, Rukeyser's use of the image here moves beyond the historical description of the home to suggest the difficulty of getting news of the Gauley Tunnel workers to the public, as the situation is kept silent not only by the company responsible but also by those who benefit from the electricity generated by using the tunnel, which warms their poorly insulated homes. Plastering news upon walls happens more often than acting upon the news in the public realm.

The images of snow allude to the workers' sickness as well as greed's role in the present situation at Gauley Bridge. Although the snow in the poem may at first seem to simply indicate the time of year, the image functions more to remind the reader of the silica that covers the land and looks like snow. Thus the “long-faced man,” the undertaker who was paid to secretly bury bodies in the cornfield behind his house, “jams the door tight against snow” (8-9) that may be the frozen form of water, or silica, or a mixture of both, since silica contaminates all stages of the water cycle. He thus “shivers” (9) not only because of the cold but also because the “snow” is a constant reminder of his responsibility in the covering up of the atrocity right outside of his tightly shut door. The undertaker's role in the burial has made him rich, and the image of his wealth is juxtaposed to that of dead, disfigured bodies: “*He / rides in a good car. They said blind*

corpses rode with him in front, knees broken into angles, / head clamped ahead” (12-5). The undertaker, in other words, has become rich from the his role in the overall disregard for human life found at Gauley; the first lines of the second stanza, “Swear by the corn, / the found-land corn, those who like ritual” (11-2) give the impression that human beings are figuratively sacrificed to the cornfield in order to meet the undertaker's greed.<sup>131</sup> He was paid “\$55 / a head for burying these men in plain pine boxes” (31-2), a payment much higher than the average. The image of the “good” car filled to the brim with dead bodies illuminates the human cost of such wealth; the unnaturalness and wrongness of what the undertaker has done is reinforced by the breakdown of his own family: his own “mother is suing him” for the “misuse of land” (33). The private home, therefore, is destroyed by capitalist greed and its subsequent destruction of human life, as well as by those who reinforce this negative model by further enabling the corporations to abuse workers. Enabling corporate and individual greed will result, the poem suggests, in the destruction of the family, the land, and our nation.

“The Cornfield” also reinforces the theme of human exploitation during the development of America and seeks to change the future through the reader's direct discovery of the men buried in the cornfield and their integration into Americans' cultural memory. The narrator encourages the individual to literally take to the road and discover this burial ground:

For those given to voyages: these roads  
discover. gullies, invade. Where does it go now?  
Now turn upstream twenty-five yards. Now road again.  
Ask the man on the road. Saying, That cornfield?

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<sup>131</sup> Shulman has a different, valid reading of this line, arguing that swearing by the corn “is the reverse of White's [the undertaker's] 'sworn papers.' The refrain has a strong, ironic charge” (213). The line, he further argues, invokes the idea of ritual and “corn and other fertility gods” like Isis and Demeter; he concludes, “Through association with the slain corn gods, the corpses buried beneath the corn assume the status of martyred divinities. Rukeyser holds in suspension the issue of their resurrection” (213).

Over the second hill, through the gate  
watch for the dogs. Buried, five at a time,  
pine boxes, . . . ” (25-31)

The reader will thus begin to uncover the history that is buried, lost, or forgotten by the majority. The narrator also encourages a community-centered ethic by focusing on the buried bodies, many of which were disposed of without family permission or knowledge: “For those given to keeping their own garden,” the narrator says, “Here is the cornfield, white and wired by thorns, / old cornstalks, snow, the planted home” (49-50). The “thorns” and the “old cornstalks” are the first clues to the fact that “keeping one's own garden” provides no fruitful harvest, but the poem clarifies further that the cornfield “[s]tands bare against a line of farther field, / unmarked except for wood stakes, charred at tip, / few scratched and named (pencil or nail). / Washed-off. ...” (51-55). Packed in these few lines are the allusions to the ideal of American individualism, or “keeping one's own garden,” as well as the consequences of trying to live out the American ideal of individualism in this situation: the agrarian dream is destroyed, the land is polluted by greedy corporations, and people's unjust deaths never go punished because the community ignores, covers up, or forgets the tragedy. Yet, despite all of this, hope exists which depends on the individual discovering the truth: “Under the mounds, / all the anonymous. / Abel America, calling from under the corn, / Earth, uncover my blood!” (55-8). We need only hear the voices of the dead, the narrator implies, in order for the truth to be uncovered. The narrator ends the poem with addresses to the reader to “Uncover... Contemplate... [and] Voyage” (60, 62, 66), all activities that will move the community toward addressing the wrongs. The narrator encourages the reader to think about what America as a nation will metaphorically harvest from its actions: “Think of your gardens. But here is corn to keep. / Marked pointed sticks to name the crop

beneath. / Sowing is over, harvest is coming ripe” (67-9). The address also implicates the reader in the future harvest, in the outcome predicated on the new knowledge of the past, by asking the individual to think about his or her “garden.”

