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## “Terrible in its Beauty, Terrible in its Indifference”: Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Sally Mann’s Southern Landscapes

Laura Keller

College of William and Mary - Arts & Sciences, [laura.anne.keller@gmail.com](mailto:laura.anne.keller@gmail.com)

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“Terrible in its Beauty, Terrible in its Indifference”: Postcolonial Ecocriticism and  
Sally Mann’s Southern Landscapes

Laura Keller

Richmond, VA

B.A., James Madison University, 2010

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# APPROVAL PAGE

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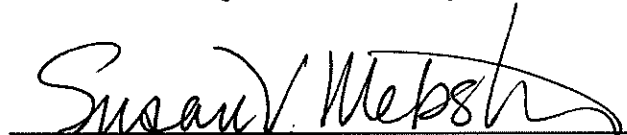
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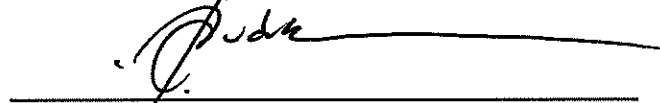
Approved by the Committee April 2018

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Committee Chair

Ralph H. Wark Associate Professor Alan C. Braddock, Art History and American Studies  
College of William & Mary

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Jane W. Mahoney Professor Susan V. Webster, Art History and American Studies

College of William & Mary

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Lecturer Eliot Dudik, Art History

College of William & Mary

## ABSTRACT

Sally Mann (1951- ) has spent forty years photographing scenes in the American South, including domestic scenes, landscapes, and portraits. Although scholars generally interpret her work as a reflection of the region's history of violence and oppression, my research will consider her work through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism. In her art and writing, Mann portrays the land as an indifferent witness to history, a force intertwined with humanity, lending matter for human lives and reclaiming it after death. However, she also describes the way the environment interferes with her the antiquated technology she uses, creating dramatic flaws that imbue the landscapes with emotion absent from the scenes themselves. My research offers new perspectives on Mann's body of work, especially the way she grants agency to the environment, thereby giving a voice to silent ecologies or silenced histories.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, Robert Gantt Keller, who would have loved the part about the battlefields.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

“The earth doesn’t care where a death occurs. Its job is to efface and renew itself. It’s the artist who, by coming in and writing about it or painting it or taking a photograph of it, makes that earth powerful and creates death’s memory. Because the land isn’t going to remember by itself, but the artist will.”

–Sally Mann<sup>1</sup>

“The repertoire of the Southern artist has long included the place, the past, family, death, and dosages of romance that would be fatal to most contemporary artists. But the stage on which these are played out is always the Southern landscape, terrible in its beauty, terrible in its indifference. “

-Sally Mann<sup>2</sup>

In a yellowed and faded photograph (Fig. 1), roots emerge from a fog like skeleton arms, reaching across to one another, merging in a jumble of limbs, then disappearing into the haze. The image appears to be from another time, an unsettling glimpse into the past. The camera focuses on the bone-like roots with the trees out of focus, almost fading away into the mist. The roots seem intent on ensnaring anyone who tries to travel through, ready to pull them into the fog and consume trespassers. The feeling of humidity almost seeps from the surface, and the air looks heavy and damp. The leaves blur into a dark cloud wrapped around a tree trunk. The darkened corners and warped trees suggest that the viewer is peering back in time. The photo, however, conveys emotions and visual components that were not present at the moment it was captured. Describing the circumstances in which she captured the image, however, photographer Sally Mann explains that she took the photo on a warm, clear night in Louisiana in 1998, a long exposure that took an hour, where gentle waves lapping against the tree roots blurred into a fog.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *What Remains: The Life and Work of Sally Mann*, directed by Steven Cantor, (Zeitgeist Films, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Sally Mann, *Deep South* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2009), 52.

<sup>3</sup> Sally Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2015), 226.

For more than twenty years, Mann has photographed landscapes in the American South, adding emotion, history, darkness, and violence to her artwork through her technique. Having mastered outmoded technology, she experiments with levels of expressive carelessness, allowing flaws at different steps in the photographic process. Since the 1990s, press coverage and exhibitions have focused on Mann's series about her children, *Immediate Family*, but those photos represent less than a decade of Mann's forty-year artistic career. In projects undertaken since 2010, Mann has worked to shape the perception of her career to demonstrate that the family photos represent a small portion of her portfolio. She published a memoir and worked with two museums to develop exhibitions representing her entire career, dedicating the majority of the projects to material unrelated to *Immediate Family*, especially her landscapes. With these endeavors, Mann helps mold her photographic legacy by predisposing the future interpretation of her work. In response to these sources and in combination with increasing awareness of environmental issues, more scholars have begun to analyze the role of nature in her work rather than focusing on history and memory alone.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis began as a paper for Alan C. Braddock's Fall 2012 seminar, "Visual Politics of Nature," a course on ecocritical approaches in art history.<sup>5</sup> In the field of ecocriticism, scholars assess the way literature and the visual arts represent the environment, especially the way culture shapes these representations. This thesis considers Mann's landscape photography through a sub-category of ecocriticism, the emerging field of postcolonial ecocriticism.

Postcolonial ecocritics consider environmental issues as part of a larger set of problems

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<sup>4</sup> Ayelet Carmi, "Sally Mann's American Vision of the Land." *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 17, December 2017, <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/carmi.pdf>, 6-10.

<sup>5</sup> Alan C. Braddock, "Visual Politics of Nature," The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA, Fall 2012.

resulting from imperialism, including racial oppression.<sup>6</sup> I argue that Mann's art illustrates the relationship between humans and the environment in three ways that offer both problems and promising approaches for postcolonial ecocritical discourse, representing the environment as a repository for contested histories, a force interwoven with humanity, and an artistic collaborator.

Of the numerous sources on Mann's photos, few book-length publications approach her work objectively or focus on her landscapes; this thesis cites a variety of sources including Mann's monographs, exhibition catalogs, and press coverage. However, one must bear in mind that galleries promote Mann to sell her work and museums publish catalogs to elevate the reputation of their collections. Many sources emphasize her family photos or consider her photography in combination with other artists. Mann has published monographs since the 1980s, an important way she shapes the understanding of her art. As a living artist, Mann controls the photographs she publishes, exhibits, or sells, and also influences the discourse surrounding the work in the way she describes it. The galleries, museums, writers, and press reference her quotes and books to inform their interpretations of her work.

Unfortunately, the two books discussing Mann's landscapes offer little academic analysis. In *Sally Mann: Deep South/Battlefields*, Erik Stephan discusses Mann's two most important landscape series for an exhibition at the Städtische Museen Jena, German museum. The text provides the same information as Sally Mann's books, but with a German translation.<sup>7</sup> In a limited edition book for 21st Editions, John Stauffer presents new works by Sally Mann from *Mother Land* and *Deep South*, but the text does not offer critical analysis. The book features eleven images printed with platinum, palladium, and gold, with three loose prints in a separate

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26.

<sup>7</sup> Erik Stephan, *Sally Mann: Deep South/Battlefields*, (Jena: Städtische Museen Jena, 2007).

portfolio, so Stauffer provides historical background on the locations to give context to the images.<sup>8</sup> Stauffer, a professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, argues that Mann's photographs "offer a way to redeem the sins of the past and break through the impasse that plagues American culture." He suggests that Mann undermines the Lost Cause tradition by addressing slavery and lynching in her photography.<sup>9</sup>

In the first thematic retrospective catalog and exhibition about Mann's career, *Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit* published in 2010, John Ravenal asserts that human body and human spirit are the threads uniting the numerous and varied series of photographs; this analysis extends to the unpopulated landscapes of Mann's American Civil War battlefields in the *Last Measure* series. Ravenal noted the overarching theme of death in the photos of the body farm and battlefields, and also in the images of her children and husband. The exhibition catalog explores themes of mortality and life after death in photographs throughout Mann's career, including her landscapes. In chapter two, I discuss the interpretation of her landscapes as a meditation on the spirits of those who died in that location rather than as a representation of the environment itself.<sup>10</sup>

In a retrospective at the National Gallery of Art in 2018, curators Sarah Greenough and Sarah Kennel consider the breadth of Mann's career, from the family photos to new works on the subject of race. They contributed essays, alongside Drew Gilpin Faust, Hilton Als, and Malcolm Daniel, examining works transferred to the National Gallery of Art from the Corcoran Museum of Art. The essays each focus on a different theme: the family, the land, race, and technique. These essays provide an overview of Mann's career, again with the intention to

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<sup>8</sup> John Stauffer, *Southern Landscape* (Cape Cod, Massachusetts: 21st Editions, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Stauffer, *Southern Landscape*, 9-11.