The use of the garden imagery in this moment, moreover, is used to challenge those writers, such as the forbears of the New Critics, who focused more on myth and symbol rather than the political reality of the moment. Jenny Goodman's enlightening article discusses “The Cornfield” in relation to T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* in order to argue that Rukeyser is engaging with her “expatriate modernist precursors” by appropriating motifs of *The Wasteland* in order to “attac[k] Eliot's conservative cultural agenda by showing its inadequacy in the face of the economic and political crisis she confronts as a member of the younger generation” (277). Goodman points out several parallels between Rukeyser's poem and the first section of Eliot's *The Wasteland*, noting the many “references to 'corpses' and 'gardens’” in “The Cornfield” which “resonate strongly with the imagery of death and the unreachable renewal of springtime in Eliot's famous opening” (278). I would add that when Rukeyser writes, “For those given to keeping their own garden:” (49) and “Think of your gardens, but here is corn to keep” (67), she responds to Eliot by prompting the reader to think about the Depression workers and the fact that America will be defined by how the nation responds to the deaths at Gauley Bridge. In *The Wasteland*, for example, the speaker, upon recognizing an old acquaintance, says, “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?” (71-2). In Rukeyser's poem, however, Rukeyser makes an assertive comment about the garden rather than maintaining the query that Eliot's work presents. No question exists in “The Cornfield” as to whether there will be a harvest, for “harvest is coming ripe” (69). The only question, therefore, is what sort of harvest it will be. The harvest is not some theoretical or mythical dream but a reality that must be

acknowledged. By challenging the New Critics as well as others in order to address the needs of the present, Rukeyser makes people conscientious of the purposely forgotten Gauley Bridge incident and seeks to make it a cultural memory one can no longer ignore. She helps the reader, in other words, to choose a new past and future. As she states in *The Life of Poetry*, “If we are a free people, we are also in a sense free to choose our past, at every moment to choose the tradition we will bring to the future. We invoke a rigorous positive, that will enable us to imagine our choices, and to make them” (20). “The Cornfield” implicitly argues that only by knowing the truth can people truly choose which traditions to “bring to the future” (20).

“The Cornfield” also positions the reader as one defines nationhood through his or her discoveries. Lowney asserts that the sequence of poems “represents an important Popular Front intervention into national identity formation...” as it “positions its readers as active 'witnesses' through its dialogic process of documenting, interrogating, and revealing the discursive practices by which national history is constructed” (“Truths of Outrage” 195, 196). Rukeyser's text, he adds, “insists on her readers' engagement in rethinking the cultural significance of Gauley Bridge. And by dynamically relating individual acts of remembering to the formation of collective memory within 'The Book of the Dead,' Rukeyser transforms a site of geographical and social marginality into a site of memory that contests official interests in forgetting the past” (“Truths of Outrage” 196).<sup>132</sup> The positioning of the reader in “The Cornfield” especially highlights the transformation of the literal site of the covert burials into a “site of memory.” The site itself is unmarked and barren, yet the narrator still asserts the importance of traveling there: “For those

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<sup>132</sup> Lowney clarifies that he uses this term based on Pierre Nora's concept found in his French history entitled *Les Lieux de Mémoire*. Melvin Dixon, in his essay “The Black Writer's Use of Memory,” clarifies Nora's concept very well when he explains that Nora “sees history as static and memory as dynamic” (*History, Memory, and the Literary Left* 18). Dixon clarifies, “Where history, for Nora, is the reconstruction of what no longer exists, memory is life itself, vulnerable to the vicissitudes of our time, nourishing recollection, yet responsive to trends, including censorship” (18).



given to voyages: these roads / discover. Gullies, invade, Where does it go now? / Now turn upstream twenty-five yards. Now road again. / Ask the man on the road. Saying, That cornfield?" (25-8). Significantly, the man on the road, a local able to direct the traveler, knows exactly which cornfield and therefore the story behind it. But those outsiders, "those given to keeping their own garden" (49), must learn that they, too, are instigated in the garden of dead corpses buried in backroads America; they must discover and inculcate that truth, and then change the nation.

The "harvest" of our nation will be evidenced in how the past is handled, what is remembered, and which narratives America utilizes to define itself as a nation as a result of that remembering. Rukeyser's desired harvest is justice for those under the soil, those she refers to as "Abel America, calling from under the corn" (57), and "The Cornfield" in particular implies that through discovering the past, recognizing the American myths as fabrications that hide the oppression of people, and purposefully remembering the Gauley Bridge tragedy, the nation will be made anew.<sup>133</sup> The oppression of American workers is revealed beneath the myth of America as a land of plenty; the iconic farm house with its bountiful crops that feed America is shown to be a fabrication as one discovers that the "planted home" always depended upon labor that people rarely think about, work often done by slaves and other exploited peoples. Now as Americans use the land and its resources for further gain through mining and other endeavors, the once fruitful cornfield is given over to pollution and destruction: it is "white and wired by thorns," from the silica that covers the ground and the weeds that have taken over the field. The "old cornstalks" hint at the once natural harvest, and grave markers allude to the destruction of people that corresponds to the unethical harvesting of earth's resources. The earth again reflects the workers' destruction, but despite all of the death, there can yet be a hopeful outcome, for

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<sup>133</sup> This idea was already highlighted in "Juanita Tinsley" through her personal testimony of finding her "place" and choosing to work for the future, but that poem does not include the reader as active participant. "The Cornfield" includes the reader as a character within the poem itself and leads the reader to self-realization.

there is yet “corn to keep” (67): through the acts of uncovering, remembering, and validating the atrocity, Americans can “harvest” a new nation.

Interspersed throughout “The Cornfield” are also pieces of transcript from the legal hearings, the last of which further encourages the reader to dwell on his or her part in remembering and rectifying of the atrocity. When the lawyer asks George Robinson, “Do they seem to be living in fear / or do they wish to die?,” part of Robinson's answer, which is strategically placed at the end of the poem, is “No, sir; they want to go on. / They want to live as long as they can” (70-1). The placement of Robinson's answer, directly after the narrator's entreaty that the reader and the nation think about sowing and reaping, suggests that the reader's response to the narrator's appeal will determine whether and in what way the men will live on in Americans' memories. In the current moment, the narrator suggests, the reader needs to respond to the need for workers' justice so that they can be compensated and medically treated in order to ensure their best quality of life under the circumstances. But Robinson's answer also resonates across time, prompting the questions of whether these men and women who suffered will be forgotten by America, nameless and buried beneath the soil forever, or whether their stories will be told, making them live on long after their unjust deaths. As Goodman notes, these workers, “sacrificed for America's progress, have the potential to be reborn,” and Rukeyser enables this process by recording their stories (278). The reader, however, must choose to learn and act upon the new-found knowledge.