<sup>10</sup> Ravenal, Strauss, and Tucker, *Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit*.

promote her career.<sup>11</sup> Although the catalog provides a thorough analysis of the photographs and themes in the exhibition, it omits projects like the body farm that fall outside of the narrative they weave.

In one academic text, *Rooting Memory, Rooting Place: Regionalism in the Twenty-First-Century American South*, Christopher Lloyd devotes a chapter to Mann's landscape photography, using her art to argue that Southern identity continues to play a substantial role in literature and art.<sup>12</sup> In a second scholarly text published in *The Journal of Art Historiography* as a preview of a forthcoming book on Sally Mann, Ayelet Carmi argues that gender and regional stereotypes influence the perception of Mann's importance as an American landscape photographer. She assesses criticism of Mann's photography, noting the characterization of Mann as a regional artist rather than an American artist. She also asserts that catalogs and press have downplayed Mann's talent by gendering her photos, especially when attributing her transition to landscapes as a result of her kids growing up, referring to the idea of "mother earth" in her work, and emphasizing emotion over content in her photography. Carmi suggests that Mann's landscapes challenge the characterization of Ansel Adams as an objective or scientific photographer by encouraging the viewer to question reality, understand that the land is ever-changing, and to use imagination when looking at the land. She also addresses the idea that landscapes are a cultural representation, not an objective art form. She compares the way Mann conveys the story of Emmett Till through landscape to other artists who have explored his murder through portraiture, touching on the theme of race in Mann's memoir.<sup>13</sup>

Although Mann has created several projects that look beyond Southern imagery, most of

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<sup>11</sup> Mann, Greenough, Kennel, Als, Daniel, and Faust, *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings*

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Lloyd, *Rooting Memory, Rooting Place: Regionalism in the Twenty-First-Century American South* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan US, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Carmi, "Sally Mann's American Vision of the Land," 1, 2, 6, 10, 11, 13, 15, 21, 24, 25, 26.

her books, interviews, press releases, and subsequent press coverage still emphasize the importance of the American South to her career. For example, she has photographed areas in Mexico as part of two projects with other artists and writers, and neither series achieved significant press coverage compared to the rest of Mann's career. The artist also created large-scale portraits of her family, but the images relate to the larger narrative of her life in the South. The diminished importance of non-Southern topics in her retrospectives and memoir could be attributed to the way Mann has chosen to brand herself as an artist or it could be due to the success of her projects with regional subjects. Mann traveled extensively during her early adulthood, spending a year abroad with her husband during college. She also lived in Mexico for a summer after graduating from high school.<sup>14</sup> Museums and galleries rarely show her photos of Mexico, perhaps to create a more cohesive narrative. She has built a brand around her Southernness, weaving the regional characteristics of her heritage, upbringing, subject matter, and technique together to create her photographs, catalogs, exhibitions, and memoir.

First, Mann depicts the land as an indifferent witness to history and a symbol for events that took place in the location photographed. Mann encourages this interpretation in her books and interviews, so writers have adopted it for use in catalogs and press coverage. In chapter two, I begin with a brief biography, summarizing Mann's body of work to offer context for my arguments. Within her career, I mark two major shifts in her work, when she begins photographing the landscape in 1994, discussed in chapter two, and when she begins exploring the idea of death in 1999, discussed in chapter three. Chapter two emphasizes the role of history and the land in Mann's life and work. At the end of the chapter, I discuss the most common interpretation of Mann's landscapes, that her Southern landscapes represent the

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<sup>14</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A memoir with photographs*, 43.

region's history of violence and oppression. She photographs locations connected to slavery or lynching, for example, to try to reconcile the physical appearance of a place with its violent history.<sup>15</sup> I describe this idea as expressed in a photo of the ruins of a sugar mill in Louisiana from her series *Deep South*. In chapter two, I do not suggest that Mann avoids colonialist approaches altogether. Her photography, especially the image of ruins, fits within a tradition of the picturesque that idealizes agrarian society and glosses over slavery. She attempts to convey the angst she feels in a location when considering the violence that took place there, but her picturesque sentimentality falls short of confronting postcolonial oppression directly. The photo of the ruins, and *Deep South* as a whole, raises questions of alterity, both environmental and racial, especially when represented by an elite, white artist.<sup>16</sup>

Second, she represents the land as inseparable from humans, with nature reclaiming the dead to nourish other life forms in two series exploring the theme of death, *Matter Lent* and *December 8, 2000*. Mann expresses these ideas in her book and exhibition, *What Remains*. In Chapter 3, "Matter Lender," I discuss ecocritical approaches to Mann's art, especially the need to question the idea of nature as a cultural construct. I consider Mann's photographs of dead bodies to be, in part, an illustration of the ecocritical idea of mesh, or interconnection among all

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<sup>15</sup> Ayelet Carmi, "Sally Mann's American Vision of the Land," *Journal of Art Historiography* (December 2017), <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/carmi.pdf>, 23; Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* Rob Nixon, eds. ProQuest (Firm) and C. S. ProQuest (Cambridge, Mass.; Cambridge, MA: Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 245; John B. Ravenal, David Levi Strauss, and Anne Tucker, *Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit* (Richmond, Va; New York, NY: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; Aperture Foundation, 2011), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1986, 63-73; John Conron, *American Picturesque*, University Park, Pa: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000, 34-36; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, London: Macmillan, 1988, 103.



living things. Mann pairs the photos, however, with descriptions that reinforce the problematic image of “mother earth” rather than truly promoting the perception of ecological connection.<sup>17</sup>

I also argue, in a new interpretation of Mann’s photographic technique, that Mann collaborates with the environment, granting it more agency in her art in ways that give a voice to silent entities or silenced histories. In Chapter 4, “Collaborator,” I assert that Mann captures images through a photographic process that allows the interference of dust, dirt, and debris, describing her practice as a collaboration with the elements.<sup>18</sup> To illustrate this idea, I examine photos from *Deep South* and *Last Measure* that feature dramatic flaws that add the emotion of history to the scene. These flaws, caused by dirt, dust, and other traces of materials from the location where the photographs are taken, are the result of natural intervention rather than the hand of the artist. As a collaborative process, her photography gives environmental factors agency over the outcome of the photograph and embeds the land itself into the varnish of the final print.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout her body of work, Mann photographs deeply personal subjects: her family, her home in the Shenandoah Valley, and the American South, where she grew up. One must consider the context and purpose of her photographs and the way she understands the world around her, and avoid holding Mann to standards to which she has not attempted to conform. This thesis uses postcolonial and ecocritical perspectives to reconsider existing interpretations of her work, not to evaluate Mann as a postcolonial ecocritical artist. Sally Mann’s landscape photography embodies oppositional ideas relevant to both postcolonial theory and ecocriticism, further demonstrating the relationship between the two fields. Postcolonial ecocritics might

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<sup>17</sup> William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 25, 50.

<sup>18</sup> Ravenal, Strauss, and Tucker, *Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Stephan, *Sally Mann: Deep South/Battlefields*, 15.

argue that Mann's photography tends to be American-focused or anthropocentric, but she avoids some of the pitfalls of those flaws. She resists idealizing humanity and United States history; instead, she addresses the violence that took place in the American South. In her memoir, Mann suggests that "the artist who commands the landscape might in fact hold the key to the secrets of the human heart: place, personal history, and metaphor," and by photographing the landscapes and infusing them with emotion over human events, she exerts control over it and risks another form of colonization.<sup>20</sup> Mann's photographs romanticize and sentimentalize the American South through picturesque photographs of the landscape, but her supporting text describes her experience as shaped by her knowledge of the oppression that took place in the region.<sup>21</sup> In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon suggests it would be more problematic to photograph the Southern landscape without addressing slavery or oppression at all.<sup>22</sup> Although her position as an elite, white artist representing violence against African American complicates her artistic intentions, her texts address marginalized histories and her technical process incorporates materials from the locations where violence against African Americans took place.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, 211; DeLoughrey and Handley, *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, 63, 43, 235.

<sup>22</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (Cambridge, Mass.; Cambridge, MA: Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 26.