#### Changing a Nation: The Reader's Response

As discussed in the introduction, Rukeyser was an activist as well as a poet, and she traveled the world to protest for causes in which she believed, traveling even to South Korea in

1975 to protest for poet Kim Chi Ha, who was on death row for his own activism. Kim Chi Ha's words, spoken to the court during the time that he was imprisoned, so fully encompass Rukeyser's own vision as evidenced in her actions and poetry that they are worth noting. Kim Chi Ha says,

I am a poet, and what is the mission of a poet? It is to throw himself among the throng of the wretched, share their pains, groan with them, say in their stead to the world what their suffering is like, and expose the root cause of all evils that are chewing them up. He is also required to undertake the arduous climb to the mountaintop to see a blessed future that lies ahead and tell those who are in despair what he has seen. (qtd. in Gardinier 92)

Rukeyser certainly showed her commitment to all of these goals that Kim Chi Ha claims must be that of the poet. She traveled to West Virginia, throwing herself into the middle of the suffering of the men and women of the region in order to record their testimonies and expose the greed of Union Carbide. Her resulting poetry then brings the reader into that pain and struggle of those suffering so that the reader, too, can be transformed and speak on behalf of the dead. But it is important to realize that this is not the end of her work: hope exists throughout the sequences as well, and Rukeyser especially reflects on the hope through her focus on the potential of the worker, who, like the poet, has the ability to craft and create in order to make a better future and to do so through a healthy relationship between his labor and the land. The laborer, she shows, should be appreciated for his craft, rather than treated as a machine with no soul. And as the poet is known well beyond death because of the created work left behind, so the Gauley Tunnel laborer, too, can be remembered for not just his pain and suffering but also for his contribution to our nation and his creation.

Rukeyser's work leaves absolutely no doubt as to how dangerous and deadly the silica is to the workers and to the extent of the damage done to individuals and families. From Mrs. Jones, who has lost three sons and will soon lose her husband, to Vivian Jones, Mearl Blankenship, and Arthur Peyton who provide their heart-wrenching testimonies outlining their physical and emotional pain as well as the deceit and greed of Union Carbide, death, destruction, pain, anger, and sadness permeate the poetry, especially those poems of personal testimony.<sup>134</sup> But in spite of all of these negative outcomes that are inevitably a part of any tragedy as monumental as that at Gauley Bridge, hope continues to appear through reoccurring reminders of human potential, creativity, strength, and willingness to remember. The potential for a better future and for remembering appears in the last few lines of "Arthur Peyton:"

my face becoming glass  
strong challenged time making me win immortal  
the love a mirror of our valley  
our street our river a deadly glass to hold.  
Now they are feeding me into a steel mill furnace  
O love the stream of glass a stream of living fire. (38-43)

Amid the allusion to his impending death and his objectification by the company, the speaker of the poem, Peyton, still maintains hope through his belief that he will "win immortal" and that the

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<sup>134</sup> The silica literally consumes the workers, making their lives obsolete in light of the power that they make possible. The silica is also violent: "The gangster's / stance with his gun smoking and out is not so / vicious as this commercial field, its hill of glass" ("Alloy" 1-3) and is a "murdering snow" (8). The electroprocessing of steel not only demands that silica be sent through the plant but also "a million men" who are "[f]orced through this crucible" (19). The comment indicates the high number of world-wide deaths caused by work-induced silicosis and the lack of humanity granted to the worker, who becomes formed and packaged through his work, like a machine packages its product. Arthur Peyton recognizes this objectification when he asserts that African-American men were "driven with pick handles" back into the tunnel immediately after the blasts went off, instead of allowing them to wait for the dust to settle ("Arthur Peyton" 32-3) and points to his own objectification, furthermore, when he likens his body to glass, which silica makes possible for everyone: "the long glass street two years, my death to yours /... my face becoming glass" (36-8).

love that he has for the woman he was going to marry will be reflected in the way that the valley, to use Mrs. Jones's words "is witness" to and responds to the tragedy. Peyton also retains a communal ownership over his environment, asserting that the street is "our street" and the river, the source of all the strength and power in the valley, is "our river"; thus even if he no longer has control over his own body, he will maintain a connection to both the products of his labor and to the nature that made it possible. Even as his body is consumed by the silica and metaphorically sacrificed to the "steel mill furnace" that refines and turns the silica into its final product, Peyton believes in his continued existence through the fact that the river, which is "the stream of glass," as well as the fire that consumes him, are "living." This life is best understood through the potential that both the river and processing plant have to make life better through the creation of products and energy for those left behind. Technology and nature, the poem hints, have the potential to be harmonized through their utilization so that they complement each other and highlight human potential rather than destroy human life. Unfortunately Peyton dies because Union Carbide's disregard for human life and desire for quick profit destroyed the harmonious potential between worker, nature, and technology.