## Chapter 2: Repository for Memory

In Mann's 2015 memoir, *Hold Still*, Mann emphasizes the importance of place in her work, even in her non-landscapes. When conveying her life story, Mann also traces the most prevalent themes in her photography-- death, race, and history-- to her early life. Her parents, Elizabeth "Betty" Munger, a socialite from New England,<sup>24</sup> and Robert Munger, a physician from New Orleans,<sup>25</sup> moved to Lexington, Virginia after marrying. They chose a small, history-rich town in the Shenandoah Valley. Betty and Robert Munger built a home just outside of town, later naming it Boxerwood after the pack of boxers they raised. In 1951, Mrs. Munger gave birth to Sally in a Lexington hospital, a building formerly used as a private home where Stonewall Jackson lived. Although she grew up economically privileged, Mann describes her childhood as a "laissez-faire, semi-neglected, rural upbringing." She roamed the family's acres of land naked, accompanied by the pack of dogs, and the artist sometimes jokes that she was practically feral. Mann grew up having frank conversations about death with her father, and Dr. Munger approached the subject with curiosity and sensibility. Due to her rural upbringing, she also lived in closer proximity to pastoral cycles of birth and death than those in suburban areas.<sup>26</sup> Before Sally's birth, the Mungers hired Virginia "Gee-Gee" Carter, an African American woman, to tend the house, cook meals, and watch their three young children. Mann writes about stories from her childhood with inflections of guilt, an emotion particularly acute in her discussion of Carter.<sup>27</sup> She describes their relationship as genuinely loving but "stalked by historical demons." When

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<sup>24</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Frederick Brandt, *Shattering the Southern Stereotype Jack Beal, Nell Blaine, Dorothy Gillespie, Sally Mann, Cy Twombly ; an Exhibition Celebrating the 5th Anniversary of the Longwood Center for the Visual Arts, March 21 - May 9, 1998*. (Farmville, Va: Longwood Center for the Visual Arts, 1998), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Eleanor Heartney, "The Forensic Eye," *Art in America* (January 2005), 51.

<sup>27</sup> "First Major International Exhibition of Sally Mann's Work of the South Premieres at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, March 4–May 28, 2018," National Gallery of Art, last modified January 8, 2018, accessed January 10, 2018, <https://www.nga.gov/press/exh/4870.html>.

her parents sent Mann to Putney, a boarding school in Vermont, she first encountered the literature of William Faulkner and experienced an awakening. In her memoir, she explains that “Faulkner threw wide the door of my ignorant childhood, and the future, the heartbroken future hitherto filled with unanswered questions, strolled easefully in. It wounded me, then and there, with the great sadness and tragedy of our American life, with the truth of all that I had not seen, had not known, and had not asked.”<sup>28</sup>

At Putney, Mann explains, she discovered her two great passions: writing and photography. A fellow student taught her how to develop photographs and encouraged her to take pictures. She excelled in writing at Putney, later studying creative writing at Bennington College. During this time, she met and married Larry Mann, a lawyer and blacksmith in Lexington.<sup>29</sup> She transferred to Hollins University and went on to earn bachelor’s and master’s degrees in creative writing. In 1972, Washington and Lee hired her as a staff photographer.<sup>30</sup> While working there, she stumbled upon a forgotten collection of 7,500 glass plate negatives by Civil War photographer Michael Miley (Fig. 2). She cleaned and organized the delicate glass plates to preserve them, and she also made prints from roughly 1,000 of them. Describing the influence of the collection on her later work, she says she was inspired by Miley’s “most embarrassing failures: the overexposed, weirdly stained, solarized, and fogged images that he, for whatever reason, didn’t scrape from the glass.”<sup>31</sup> During this time, she created and published

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<sup>28</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, 14, 17, 365, 7, 43, 262, 243.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Bishop, "Sensitive Viewer," *Roanoke Times*, January 22, 1984.

<sup>30</sup> Sally Mann, Sarah Greenough, Sarah Kennel, Hilton Als, Malcolm R. Daniel, Drew Gilpin Faust, *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings*, (Washington: National Gallery of Art; Salem, Massachusetts: Peabody Essex Museum; New York: Abrams, 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A memoir with photographs*, 220-221.

several series taken at the college or in the surrounding community. These early projects include photos of landscapes, architecture, still life, and self-portraits.<sup>32</sup>

In a series Mann describes as simultaneously capturing her love for her family and her love for the land where she took the photos, Mann photographed her children, Virginia, Jessie, and Emmett. These photos, some of her best known and most controversial, show the children roaming through the woods, swimming in the river, and playing in their cabin, sometimes injured, frequently naked, and always perceived with the artist's editorial eye.<sup>33</sup> Describing the time in her life, Mann said: "These pictures cannot be understood without the context of the farm and the cabin on the river-- the intrinsic timelessness of the place and the privacy it afforded us."<sup>34</sup> By emphasizing the importance of the setting of her family photos, Mann recognizes the role of the environment as an agent in the images rather than a static backdrop. Eventually, the family photos thrust Mann into the spotlight. When Mann describes the time that reporter Richard B. Woodward of the *New York Times* visited Lexington to interview her about the series in 1992, she explains that she was open, candid, and naïve. So, she was taken aback when Woodward's cover story for *New York Times Magazine*, "The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann," branded her as controversial and suggested that the photos were problematic.<sup>35</sup> Mann explains that the pictures were not intended to provoke but to express "a mother's love, admiration, awe, concern, fear, and helplessness."<sup>36</sup> Published in the midst of the Culture Wars,

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<sup>32</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, 27, 35, 91, 220, 221.

<sup>33</sup> Melissa Block, "From Lens to Photo: Sally Mann Captures Her Love," *NPR*, February 17, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/2011/02/17/133595585/from-lens-to-photo-sally-mann-captures-her-love>.

<sup>34</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A memoir with photographs*, 161.

<sup>35</sup> Richard B. Woodward, "The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann," *The New York Times Magazine* (September 27, 1992), 29. Mann was also criticized by Ray Sokolov, *The Wall Street Journal*, February 6, 1991. "Critique: Censoring Virginia," A10.

<sup>36</sup> Ravenal, Strauss, and Tucker, *Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit*, 6.

the photos led to Mann's scrutiny, but they also launched her to fame.<sup>37</sup> In a photo from this period, "The Perfect Tomato" (Fig. 3), a doe-like child balances on the edge of a table, slightly blurred. The camera instead focuses on a ripe tomato in the foreground, as if its perfection justifies the choice to make it the main subject, overshadowing the dancing child. If the photo depicts Eden, the/ tomato represents the forbidden fruit, foreshadowing the eventual knowledge of good and evil, indicating that the innocence captured by the photo will one day end.<sup>38</sup>

Following *Immediate Family*, Mann began to consider the landscape and histories that took place in the American South. In a 1993 letter to Melissa Harris, a friend and the editor of *Aperture* magazine, Mann describes the change in her artwork, remarking "I sense that there is something strange happening in the family pictures. The kids seem to be disappearing from the image, receding into the landscape. I used to conceive of the picture first and then look for a good place to take it, but now I seem to find the backgrounds and place a child in them, hoping for something interesting to happen."<sup>39</sup> Mann acknowledges the human focus of her family photos and how she overlooked the latent potential of the landscape as a subject. Where she once observed the children's vitality compared to the land, she grew to see the land as equally compelling. This change relates to the way ecocriticism suggests questioning the perceived separation between nature and humanity.

She conveys the new challenges posed by landscape photography, explaining how difficult it is to create compelling images from seemingly ordinary places. Then, in 1996, the

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<sup>37</sup> During this time, she also faced backlash for a lecture given at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. A complaint about a photo of Mann and her daughters urinating reached the governor, Jim Gilmore. The interim director of the museum, Richard B. Woodward, is not the same Richard B. Woodward who wrote "The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann" for *The New York Times*. For more information on the Culture Wars, see Julie Ault et. al, *Art matters: how the culture wars changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Phillip Yenawine, New York: New York University Press, 1999.

<sup>38</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, 19, 134.

<sup>39</sup> Sally Mann, "Correspondence with Melissa Harris," *Aperture* vol. 138, Winter 1995, 24.

High Museum of Art in Atlanta contacted Mann to create a series of photos for its *Picturing the South* project.<sup>40</sup> Already photographing locations in Virginia and Georgia for *Mother Land*, she continued working on the project and expanded it by traveling to Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana to create the series *Deep South*.<sup>41</sup>

In 1999, in the midst of her work on the Southern landscapes, the artist's greyhound Eva died, causing a second major shift in Mann's artwork and inspiring her examination of the subject of death.<sup>42</sup> Mann wanted to preserve the dog somehow, so she had her skinned and then buried her body. The next year, she unearthed and photographed the bones and the hide.<sup>43</sup> In a second encounter with death shortly thereafter, a convict escaped a nearby prison and led the police on a chase to her farm.<sup>44</sup> During the standoff, he shot himself within sight of Mann's home. The two deaths caused her to wonder about the effects of a person's death on the earth and whether a violent event invariably leaves something in its wake. She later followed that idea to its extreme, traveling to Antietam, the site of the American Civil War battle with the highest number of casualties in a single day. Then, in 2001, *New York Times Magazine* invited her to photograph the University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Center's outdoor research facility, nicknamed "the body farm." She photographed bodies donated to the center, each in varying states of decomposition. She considered how the body relates to the spirit, especially what happens to each after death. She examined and documented the biological processes taking places as the bodies become part of the earth over time. She combined the

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<sup>40</sup> The series began with Mann's commission and continues today. Participants include Dawoud Bey, Richard Misrach, and Emmett Gowin. See <https://www.high.org/highlights/picturing-the-south/>.

<sup>41</sup> Mann, Greenough, Kennel, Daniels, Als, and Faust, *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings*, 40.

<sup>42</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, 446.

<sup>43</sup> Ann Hornaday, "'Remains' to be Seen," *Washington Post*, June 6, 2004, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/2004/06/06/remains-to-be-seen/2ab34ff5-1b72-4622-aa57-0dea11b0d7fa/?utm\\_term=.da8de452765a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/2004/06/06/remains-to-be-seen/2ab34ff5-1b72-4622-aa57-0dea11b0d7fa/?utm_term=.da8de452765a).

<sup>44</sup> Ravenal, Strauss, and Tucker, *Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit*, 174-5, 54.

photos of Eva, Antietam, and the body farm to create a catalog and exhibition, *What Remains*.<sup>45</sup> The catalog concluded with photographs of her adult children. In an interview with Ann Hornaday of *The Washington Post*, she explained that she had found, in response to the question of what remains after someone dies, the answer was “love, memory, and loss.”<sup>46</sup> She continued her work photographing Civil War battlefields, traveling to Manassas, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, The Wilderness, and Appomattox.<sup>47</sup> She returned to subject matter closer to home in 2003 when she began a series about her husband and his battle with muscular dystrophy.<sup>48</sup> Then, in 2006, she suffered an injury when the horse she was riding had an aneurysm, threw her, and landed on top of her. Mann broke her back and faced a four-mile trek to find help. As she recovered, her physical ability was limited, and she began a series of portraits of her face and injured torso.<sup>49</sup>

In the last decade, Mann has continued to photograph a wide range of subjects, from her husband’s battle with muscular dystrophy, to her friend Cy Twombly’s studio, to her newest works on the subject of race. Simultaneously, she has worked on large-scale projects that tell the story of her career, conveying the breadth of her photographic endeavors and the rich history behind them. In 2011, Mann received an invitation to speak at Harvard University for the Massey Lecture series. After she delivered the lecture telling the story of her family and her life, the artist continued to add to the narrative to create her memoir, *Hold Still*, published in 2015. In addition to the story of her childhood, marriage, and career, Mann relates generations of family history. She explains how many of her photographs came to be and also provides a detailed

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<sup>45</sup> Sally Mann, *What Remains: Sally Mann* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2009).

<sup>46</sup> Hornaday, "'Remains' to be Seen." *Washington Post*.

<sup>47</sup> Ravenal, Strauss, and Tucker, *Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit*, 54.

<sup>48</sup> Block, "From Lens to Photo: Sally Mann Captures Her Love," *NPR*.

<sup>49</sup> Ravenal, Strauss, and Tucker, *Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit*, 11.



account of sources of inherited family shame. Mann discusses several scandals in her past, from the murder-suicide of her husband's parents to the controversy around the family and body farm photos, to the two stalkers she faced in the 1990s. She wrote several chapters on the role race has played in her life. She admits that she was blind to the reality of segregation, lynching, and prejudice against African Americans, telling the story of Virginia Carter's years working for the Mungers through a lens of self-awareness and guilt. In the memoir, she also discusses embarking on a new project about race. The book addresses demons not only in Mann's lifetime but also in the generations before her.<sup>50</sup>

From the sources outlined in the introduction, one sees the most frequent interpretation of Mann's landscapes, that they are repositories for history. Mann describes experiencing "ecstatic time" in which the past feels "impossibly present" in a particular location.<sup>51</sup> In the section of her memoir about *Deep South*, she explains "These pictures are about the rivers of blood, of tears, of sweat, that Africans poured into the dark soil of their thankless new home. It was impossible for me to drive the vine-hung back road of Mississippi and not think of the invisible sediment of misery deposited at every turn."<sup>52</sup> She conveys this idea by either mimicking or replicating the appearance of nineteenth-century photographs in a combination of old and new techniques, culminating with her use of wet plate collodion photography. This artificial appearance of age, combined with the specks, scratches, flares, and other flaws, evokes thoughts of war, violence, and slavery. She encourages the viewer to imagine what might have taken place in that location 150 years ago. The land survives acts of violence and war; a specific location elicits memories of the events that took place there in the past.

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<sup>50</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, x, 131, 161, 240, 281

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 226; Mann, *Deep South*, 7 ; or "paralyzingly present" in Ravenal, Strauss, and Tucker, *Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit*, 171.

<sup>52</sup> Mann, *Deep South*, 50.

In one specific example of the way Mann characterizes the landscape in relation to history, she describes trees as “the silent witnesses to so much of what has happened on my poor, heartbroken Southern soil.”<sup>53</sup> For Mann, this thought holds particular meaningfulness for repressed histories, like those of enslaved people or lynching victims. Though the stories have been silenced, she feels that the witnesses represent their stories. In a section of her memoir where she discusses the battlefield, she asks “... does the earth remember? Do these fields, upon which unspeakable carnage occurred, where unknowable numbers of bodies were buried, bear witness in some way? And if they do, with what voice do they speak? Is there a numinous presence of death in these now placid battlefields, these places of still time?”<sup>54</sup> In these quotes, Mann romanticizes and anthropomorphizes the landscape. This approach poses problems because, as an elite, white, Southern artist, she portrays an adversity she has not faced personally. She grapples with the idea of race, not by confronting existing structures of oppression but through a more passive, picturesque sentimentality. However, Mann shows the land both as it is and as it is not, using a flawed photographic process that allows the environment to interfere with the outcome, bolstering emotion by manipulating her technique. This is not simply an artists portrayal of the way she feels in a landscape but also a collaboration with the environment.

The collaborative aspects of her photography practices, in which she allows flaws caused by dust or mold, offer promise for giving a voice to these places where violence took place. For Mann, the gothic qualities of the landscape express the misery experienced by

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<sup>53</sup> Stauffer, *Southern Landscape*, 20; Ravenal, Strauss, and Tucker, *Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit*, 54; Stephan, *Sally Mann: Deep South/Battlefields*, 13, 40.

<sup>54</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, 411.

African Americans.<sup>55</sup> By prefacing her photographs of the American South with quotes about misery, death, and racism, the trees become inseparable from the idea of lynching, and the dark forest conveys both the promise and fear of escape narratives.<sup>56</sup> They attempt to communicate Mann's sorrow over the cruelty and oppression committed in the South, but also a desire to atone for the sins of the past out of her sense of collective responsibility.<sup>57</sup> Her romantic approach, though well-intentioned, raises questions about representing racial alterity.<sup>58</sup>

To create *Deep South* and *Mother Land*, Mann traveled to locations where enslaved people worked long, grueling hours each day, threatened with death for attempting to escape. In a photograph taken in Fontainebleau State Park in Louisiana, she captures the ruins of a sugar mill. During the 19th century, the owner of the sugar mill, Bernard de Marigny de Mandeville, reaped profits by forcing enslaved laborers to work 18-hour shifts in the dangerous factory. The workers risked being pulled into the equipment used to extract juice from the sugar cane, so they kept a hatchet nearby to cut off an arm to save the person's life. In *Southern Landscapes*, John Stauffer ends his description of the photograph with a note that de Mandeville ultimately gambled away the wealth he accumulated from the sugar mill, emphasizing the pointlessness of the violence that took place at Fontainebleau.<sup>59</sup>

In Mann's photo of the ruins of the sugar mill (Fig. 4), she focuses on a damaged section of a brick wall, with a gap beckoning the viewer to step through into the center of the structure. Three trees recede into the background, from largest, in the foreground, extending from the

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<sup>55</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, 50.

<sup>56</sup> Hilton Als, "The Unvanquished: Sally Mann's Portrait of the South," *The New Yorker* (September 27, 1999), 98. and "First Major International Exhibition of Sally Mann's Work of the South Premieres at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, March 4–May 28, 2018," National Gallery of Art.

<sup>57</sup> Stauffer, *Southern Landscape*, 9-11.