The hints of potential at the end of "Arthur Peyton" are more fully explored in the poems "Power" and "The Dam," which celebrate the possibility of the workers' creativity and labor as it could exist, especially in relation to nature. The first stanza of "Power," for example, provides Whitmanesque, sensual imagery to highlight the potential harmony and resulting fertile possibilities between nature and technology as man works with both:

The quick sun brings, exciting mountains warm,  
gay on the landscapers and green designs,  
miracle, yielding the sex up under all the skin,

until the entire body watches the scene with love,  
sees perfect cliffs ranging until the river  
cuts sheer, mapped far below in delicate track,  
surprise of grace, the water running in the sun,  
magnificent flower on the mouth, surprise  
as lovers who look too long on the desired face  
startle to find the remote flesh so warm.  
A day of heat shed on the gorge, a brilliant  
day when loves sees the sun behind its manifestation  
and the disguised marvel under familiar skin. (1-13)

Oneness exists between the “landscapers” with their “green designs” for technology and nature, which, like a lover, gives freely of itself for man's creation and, on this particularly bright day, illuminates the created “steel-bright, light-pointed, ...narrow-waisted towers” (14). Their creation, made possible through the laborer's harvesting of a fecund nature, is described very positively, as a “disguised marvel” (13), a result of an “economy of gift” and of “god's generosity” (16, 17). The sensual imagery alludes to the potential intimacy between nature and man, who, through the right relationship to nature, can craft wonderful inventions like the towers and dam, which, in turn, can reassert man's right relationship to nature as well as expand nature's ability to provide people with life-enhancing gifts.

To highlight the unfortunate reality of the workers, the poem transitions from man's potential relationship to nature to the “power house” that sits beside the towers; yet despite the reality, hope exists, rooted in collective identity and response. The laborers in the power house work in darkness with only a “stuttering” light bulb to make their presence known. Descending

to the work area where men create is likened to traveling to the underworld rather than as a venture in the sun: the narrator claims, “I am indeed Adam unparadiz'd” when traveling down the ladder, and the only words upon the lips of the welder working in the power house are words of death: “A little down, five men were killed in the widening of the tunnel” (79-80). Yet despite the seeming hopelessness, hope exists. Although for some there is “no ladder back” to the earth's surface, the workers' creation is a monument that gives them identity, that literally and figuratively “echoes words, footsteps, testimonies” (84). The creation evidences the workers' existence and labor and thus also their stories and destruction brought about by unsafe labor practices. “The Dam” also echoes this idea, highlighting the workers' value as creators: “They poured the concrete and the columns stood, / laid bare the bedrock, set the cells of steel, / a dam for monument was what they hammered home” (66-8). “The Dam” also reasserts the necessity of the readers' collective response to the tragedy: “Their hands touched mastery: / wait for defense, solid across the world” (72-3). Historically the court battles were not enough to recompense the victims or family members left-behind with enough money to truly survive, but the poem calls for a worldwide response, a defense much more powerful than that at the hearings.

The call to defend the victims of work-induced silicosis is predicated on a connection between all of humanity past and present, as the poem “The Disease” clarifies. In the poem, many life-changing bills are presented to Congress, including “a bill to prevent industrial silicosis” introduced by New York Senator Vito Marcantonio, who historically fought for the victims by calling for a subcommittee hearing to review the evidence against Union Carbide. The bill shows work-induced silicosis as a large-scale issue that actually had, at that time, “one million potential victims” (35) and currently affected “500,000 Americans” who were living with the disease (35, 36). The poem also posits work-induced silicosis as a problem that is both global

and affecting generations. Marcantonio, for example, was impacted by silicosis as a young boy because his father “had silicosis” and died from a gunshot wound inflicted during a protest “at the Anaconda mine” (25, 21). Now Marcantonio, several decades later, seeks justice for his father by seeking change. But even today's reader, decades removed from the historical moment, has a responsibility to the past as well as to the present issue of work-related diseases:

No plane can ever lift us high enough  
to see forgetful countries underneath  
but always now the map and X-ray seem  
resemblant pictures of one living breath  
one country marked by error  
and one air. (46-51)

Misused technology caused the work-induced silicosis, but technology, like the X-ray, can also connect us. Technology can make us realize that we are “of one living breath” and a nation needing to rectify the errors of the past, for we are “one country” that has been in “error” in the response to work-induced sickness, as well as one country that breathes “one air,” and therefore will, as a whole, be affected by whether the victims are remembered or forgotten.

The final poem, “The Book of the Dead,” emphasizes the reader’s new ability and responsibility to act on the truth learned through journeying and discovering. The first three lines imply a sense of becoming or change: “These roads will take you into your own country. / Seasons and maps coming where this road comes / into a landscape mirrored in these men” (1-3). Unlike the first poem, in which the journeyer will consult a map, now the “maps” will be “coming”—and, it is implied, we are the creator of those new maps. Not only this, but the mapping of the physical terrain cannot be completed without a full awareness of those men



whose work created the landscape and its roadways, for the land is “mirrored” in the men who work it. The narrator asserts the need to continue rethinking, “remeasuring,” uncovering, and professing history as well as creating America anew based on that discovery: “and you young, you who finishing the poem / wish new perfection and begin to make; / you men of fact, measure our times again. / These are our strength, who strike against history” (88-91). Now that the reader has journeyed into history and to the present Gauley Bridge, has uncovered what powerful corporations and nostalgia obscure, and has been transformed, he or she is ready to create a new, more equitable America by “striking against” a false history that denies or devalues the creative work, potential, and humanity of the laborer.

The history one is encouraged to “strike against” is that earlier described in “West Virginia,” the history of denying the name, humanity, and contribution of the servant and worker, and of war, slavery, and greed's destruction of nature and the laborer. Readers must also protect themselves from that which becomes so familiar and comfortable that it dulls the senses and understanding so that the readers become participants in the perpetuation of a false history:

Half-memories absorb us, and our ritual world  
carries its history in familiar eyes,  
planted in flesh it signifies its music  
  
in minds which turn to sleep and memory,  
in music knowing all the shimmering names,  
the spear, the castle, and the rose. (61-66)

The “half memory” indicates only a partial remembering of history, and “the spear, the castle, [and] the rose,” allude to a romanticized or unrealistic view of history (66). Instead Rukeyser encourages us to know a history of the flesh: “But planted in our flesh these valleys stand, /

everywhere we begin to know the illness, / are forced up, and our times confirm us all” (67-9).