<sup>58</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 103.

<sup>59</sup> Stauffer, *Southern Landscape*, 28.

wall, to the background, with a chimney stack among them. Stauffer suggests that the layers of openings, through the brick wall and the hole in the column evoke layers of time opening the past to the viewer. Mann frames the elements in a composition of layers extending into the picture plane, as if by walking into the photo, then through the opening in the wall the viewer would travel further back in time with every step. The backlit trees allow a small amount of soft light through, combining with the blurred trees in the distance to create a dream-like backdrop. The forest overtakes the structure, with the chimneys blending in with the trees. She underexposes the photograph and omits the signage, fences, and tourist center nearby to make it seem that the forest has consumed the structure, overshadowed by the lush canopy of trees. She suggests that the land has tried to erase the wounds of the past.<sup>60</sup> At the ruins in Fontainebleau, vines climb the factory walls, and trees grow where the equipment once stood, breaking the building apart, and reclaiming the matter for other uses, an idea explored in the next section.<sup>61</sup>

Though Mann tries to communicate her emotional reaction in a location with a history of oppression, Mann's photos for *Deep South* and *Mother Land* also represent the tradition of the picturesque, especially her photograph of the ruins at Fontainebleau. In nineteenth-century picturesque paintings, ruins represent a civilization currently at peace but with a history of violence. Although the ruin is a meditation on past moral decay, it also glorifies the pastoral or agrarian. For example, in Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire*, the painter idealizes *The Arcadian or Rural State* by showing the path to the all-consuming empire, followed by its collapse and return to nature represented by ruins. In the United States, however, the pastoral landscape is

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<sup>60</sup> Stauffer, *Southern Landscape*, 28.

<sup>61</sup> Sally Mann, *What Remains: Sally Mann* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2009), 33.

inextricably linked with slavery.<sup>62</sup> Mann simultaneously feels compelled by the beauty of a scene and haunted by the violence that took place there, and she aspires to convey that complex experience through her photography. Although her picturesque aesthetic and use of nineteenth-century technology encourage viewers to imagine the past, those characteristics may also suggest nostalgia for the nineteenth century with all its racial demons.

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<sup>62</sup> For further discussion of the picturesque and ruins, see Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, 63-71; Conron, *American Picturesque*, 22, 3-36.

### Chapter 3: Matter Lender

All things summon us to death;  
 Nature, almost envious of the good she has given us,  
 Tells us often and gives us notice that she cannot  
 For long allow us that scrap of matter which she has lent...  
 She has need of it for other forms,  
 She claims it back for other works.

- Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704) "On Death, a Sermon"  
 (quoted in Sally Mann, *What Remains*)<sup>63</sup>

Before considering ecocritical approaches to understanding Sally Mann's photography, one must consider ecocritical perspectives on art history as a whole. In the field of ecocriticism, scholars like Timothy Morton, William Cronon, and Alan Braddock evaluate representations of the environment in art and literature, arguing that the idea of nature has evolved as a reflection of culture and recommending new approaches to reflect the interconnection of all living and non-living things, in an effort to promote sustainable ways of coexisting. In the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty defines the field of ecocriticism, saying:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary criticism.

Lawrence Buell divides ecocriticism into two waves in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. In the first wave, literary scholars suggest that nature writing reconnects humans with the natural world, fostering sustainability and conservation. Second wave ecocritics question the idea of nature, examining social constructions of the environment within literature.<sup>64</sup> For example, in William Cronon's 1996 edited collection, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in*

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>64</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 23.

*Nature*, the author says, “Ideas of nature never exist outside a cultural context, and the meanings we assign to nature cannot help reflecting that context.”<sup>65</sup> Similarly, in *Ecology without Nature* (2009) and *The Ecological Thought* (2012), Timothy Morton asserts that the idealization of nature (an idea denoted by Nature with a capital “N”) stands as an obstacle to a truly ecological way of living by implying the separation of man and the environment.<sup>66</sup> In *The Ecological Thought*, Morton calls for a new type of thought, the “ecological thought,” which engages the environment more deeply by focusing on interconnection among all living things.<sup>67</sup> Morton also explains that words can never capture all aspects of the environment, implying that the visual arts could provide a way for silent entities to have a voice in the arts, saying “Art gives voice to the unspeakable.”

Morton’s and Cronon’s ideas emerge from an increased awareness of environmental issues in literary criticism and the humanities as a whole, a movement that began with multiple scholars working on ecological themes leading up to the 1990s. A group of academics founded the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, later establishing the journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*.<sup>68</sup> In a piece for *The New York Times* in 1995, Jay Parini describes the emergence of environmental studies as a return to reality and activism from apolitical theory.

In an essay included in *A Companion to American Art*, “From Nature to Ecology: The Emergence of Ecocritical Art History,” Alan C. Braddock emphasizes the importance of ecocriticism to unsettle assumptions about the idea of nature in art history. Using examples from

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<sup>65</sup> Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 35.

<sup>66</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 8.

<sup>68</sup> Alan C. Braddock, “From Nature to Ecology: The Emergence of Ecocritical Art History,” *A Companion to American Art*, eds. John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, and Jason D. LaFountain (Malden, Ma: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 448.

American art, he demonstrates the ways national identity and political discourse have shaped representation of the environment in art. He cites Morton in a discussion of the false dichotomy of wilderness and civilization, explaining the way art reinforced ideas that man exists separate from nature.<sup>69</sup> Discussing the representation of the environment, Buell suggests that “all artistic work hinges upon the evocation of imagined worlds that may or may not bear a close resemblance to literal or historical environments.”<sup>70</sup> In a source further discussed in the next chapter, postcolonial ecologists Helen Tiffin and Graham Huggan also note the role of the arts, especially literature, in perpetuating hegemonic structures privileging humanity at the expense of the environment. They warn against focusing exclusively on problematic components, asking that critics continue to consider the aesthetic qualities of a text, recognizing that it was created at a specific time and in a particular cultural context.<sup>71</sup>

Braddock collaborated with Christoph Irmscher to edit a collection of essays using various ecocritical approaches in art history, describing the project as the result of the “environmental turn in cultural interpretation.” In the introduction, Braddock describes ecocritical art history as a field considering interconnection, sustainability, and justice through visual analysis, cultural interpretation, and environmental history. In one example from *A Keener Perception*, Angela Miller traces nineteenth-century American understandings from landscapes through Thomas Cole’s painting. She argues that his work shows the way culture idealized the wilderness through emotional experiences, then focused on the concept of harmony between nature and culture in the middle landscape, then lastly moved toward preserving undeveloped

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 450

<sup>70</sup> Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, 31.

<sup>71</sup> Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 20.



areas from development.<sup>72</sup> As demonstrated by Braddock, Miller, Morton, and Cronon, ecocriticism opens new possibilities for considering works of art, so how might these ideas apply to Sally Mann? In *Uncommon Ground*, Cronon outlines eight examples of culturally influenced conceptions of nature.<sup>73</sup> This list provides an opportunity to consider these constructs in Mann's work, as an introduction to the ways ecocriticism unsettles existing interpretations of her photography. For example, he notes problems with the idea of "nature as Eden," in which a work of art shows a flawless, untouched landscape corrupted by humanity. Mann's *Immediate Family* series represents the idea of the Garden of Eden, with an idyllic rural setting insulated from the rest of the world, where her innocent children play naked. Injuries, danger, snake skins, and blood imply the eventual corruption of the landscape and children, as illustrated by *The Perfect Tomato* (Fig. 3). Another of Cronon's examples, "nature as artifice" encourages viewers to analyze the environment itself for human interference, as a way to question the idea of natural landscapes. This relates to Mann's battlefield photographs in *What Remains* and *Last Measure*, where park attendants intervene to alter ecosystems (Fig. 10 and 11). The National Park Service website for Antietam National Battlefield explains how the park stewards restore forests, cultivate farmland, and fight invasive species in a conservation effort not to restore the land to "wilderness" but rather to its appearance during the Civil War. Next, Cronon discusses the idea of "nature as demonic other," and Mann's *Deep South* photos explore the idea by illustrating a landscape in which the environment avenges the violence that took place there (Fig. 4). Cronon summarizes the section by explaining that nature has numerous, simultaneous,

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<sup>72</sup> *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical studies in American art history*, eds. Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmischer, Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2009, 3, 87.

<sup>73</sup> Cronon's eight constructs are "nature as artifice/self-conscious cultural construction," "nature as naive reality," "nature as moral imperative," "nature as Eden," "nature as virtual reality," "nature as commodity," "nature as demonic other/avenging angel," and "nature as contested terrain." Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 39-51.

and contradicting meanings, an idea central to this thesis, one he calls “nature as contested terrain.”<sup>74</sup>

Although Morton would likely criticize Mann’s romanticization of nature, he suggests that environmental writing adopt approaches that invoke “negativity, introversion, femininity, ambiguity, and darkness.”<sup>75</sup> Mann challenges stereotypical landscape photography by incorporating some of these characteristics. Although her use of the picturesque undermines her efforts, the artist resists the Lost Cause tradition in Southern art and literature, in which artists and writers minimize the role of slavery and racism. She uses darkness and shadow to imply the violence that took place in the South, rather than representing the forest as a virgin wilderness. She frequently refers to nature as indifferent, ambivalent, or dispassionate toward the interests of humanity.<sup>76</sup>

In her book *What Remains*, Mann explores the theme of death through images of decomposing bodies,<sup>77</sup> but the series also illustrates the humans intertwined with the environment, a representation of the concept of “mesh” as defined by Morton in *The Ecological Thought*, and troubles the idea that the earth provides limitless resources for consumption.<sup>78</sup> She includes an excerpt from “On Death, a Sermon” by Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, printed at the beginning of this section and adopts a phrase from it to title the series of photographs from the body farm, *Matter Lent*. The excerpt expresses that Mann understands nature in terms of death. She describes it as integrated with humanity, giving and taking matter to be used for

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<sup>74</sup> Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, 36, 39, 48. For another approach to the idea of Eden as related to imperialism, see Sharae Deckard, *Paradise Discourse, Imperialism, and Globalization: Exploiting Eden*, (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>75</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 14.

<sup>76</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A memoir with photographs*, 240; Mann, *Mother Land*, 6; Mann, *Deep South*, 52.

<sup>77</sup> Mann, *What Remains: Sally Mann*, 7-33.

<sup>78</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 15.

human lives. The photographer describes *What Remains* as an examination of what the earth does to a body and how a person changes the earth after death. She describes trying to evoke the feeling that humans are “walking among the accretions of millions of remains-- the bones, lives, souls, hopes, joys, and fears that devolved into the earth-- walking, in effect, on the shifting remains of humanity.” She carries the idea to its most macabre in the photographs of her greyhound’s bones, the place where the convict’s blood seeped into the land of her farm, and finally with the body farm.<sup>79</sup> As expressed by Bossuet, the photos question what Morton describes as the “myth of the faceless mother” which “provides the very motivation for our exploitation of Earth, as seen as ‘inexhaustible matter for things’” by explaining the necessity of death to provide new resources for the earth. The photos show bodies broken down by bacteria and maggots and eaten by animals, nourishing them. The images capture the mesh of organisms and non-living things existing together in this location, with intertwined cycles of birth, life, and death.

Discussing one of her earliest projects about death, Mann photographs the location where a convict committed suicide on her land, later remarking about the way his death impacted the land and vice versa. She expresses her feelings in the aftermath of the tragedy in *What Remains*, saying:

I walked over to the place where he died. The underbrush was matted down, patches of blue and orange spray paint marked coordinates of some kind, yellow crime tape hung on the wild rose, and at the base of a hickory tree, a dark pool of blood glistened on the frozen soil. I was tempted to touch its perfectly tensioned surface. Instead, as I stared, it shrank perceptibly, forming a brief meniscus before leveling off again, as if the earth had taken a delicate sip. Death had left for me its imperishable mark on an ordinary copse of trees in my front yard. Never again would I look out of my kitchen window at that lone cedar on the prow of hickory forest the same way as I had before. I would never be free of the memory of what happened there. But would a stranger, coming upon it, say, a

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<sup>79</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, 234, 410.

century later, somehow sense the sad, lost secret of the place, the sanctity of this death inflected soil?<sup>80</sup>

In this photo taken in the wooded area where the man died (Fig. 5), a group of trees cast shadows across a small clearing with two stumps and some fallen branches. One backlit tree casts a long, wide shadow across the bottom right third of the image. The edge of the shadow lies parallel to the bone-like branch. The brown tone of the photo feels cold instead of warm. It seems sapped of life. The trees positioned around the periphery of the photo resemble a group of people gathered around to observe an accident. The scene feels less violent than the photos from *Deep South* but unsettling nonetheless. Mann looks for a physical indication of the violence that took place, having seen the blood seep into the earth, nourishing the trees guarding the clearing.

Similarly, in the photographs of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville Forensic Anthropology Center (Fig. 6-9), known as the body farm, Mann shows human bodies decomposing, becoming part of the earth, and nourishing other life forms. From 2000 to 2001, Mann made several trips to the body farm. The center places donated bodies in an enclosed, wooded area to observe decomposition. The research provides law enforcement agencies with a database of more than 1,800 skeletons and the supporting documentation of decomposition, helping estimate the time of death of a given person, as well as the person's age, sex, ancestry, or physical appearance when living.<sup>81</sup>

Mann uses two photographic processes in the series. First, she uses wet plate collodion photography to produce black and white images with longer exposure times and more flaws.

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<sup>80</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, 410.

<sup>81</sup> Ravenal, Strauss, and Tucker, *Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit*, 6; "Fast Facts," University of Tennessee, Knoxville Forensic Anthropology Center, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://fac.utk.edu/fast-facts>.

Second, she uses modern color film to capture movement or detail, especially the purples, reds, and pinks of the decaying flesh. There are two sets of photos where Mann photographs the same scene in color and collodion. In the first set (Fig. 6-7), a body lies face up on the ground. A haze across the surface obscures the details of the body, as well as the trash can, fence, power lines, and cinder blocks. The color photo also communicates a sense of modernity, whereas the collodion could have been made any time in the last century and a half. When Mann handled the wet plate for the collodion negative, she left fingerprints. The viewer has a sense that a foggy window separates him or her from a scene, and someone has left a handprint on the glass. The smudges could also be bloody prints left behind at a crime scene. The color photo reveals that the diagonal white line across the bottom right corner has been created by a ripple in the collodion. The body seems more cumbersome in the color photo, while the collodion version looks more ethereal. Both versions illustrate the idea of mesh, in different ways. For example, in the color photo, the reds, purples, and browns of the body more closely relate to the land than to the trash can or chain link fence. Furthermore, the holes in the chest, abdomen, and thigh indicate that scavengers have assisted the decomposition, so the body has provided nourishment to animals.<sup>82</sup> The collodion version, however, blurs the distinction between the body and the land through the haze and flaws.

In a second pair of photos from the Forensic Anthropology Center (Fig. 8-9), a body lies face down, close to the photographer. Any characteristics that might suggest a person's identity have been erased over time, so I consider the photograph a landscape. Describing the photo, Mann refers to the subject as "Tunnel Man," saying:

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<sup>82</sup> Brittany M. Wolff, "A Review of 'Body Farm' Research Facilities Across America with a Focus on Policy and the Impacts when Dealing with Decompositional Changes in Human Remains" (Master of Arts in Criminology & Criminal Justice, The University of Texas at Arlington, 2015), 27.

I found him good company, Tunnel Man. He wasn't afraid of death, he was in no pain, and he had finally relinquished control. He was so much less painful to be around than, say, my then-living mother, lying on her back in the retirement home, tears leaking from her eyes, her face balled up with fear. In a sense, Tunnel Man had more life in him; life was feeding on him, the beetles and worms making inroads and leaving behind soil into which stray seeds would sink their fibrous roots.<sup>83</sup>

In the collodion version, everything from the eyes to the neck blur into the ground. The surface of the blurred areas appears soft and gauzy. The shoulder resembles leather, with the lighter skin of the back closer to the tone and texture of stone. The hair evokes straw or grasses. The speckled texture across the surface of the photo is likely from the dirt embedded in the collodion, dust from the body farm. The color version is more jarring. With the shorter exposure, maggots have replaced the blurred areas, their movements too quick for the longer exposure time of the collodion photograph. She shows that the pink skin has slipped from the shoulder, revealing the purple layer below. The color photo also captures the liquid expelled from the body, seeping into the ground.

In these examples, Mann shows humans as interwoven with the land and bodies as a rich microbiome. In "The Loveliness of Decay: Rotting Flesh, Literary Matter, and Dead Media," Jesse Stommel says "The ecosystem of the dead body is more hospitable and biodiverse than the live body. While living, the human body has 100 trillion cells, and most of them are not human. Over 90% of the cells in our body are bacteria, at least 500 different species. Many of these microorganisms flourish when we perish."<sup>84</sup> In Mann's photographs, the dead are bloated from gases released by bacteria, with putrefaction liquid seeping into the ground, and maggots consuming flesh. Blood from the convict's death soaks into the earth to nourish the trees. Mann conflates the idea of "Mother Nature" with death, saying "death is the sculptor of the ravishing

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<sup>83</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A memoir with photographs*, 428.