The reader is connected to the people of history through the connection to physical place, which is internalized through the discovery of Rukeyser's text and its metaphysical journey.

Discovering the hidden history behind the tunnel in West Virginia, one finds that the “illness” includes hiding the reality behind fancy, romantic rhetoric of the past or choosing to ignore or forget people's suffering.

## Conclusion

In speaking of Rukeyser's poetics, Jane Cooper points out that Rukeyser “saw herself less as one who protests than as one who makes,” and quotes, then, from Rukeyser’s poem “Wherever”: “Wherever / we protest / we will go planting // wherever / I walk / I will make” (qtd. in Cooper 12). When Rukeyser imagined what being an American could be like, it meant “reaching out, relationship, the dissolving of boundaries, speaking, touching, one world” (Cooper 12). Certainly we see this desire for relationship, for oneness and wholeness, in Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, even though it was written early on in her poetic career. In the work the “boundaries” of past, present, and future are dissolved as the present reader becomes aware of his or her responsibility to both, a responsibility to speak the truth about the past and to act, or to make, the future, to bring about a bountiful harvest based on what one is sowing in the present moment. We also see the potential that exists in the relationship between worker and nature to create life-enhancing achievements without degrading either the laborer or the land.

*The Book of the Dead* prompts us to recognize the laborers who unnecessarily died in the name of progress and be transformed into people who choose not to deny but to recognize the atrocities in America's history, communicate them, and make sure that others do not suffer the

same. The text connects the disregard of workers at Gauley Bridge and the perpetual cycle of subjugation of the lower-classed worker, the slave, the African American, or other racialized, classed, or gendered “others” throughout America's history. Even more specifically, the text positions the “other” in relation to wilderness in a way that the long-standing myths of the white, male wilderness explorer obscures: Rukeyser revises our national dominate narratives of discovery by showing that the land was not discovered by those explorers that history overwhelmingly recognizes but by the earlier, original inhabitants. Both the Native American, who was displaced from their homelands, and the slave, forced to work and change the landscape, are highlighted as people who others ignore but whose marks on our landscape cannot be denied. Subjugation did not end, moreover, but only changed form as the African-American laborer died continuing to work the earth and change the landscape in remote areas like Gauley Bridge. By highlighting these connections and calling for a radical change in the way that the worker is valued in society, Rukeyser joins the many others before and after her that advocated for justice, and, even more specifically, for environmental justice. Yet despite the injustice, Rukeyser maintains a vision of hope, explored through what a beneficial relationship between worker and land could be, a relationship in which the fecundity of nature overflows and the worker cultivates it through his artistry and engineering, making technology that undergirds nature's bounty as well as enhances people's lives.

Although the dominant myths and national narratives and histories perpetuate cycles of abuse and disregard of humanity through their obscuration of wrongdoing, *The Book of the Dead* shows that we can change this cycle by telling the stories of those who have suffered, celebrating their abilities, and recognizing their invaluable contributions, a sacrifice that cost so many their lives. Rukeyser's vision of potential unity between worker and land as well as nature and

technology holds wonderful possibilities for how we think of and associate with the American wilderness. What pictures exist of the Gauley Tunnel project show an area in which the immediately surrounding wilderness is destroyed through clear-cutting. Stumps of trees litter the background of images as workmen position themselves in front of the tunnel that they are excavating. The tunnel project itself also shows the tremendous power that the working man can exert over nature and wilderness, as well as the power wielded through numbers. When justice is given to those workers, Rukeyser's work implies, there exists the potential of no longer having to live in a binary of man vs. wilderness; thus the dichotomy of wilderness and civilization begins to break down, as well as the myths of wilderness that continuously reinforce that dichotomy. Now a fecund nature continuously fuels the imagination as well as completes man's inventions. Rather than being destroyed by progress and civilization, now wilderness is shown to be integrally necessary to that progress. Also, now we see that it is not just the white male sojourner and explorer that can develop and maintain an intimate relationship with the natural world but the African-American laborer who is using his abilities to create technological wonders that improve all of our lives. And with the breakdown of the dichotomies and myths as well as the new symbiotic relationship between nature and worker, the nation is freer to create and carry new identities of Americanism as connected to wilderness into the future. As those who for too long were denied freedom find in nature not only a freedom from oppression but a freedom that inspires creativity and craft. Wilderness, for the first time, has the potential of being a symbol of freedom for all Americans

## Conclusion

When I was recently looking for information that may help me in my studies of women and the wilderness in the nineteenth century, I was surprised to discover the large number of contemporary texts that have to do with this topic. Found under the category of travel, nonfiction, and fiction, books about women in or women and the wilderness have continued to multiply rapidly since the 1970s. Today, there are backpacking guides especially written for women to build their confidence and enthusiasm for their own ventures into the woods. Women of all ages, like fifty-nine-year-old Leslie Maas, are taking to the Appalachian trail or other adventure routes and writing about their experiences.<sup>135</sup> In 1998, the Women's Wilderness Institute was founded, which provides women of all ages, but especially teenage women, the opportunity to have wilderness adventures and learn wilderness survival skills. It appears today that American women have finally claimed with gusto the roles of traveler, adventurer, and sojourner that for so long in American history were overwhelmingly only available to men.<sup>136</sup>

Women, however, desired to claim some of those freedoms in the wilderness long before today's texts would show their unhindered ability to do so. This desire for wilderness adventure is found in the fictional Elizabeth Temple, who highlights possibilities for American femininity, as well as in the historical adventurer Isabella Bird, who lived out many of her hopes for wilderness exploration. As both the fictional and real women show, women had to negotiate socially sanctioned notions of femininity and gender roles with their own individual desires, making their adventures constantly mediated through these social expectations. These women did not seek to undermine the established social hierarchy but rather to maintain their own social

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<sup>135</sup> When Leslie Maas was fifty-nine, she began hiking the Appalachian Trail. In 2005 she published *In Beauty May She Walk: Hiking the Appalachian Trail at 60*, a recounting of her experience.

<sup>136</sup> In addition, women are also breaking out of these categories by often partaking in their adventures as a part of a group of women, such as those women who participate in the Women's Wilderness Institute.

standing while simultaneously garnering the freedom that was associated with the wilderness and freely accessed by white men. Under the protection of the power of their respectable femininity, therefore, as well as often the protection, or at least the sound advice, of the gentlemen present in their lives, these women accessed the outdoors, enjoying activities as diverse as horseback riding, turkey shoots, climbing mountains, and rounding cattle.

The character Elizabeth Temple from *The Pioneers* represents a possibility of what American femininity could become in the wilderness and on the frontier. Her femininity takes into account the need to be able to traverse a rugged and harsh landscape, yet she remains fully modest, chaste, and pious while also being active, curious, and brave, therefore opposing the sickly, passive femininity espoused in England and the US during the early nineteenth century. Had Elizabeth's character taken a stronger hold on Americans' imaginations and had she been more fully embraced as the ideal woman of the time, perhaps the later femininity of the nineteenth century would have been more balanced between the home and the wilderness rather than between the home and garden, which were the spheres to which the “angel of the house” was relegated. Unfortunately, Elizabeth Temple did not fascinate Americans as much as Cooper's backwoodsman Natty Bumppo, who has become one of many iconic figures representing the American male wilderness traveler, adventurer, and sojourner.

The real life Isabella Bird, on the other hand, shows that some women achieved their desires and found new identities through their wilderness ventures yet had to portray these experiences through careful representations of self. Although growing up in and raised to adhere to the “angel of the house” mentality of the nineteenth century, Bird longed for the freedom found only outside of her small sphere and found that her illness and its socially acceptable cure of experiencing “a change of air” could help her achieve her desire for travel, adventure, and

solitude. Her exhilarating experiences of climbing volcanoes in Hawaii and a mountain in Colorado encouraged her future travels because she discovered that she could challenge her own physical limitations and attain the pinnacle view that so few people were privy to see. We may also surmise that both her bravery as a traveler and adventurer as well as her and other women's introduction into the Royal Geographical Society for their achievements opened the way for more women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to also venture into the outdoors.

The desires and adventures of women like Isabella Bird counter the majority of fantasies of women of the nineteenth century who, as Annette Kolodny argues, fantasized about gardens and homes. In *The Land Before Her* Kolodny argues that women were limited not only by society but also by their own individual abilities to view and shape themselves outside of society's expectations. As Kolodny states, "...it would be naïve to expect that the first development of women's frontier fantasies could have given rise to radically unprecedented shapes or patterns. The forms a fantasy may take, after all, are constrained by what the culture makes available to imagination" (12). Because of their already small sphere, women therefore often fantasized about that which was achievable, such as gardens, rather than about that which they would most likely never do, such as conquering mountains. For most women of the nineteenth century, climbing a mountain or taking all-day horseback rides to view the countryside was not an attainable goal; neither was becoming a cowhand or trading places with one's servant just to be philanthropic. In fact, traveling itself was most often out of the question. Kolodny notes that "[d]uring the formative years traced [in her study], women's fantasies about the west took shape within a culture in which men's fantasies had already attained the status of cultural myth and at a time when woman's sphere was being progressively delimited to home and family" (12). Yet women like Elizabeth Temple and Isabella Bird could travel and fantasize

about their experiences because of their upper-class social standing and the money which accompanies that position. These women had the power to dream themselves into the myths of the wilderness that were already circulating and then, through their privilege, move those desires toward reality. There still existed clear limitations and social expectations that these women had to adhere to or circumvent in socially respectable ways, but their responses to both the landscape and the wilderness myth show that some women were able to grasp the freedoms from society or sense of independence associated with the rugged outdoors.

Although constricting social spheres limited women's lives, including their own dreams and desires, some refused to fit the mold and be defined by social constrictions. The possibilities of womanhood lived out in the wilderness, as reflected in characters like Elizabeth Temple, and the real life experiences of women adventurers like Isabella Bird pave the way for other women to also experience the outdoors by breaking down social and physical barriers preventing them from fully experiencing nature. One could say that women eventually became able to fantasize about the wilderness experiences that men had because of the changes in society that made it socially acceptable and physically possible to experience more. For example, according to Schrepfer, women began climbing mountains for sport as early as men in the 1830s (68), a fact which shows their desire for adventure, but not until 1863 was the first women's-founded Alpine Club in the United States formed (69), indicating that it took several decades for the sport to become an activity that women could embrace without much fear of social backlash. The women in this group, in fact, were very adventuresome and active, for they “made nineteen ascents of the highest peaks of the eastern United States” in the “next several years” (69).<sup>137</sup> Women were further encouraged to experience and tell stories of their wilderness adventures because

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<sup>137</sup> Schrepfer says that the women's club, the Alpine Club of Williamstown, Massachusetts, was “perhaps the first such club in the United States” (69). I can find no evidence of any earlier formed women's climbing club.



travelogues were growing in popularity, the presence of women in the literary field was becoming more socially accepted, and courageous women like those in the first women's alpine clubs made official their love of the outdoors and proved over and over their ability to navigate the wild (Schrepfer 69).