<sup>84</sup> Jesse Stommel, "The Loveliness of Decay: Rotting Flesh, Literary Matter, and Dead Media," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 25, no. 2/3 (2014): 338.

landscape, the terrible mother, the damp creator of life, by whom we are one day devoured.”<sup>85</sup>

The poem by Bossuet anthropomorphizes the environment and characterizes it as having an interest in human affairs. It subverts the idea that the earth has endless resources, but it still characterizes the environment as an entity with perfectly balanced cycles of life and death rather than a system reeling from the effects of human industry.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 8; Stauffer, *Southern Landscape*, 9.

<sup>86</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 64.

#### Chapter 4: Collaborator

Postcolonial ecocriticism offers a new way to discuss Sally Mann's technique, especially the way it relates to the representation of entities without a voice. At the dynamic intersection of postcolonial theory and ecocriticism, both fields continually evolve to take new ideas into consideration; postcolonial ecocritics recommend integrating ideas from postcolonial theory in ecocriticism, comparing and contrasting ideas in both fields, and suggesting new approaches for the future. Scholars trace the beginning of postcolonial ecocriticism to writers like Ramachandra Guha, who writes in "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique" that American environmentalism risks implementing a new form of colonization if it excludes non-Western voices.<sup>87</sup> Citing Guha in their 2007 article for *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, "Against Authenticity: Global Knowledges and Postcolonial Ecocriticism," Cara Cilano and Elizabeth deLoughrey echo his call for a worldwide dialogue about the environment that bears in mind the way knowledge is produced both locally and globally.<sup>88</sup>

Anne McClintock's 1992 article "Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of Postcolonialism" also suggests postcolonial theory's need to address environmental issues. She outlines several problems with the term postcolonial, pointing out the questionable practice of defining the history of all cultures in relation to the time certain regions were colonized and when colonialism ended, while some countries remain colonized. In her arguments, she identifies another issue with the term, the fact that the world has not reached a period free of colonialism, as some countries remain colonized and imperialism has resulted in ongoing environmental and social

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<sup>87</sup> Ramachandra Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 11, no. 1 (Spring 1989), 22.

<sup>88</sup> Cilano C, Deloughrey E. "Against authenticity: Global knowledges and postcolonial ecocriticism." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2007), 71.



problems.<sup>89</sup> In 2008, O'Brien reconsiders ecocriticism as a consequence of colonization in "Back to the World: Reading Ecocriticism in a Postcolonial Context," a chapter in *Five Emus to the King of Siam*. She argues that, as a result of academic siloing, early ecocriticism failed to engage postcolonial concerns about race, class, and gender.<sup>90</sup> In 2010, Tiffin and Huggan collaborated to create and introduce the volume *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. In the introduction, the authors outline obstacles posed by both postcolonial theory and ecocriticism for any scholars attempting to combine the two, namely the challenges of combining two perspectives that sometimes seem to be characterized by opposing views (if they can be defined at all).<sup>91</sup> In Graham Huggan's introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, he addresses these concerns by defining postcolonialism as "a performative mode of critical revisionism, consistently directed at the colonial past and assessing its legacies for the present, but also intermittently focusing on those forms of colonization that have surfaced more recently in the context of an increasingly globalized but incompletely decolonized world."<sup>92</sup>

The pioneers of postcolonial ecocriticism compare and contrast postcolonial theory and ecocriticism, looking for areas in which the fields represent opposing viewpoints, identifying dualisms to address in the future. Beginning with his 2006 article, "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism," part of the collection *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* and then continued in

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<sup>89</sup> McClintock A. "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the term "post-colonialism." *Social Text*. no. 31 (1992), 87, 95.

<sup>90</sup> Susie O'Brien, "Back to the World: Reading Ecocriticism in a Postcolonial Context," in *Five Emus to the King of Siam: Environment and empire*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 187.

<sup>91</sup> Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, 2.

<sup>92</sup> *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Graham Huggan (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9-10, <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199588251.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199588251>.

his 2011 book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon suggests a list of ways postcolonialism and environmentalism differ, a list cited by nearly every subsequent postcolonial ecocritical text. He contrasts postcolonial theory's emphasis on hybridity, a way of disrupting false dichotomies, with environmentalism's objective to save virgin wilderness. He compares displacement in postcolonialism to sense of place in environmentalism. He also notes the way postcolonialism excavates marginalized histories while environmentalists risk repressing them by encouraging communion with nature without considering the past.<sup>93</sup>

More importantly, postcolonial ecocritics suggest what postcolonial theory and environmentalism have in common. O'Brien, echoed by Ursula Heise in the afterword to *Postcolonial Green: Environmental politics & world narratives*, explains that both fields grapple with identity and representation.<sup>94</sup> In his 1978 book *Orientalism*, postcolonialist Edward Said criticized the way European culture represents other people groups, emphasizing separation and inferiority. He suggests that representation contributes to a power structure in which Europeans benefit at the expense of non-Europeans.<sup>95</sup> This argument parallels the false dichotomy of humans and nature and the way humans use the environment to benefit humanity. Tiffin and Huggan define postcolonialism as the study of the repercussions of imperialism, which include the impact on environmental practices, especially land seizure, transportation of plants,

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<sup>93</sup> Nixon describes four main schisms, listed here with the postcolonial approach versus the environmentalist theme: hybridity and cross-culturation versus purity, virgin wilderness, and "last great places;" displacement versus sense of place; cosmopolitanism and transnationalism versus nationalism (esp. American); and excavation of marginalized histories versus timeless communion with nature that represses history. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 236 ; also outlined in Nixon's essay "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism" in Ania Loomba, *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>94</sup> Susie O'Brien, "Back to the World: Reading Ecocriticism in a Postcolonial Context," in *Five Emus to the King of Siam: Environment and empire*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007); Ursula Heise, "Afterword," *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics & World Narratives*, ed. Bonnie Roos, Alex Hunt, (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 251.

<sup>95</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism / Edward W. Said*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 15.

animals, and people, and the spread of European farming techniques.<sup>96</sup>

In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon describes an increasingly important phenomenon, one he calls "slow violence," in which marginalized groups suffer a disproportionately high number of the effects of climate change as a result of colonization.<sup>97</sup>

DeLoughrey and Handley convey a similar idea in *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, pointing out the correlation between the oppression of particular groups of people and the destruction of landscapes.<sup>98</sup> Huggan, Tiffin, and Heise also suggest that imperialism resulted in both racial oppression and environmental degradation, continuing now with the impact of corporate expansionism.<sup>99</sup>

Nixon also addresses the problem of representation, especially when Americans in positions of privilege build careers by writing about Third World issues. Mann's landscape photography raises the question of the right to represent the land and marginalized histories. As a white artist from a privileged background, does Mann risk another form of imperialism by exerting control over the land and the narratives that took place there? In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon suggests that it would be worse for artists to ignore oppression altogether. He describes a group of writers including Rachel Carson and Jamaica Kincaid who seem to feel a sense of "collective responsibility" to translate the environmental problems of the poor, having experienced poverty early in life and later becoming successful

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<sup>96</sup> Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, 3-4.

<sup>97</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>98</sup> DeLoughrey and Handley, *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, 26.

<sup>99</sup> Graham Huggan, "Postcolonial Ecocriticism and the Limits of Green Romanticism," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2009), 6; Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, vi, viii; Roos and Hunt, *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics & World Narratives*, 251.

writers.<sup>100</sup> DeLoughrey and Handley voice the same concern, asking how a writer might think beyond the human to the non-human world in order to represent nature without making the non-human sub-altern.<sup>101</sup> Since the solution to many postcolonial problems lies in giving a voice to the “other” and encouraging global dialogue, the challenge of representing the dead or the silent must be handled differently.<sup>102</sup>

In a discussion of representation in her afterword to *Narratives of Survival, Sustainability, and Justice*, Ursula Heise asks how, then, one resists hegemonic structures and imagines alternatives.<sup>103</sup> DeLoughrey and Handley recommend using ideas from ecocriticism like questioning anthropocentrism, recognizing interdependence among all living things, and using imagination to give a voice to the silent. They also suggest thinking about the idea of “deep time”, an ecological term indicating that human time and ecological time exist on different scales, to consider longer-term solutions to human and environmental problems. They describe the idea to advocate for conservation efforts based on ecological reasons but also historical ones. They characterize the land as a witness to trauma, existing outside of human time and without regard for human interests. Nixon suggests a similar concept, using W.E.B. Du Bois’s term “double-consciousness” to describe the way someone in a marginalized group might simultaneously perceive the idealization of a landscape while also being reminded of a history of forced displacement and labor that shaped the landscape. He asks what aesthetic endeavor might bring the two consciousnesses into dialogue, giving the example of Keith Morris Washington, who paints the locations of lynchings.<sup>104</sup> Like Mann, Washington searches for a

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<sup>100</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 26.