As more women took advantage of the growing acceptability of women's wilderness adventures, even sojourns or ventures without men, such as those Bird enjoyed but had to retell with great care in her narratives, became permissible. Whereas Elizabeth Temple's decision to go with only her friend Louisa on a walk up Mount Vision resulted in needing to be saved by the hero Natty Bumppo in Cooper's 1823 *The Pioneers*, according to Schrepfer, by 1889, the answer to the question of whether a woman can “tramp alone” began to depend more on the ability of the woman than on social acceptability (72). Schrepfer also notes that in 1893 “Boston lawyer Philip Abbot called the Alps a 'feminine Utopia,' where ladies thought 'nothing of going unattended,' wore knickerbockers, and engaged men in conversation without having been introduced” (72). The description of these women is reminiscent of Bird, whose Hawaiian riding outfit closely resembled bloomers, who preferred exploring alone and was annoyed when most men accompanied her, and who thought nothing of speaking to those she met during her travels. Thus again I assert that it was brave individuals with pluck like that of Elizabeth Temple and Isabella Bird that challenged society's standard of acceptability, encouraging other women's entrance into a male-dominated wilderness.

Yet the consequence of white women carving out a place for themselves in the wilderness without highlighting and fighting against the racism and classism that kept minorities and those of lower social standing from also enjoying the same space makes those women complicit with the racist, classist social hierarchy. These women do not debunk the growing popularity of the

wilderness myth, which stars the white, male sojourner and adventurer, but rather claim a small piece of that myth for themselves, making it possible for the white, female sojourner and adventurer to also exist within the physical wilderness space if not in the American imagination. Playing into rather than debunking the wilderness myth obscured the racism, genocide, slavery, and indentured servitude that the myth and its subsequent Manifest Destiny undergirded and fueled. The relatively privileged white women who published travel musings, therefore, fill in some of the missing pieces of our history but still leave much out because their position is still one of privilege and they seek not to undermine the social hierarchy but claim their own freedoms from within it.

Although my study of upper-class, white women travelers, characters, and authors highlights some women's changing responses to wilderness and shifts in conventional thinking concerning women and wilderness, it also makes evident the need to explore the wilderness experiences of women and men of other races and classes. Private letters and journals, newspaper articles, or other historical documents can begin to uncover the reality of minorities and the working class who subdued the wilderness to build railroads, followed the North Star through the wilderness to freedom, settled in the west, fought for their homelands and ways of life, or experienced the wilderness in other ways, but their stories are not as readily uncovered or available as those of upper-class white women who wrote as they traveled with the intent to publish. Also, because slaves, the working-class poor, and Native Americans were often illiterate or limited by language or other barriers, fewer documents about their wilderness experiences have been discovered, making it necessary to explore what is available and also piece together some of their experiences from new readings of texts by the dominating classes.<sup>138</sup> Some Native

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<sup>138</sup> There is a growing body of scholarship, however, which explores literacy among African Americans, and we are finding that more slaves knew how to read than what we previously thought. For further reading on African-

Americans, for example, do share their relationship to the land, including Blackhawk who dictated his *Autobiography of Ma-Ka-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak, or Black Hawk*; Standing Bear, whose speeches leave us with a lasting impression of his people's love for the land; and, in the early twentieth century, Zitkala-Să, whose *American Indian Stories* includes a memoir of her childhood. We need more study of existing texts and more discovery of other Native American experiences, but we also need to explore texts like Isabella Bird's from a post-colonial and deconstructionist perspective to recognize how those texts often normalize oppression, obscure others' experiences, and reinforce the dominant narratives and myths that continue to silence history's many other voices so that we can piece together some of the lost Native American experiences of wilderness.

We must also continue to explore the African-American experiences of nature, which are often very different than those of the upper class women in my study because the African-American experiences are influenced and most often limited by the evils of slavery and its lasting oppression and racism. As Abel Meeropol's poem "Strange Fruit" undeniably makes clear, the brutal lynching and torture of African Americans, which took place well beyond the end of slavery, often had the backdrop of a beautiful pastoral landscape, where the "[s]cent of magnolias, sweet and fresh" was replaced with the "sudden smell of burning flesh" (7, 8) and the trees produced the "strange fruit" of destroyed human beings. For those escaping the bonds of slavery in the nineteenth century, moreover, the wilderness was both a refuge as well as a lonely, scary place. The dense foliage of the forests offered its protective covering, the land provided

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American literacy in the nineteenth century, see Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (London: Duke UP, 2002). See also Katherine Clay Bassard, "Gender and Genre: Black Women's Autobiography and the Ideology of Literacy," *African American Review* 26.1 (1992): 119-129, for a discussion of how social position affects the ability of African-American women writers of the nineteenth century, such as Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote, and Jarena Lee, to adopt or embrace "the ideology of literacy, freedom, and economic advancement" (119), which equates literacy with power.

sustenance, and the North Star offered guidance through the terrain, but the slave's journey through the wilderness to freedom was far from the experience we associate with the lone figure in the wilderness joyfully living off the land and reveling in his solitude.

A small yet growing body of scholarship does exist, however, which explores African-American traveling nineteenth-century female itinerant preachers like Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote, Jarena Lee, and others who show us both bravery and fortitude in the face of racism and slavery. Jarena Lee, for example, writes in her memoir that one year she traveled “two thousand three hundred and twenty-five miles, and preached one hundred and seventy-eight sermons” across the country (J. Lee 51). She not only shared the gospel with her own race but with white slave-owners and Native Americans. Her writing shows us an example of an exceptional working-class African-American woman's experience of the country. Although her travels are not focused on wilderness but rather on the conversion of souls, the sheer amount of traveling, as well as her willingness and ability to tread even onto the slave plantations and Native American lands deserves closer scrutiny, especially to help us discover more about how Christianity empowered the African-American woman to travel as freely as—or even more freely than—women like Isabella Bird.<sup>139</sup>

African-Americans who were free, however, were still often barred from the wilderness experiences in which the white women of my study so freely engaged, and rarely did they write about their experiences. One exception is the journals of free-born Charlotte Forten Grimké, an abolitionist and teacher whose enthusiasm for nature comes out in her writing. She, unlike many

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<sup>139</sup> For more information about Jarena Lee, see Katherine Clay Bassard's chapter in *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African-American Women's Writings* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999); see also Carla Peterson, *“Doers of the Word”: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), which includes discussion of female itinerant preachers including Jarena Lee. See Delores S. Williams, “Visions, Inner Voices, Apparitions, and Defiance in Nineteenth-Century Black Women's Narratives,” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 21.1/2 (1993): 81-9, for an exploration of how the spiritual lives of Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw contributed to their courage to enter into the public realm.

of her people, had the freedom to wait “half the afternoon on the roof of the house in eager expectation” of an eclipse (2) or, on the Sabbath day, to walk freely in Harmony Grove and revel in the joy of “perfect silence” that allowed her to “commune with Nature and with Nature's God” (3), but Grimké, because she was black, was still very limited in her ability to experience nature outside of her well-traveled area. In general, a black woman would not experience the safety that Isabella Bird felt when traveling alone in the wilderness, for her color heightened her chances of becoming a target of rape and traveling alone would put her in great danger of being kidnapped into slavery. And on another level, because of racism, Grimké was also barred from many of those nature experiences in which white women and men were free to participate. Grimké could experience nature from her roof and on her walks, for example, but because she was black she was barred from seeing popular nature tourist attractions of her time. Despite having greater freedom than many, Grimké shows us how racism of her time limited and influenced the nature experiences of free upper-class African Americans.

Because many poor or working-class African-Americans never wrote about their nature experiences, texts like Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* become important to piece together the African American laborer's experiences with wilderness. By creating a text to make the nation hear their voices, Rukeyser sought to uplift the African-American and other laboring poor who were dying because of unfair labor practices at Gauley Bridge, West Virginia.

Rukeyser's text captures some of the complexity of the African American laborer's relationship to the land throughout our history by the fact that the destroyed body of the laborer is connected to the destruction of the earth in which they were forced to work and die. She shows that the slavery of the past, in other words, continues in the destruction of the African-American worker in the present, and the laborer is still not yet free to truly experience nature. But by juxtaposing

this reality to a vision of hope, that the laborer can be valued for his ingenuity and creativity and that a mutually-beneficial relationship between nature and worker can exist, Rukeyser highlights new relationships to wilderness that could come to fruition in an egalitarian society.

We need to continue to explore the experiences of the Native American, African-American, and other minorities so that more of their stories and experiences become part and parcel of what we consider our national narratives and so the other experiences of wilderness are identified and validated as a part of our history. Writers who research the historical experiences of the poor, enslaved, or minorities and write those experiences into today's historical fiction form an integral part of this exploration. For example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* provides readers with a more nuanced understanding of how the wilderness influenced the African-American slave experience: more specifically, the text highlights how the wilderness functioned as a sort of refuge and place of spiritual renewal for the slaves as the characters meet in the clearing in the woods to worship and have meetings under the leadership of a matriarch figure. Contemporary Native American writers are also sharing their stories of struggle and displacement, adding to both our understanding of different Native people's relationships to the land as well as to our understanding of history. Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*, for example, shares the story of Native American people displaced and fragmented through a long history of abuse and genocide as seen through the experiences and stories of characters fighting against the James Bay Hydroelectric Project of the 1970s and 80s. Hogan takes a more recent historical example of Native American displacement, in other words, in order to also highlight the long history of Native American struggles for their land and livelihoods. The text also shows the Native American characters' connection to the land when the women characters travel through the wilderness to where they will eventually reside as they protest the hydroelectric project. As they travel through the

wilderness, a sense of timelessness envelopes them and the main character Angel grows spiritually in connection to the earth as she learns to harvest the power of her dreams as generations of her people did before her.

The Native American and African American experiences of wilderness, which are often rooted in community and communal identity, are valid and important to study and add to our growing understanding of people's relationship to wilderness. These experiences, for example, show that there is no one single master narrative of man's relationship to wilderness to be discovered historically. The communal experiences also show that the model of the white sojourning man of the wilderness, rather than being the most historically accurate model of interaction with nature, is more an anomaly than the norm. By integrating the stories written by Morrison, Hogan, and others of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into our understanding of history, the myth of the wilderness, which excludes so many people's experiences yet still maintains such a strong grip on the American imagination, begins to be replaced. And not only do we need to explore the realities of minority women but also those of different classes and of men of color so that the influences of race, class, and gender on one's wilderness experience can be more fully delineated. My dissertation only begins to scratch the surface of what needs to be explored in relation to the American wilderness experience, and my hope is that people with interest in ecocriticism, ecofeminism, environmental justice, and history will begin to explore more texts from all centuries in order to articulate a fuller experience of wilderness as we can see it through American literature and letters, and that, through this exploration, the voices of those lost and forgotten will be uncovered and recovered, validated, and integrated into our historical understanding.

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