<sup>101</sup> DeLoughrey and Handley, *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, 25.

<sup>102</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 103.

<sup>103</sup> Heise, “Afterword,” *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics & World Narratives*, 255.

<sup>104</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* Rob Nixon, 242, 250.

trace of the violence in the landscape, manipulating the image to convey the emotion he feels in a particular place. Discussing Washington's paintings, Nixon says that two types of violence take place in a lynching, the murder and the "gradual violence of forgetting," arguing that Washington's art, and therefore Mann's, resists the violence of forgetting.

Mann's process troubles the idea that the photographer controls the final image, an idea that complicates discussions of agency. Mann captures the Southern landscape through photography, a technical process with opportunity for creativity, innovation, and chance. In the process of producing an image, dozens of factors can skew the representation of a scene. Mann's antiquated cameras and outmoded photographic technologies allow flaws into the images. These flaws introduce visual elements like streaks, scratches, and flares that interfere with the camera's ability to capture a scene accurately. With these interruptions and with the illusion of age, the photos evoke an emotional reaction that the original scene might not.<sup>105</sup> The photographs represent the location, including pieces of dust, dirt, or debris from the site, but they do not depict its appearance to the human eye. Viewed next to one another, the body farm photos (Fig. 6-9) illustrate the impact of Mann's technique on a scene.

In Braddock's essay, "From Nature to Ecology: The Emergence of Ecocritical Art History," he suggests considering the way materials used to create art make an "agentic contribution," and Mann's photos amplify this idea with the environment functioning as photographic subject and technical collaborator, in addition to providing the medium itself. Wet plate collodion provides compelling possibilities for Morton's idea of "art [giving] voice to the unspeakable,"<sup>106</sup> with the artist, equipment, chemicals, and natural elements playing instrumental roles in the resulting image. Her photographs begin with the physical reality of a

<sup>105</sup> Mann, "Correspondence with Melissa Harris," 30.

<sup>106</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 12.

natural setting, interpreted by the artist's compositional decisions, filtered through aging nineteenth-century lenses, then the resulting mix of light and shadow lands on a light-sensitive combination of chemicals on a glass plate. In photography, nature has more agency and influence on the outcome, because the process is more sensitive to environmental conditions. One could also consider Sally Mann's specific style of photography-- with the intentional intervention of dust, dirt, river water, and other natural elements creating imperfections in her photographs-- a collaboration with nature. This idea does not diminish her role as an artist. Mann leverages environmental interference to amplify emotion by carefully adjusting control through her lens, her negative, and her print, increasing her command of one while decreasing another.<sup>107</sup>

From the beginning of her career as a photographer, Mann primarily used aging or flawed cameras, allowing less control of the outcome of the image. In 1969, her father gave her a damaged Leica III with a faulty focus knob and problematic optical coating, variables that caused a flare in her earliest photographs.<sup>108</sup> Although she studied writing at university and not photography, she attended three photo workshops in the early 1970s, the most formative of which was the Ansel Adams Yosemite Workshop.<sup>109</sup> At Adams's suggestion, Mann began using a 5x7 format camera.<sup>110</sup> Then, in 1973, Mann allowed a stranger stranded at the bus station to stay in her home and, in gratitude, he sent her an 8x10 format camera he had inherited.<sup>111</sup> She

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<sup>107</sup> Carmi notes that Mann's art has been perceived as natural, decreasing the perception of Mann as a great artist. Carmi, "Sally Mann's American Vision of the Land," *Journal of Art Historiography*, 8.

<sup>108</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, 402.

<sup>109</sup> Roy Proctor, "Lens of Life," *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (November 21, 2010), G1, G4.

<sup>110</sup> Mann, Greenough, Kennel, Daniels, Als, and Faust, *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings*, 25.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* 284.

uses lenses with varying amounts of what she calls “decrepitude,” with some in good condition and others with dislodged components, light leaks, and mold growing on the glass.<sup>112</sup>

When Mann began the Southern landscapes, she used a damaged lens and experimented with Ortho Film, a high contrast, low sensitivity emulsion, to mimic the appearance of collodion photographs. Ortho Film allowed Mann to be less precise with her technique because it requires longer exposures.<sup>113</sup> In his discussion of Mann’s technique in *A Thousand Crossings*, Malcolm Daniel explains that Ortho Film’s “slow speed allowed her to use an antique lens that had no shutter or aperture, was held together with tape, and let in a huge amount of light.”<sup>114</sup> The slow exposures gave Mann flexibility to adjust light levels over the course of minutes (or hours in the case of Fig. 1) instead of seconds.

Searching for a way to add more history or emotion to the photos in her *Deep South* series, Mann invited Mark and Frances Osterman to Lexington to teach her how to create wet plate collodion photographs and to help set up her studio for the new process.<sup>115</sup> Mann describes the intricate practice of collodion photography, in which a photographer risks flaws at each step of the long process unless performing the ritual quickly and perfectly, using fresh chemicals, distilled water, flawless framing glass for the plates and a specific cleaning solution to prepare the plates.<sup>116</sup> In the same way Mann came to appreciate her father’s defective Leica III, the damaged camera lenses for her large-format camera, and the mistakes in Matthew Miley’s glass plate negatives, she started to embrace the mistakes in her collodion photos: a

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<sup>112</sup> “Collodion Process, Sally Mann” Video, *Art21: Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 1, Episode 1*, (PBS, 2001).

<sup>113</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, 221.

<sup>114</sup> Mann, Greenough, Kennel, Daniels, Als, and Faust, *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings*, 39.

<sup>115</sup> Ravenal, Strauss, and Tucker, *Sally Mann: The Flesh and the Spirit*, 40; Mann, Greenough, Kennel, Daniels, Als, and Faust, *A Thousand Crossings*, 246.

<sup>116</sup> “Collodion Process, Sally Mann,” *Art21: Art in the Twenty-First Century*.

ripple effect or peeling edges from imperfections in the collodion layer, the streaks caused by pieces of dust in the emulsion, dark corners, or scratches on the glass plate. In *A Thousand Crossings*, Sarah Greenough describes this transition, saying:

Thus, if the Osterman's or nineteenth-century manuals advised her to polish the glass carefully, she did not, causing pits, spots, and comet-like streaks in her prints...; if they directed her to pour the collodion slowly and evenly over the entire plate, she did not, creating bands and pools...; and if they cautioned her to handle the edges of the negative with care to avoid damaging the fragile emulsion, she did not, welcoming the losses and cracks...<sup>117</sup>

To create a glass plate negative, Mann first cleans the high-quality framing glass with glass wax. Onto the plate, she pours a mix of collodion and ether across the plate and tilts it to evenly coat the surface, draining the excess back into the container. Next, she dips the coated plate into a silver nitrate bath which makes the surface light sensitive for up to three minutes. After creating an image by exposing the plate through the camera, she pours developer over the surface, a mixture of ferrous sulfate and grain alcohol, and rinses the plate in water to stop the process. Lastly, she fixes the image using sodium thiosulphate and rinses the plate. She built a darkroom in the back of her car, and she coats, sensitizes, exposes, and fixes the plates on site, complicating an already challenging process.<sup>118</sup>

During the ritual of the collodion process, Mann manipulates the flaws to create a sense of emotion at the sites she photographs. In *Deep South* and *Mother Land*, Mann held the errors at bay, allowing a small amount of flare, fog, specks, or scratches. These accidents, however, can only be moderately controlled. Mann describes moments praying for the serendipitous outcomes in *Hold Still*, explaining:

I grew to welcome the ripply flaws caused by a breeze or the tiny mote of dust, which ideally would settle right where I needed a comet-like streak, or the

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<sup>117</sup> Mann, Greenough, Kennel, Daniels, Als, and Faust, *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings*, 41.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 249; "Collodion Process, Sally Mann," *Art21: Art in the Twenty-First Century*.



emulsion that peeled away from the plate in the corner where I hadn't liked the telephone line anyway. Unlike the young narrator in *Swann's Way* praying for the angel of certainty, I found myself praying for the angel of uncertainty. And many times she visited my plates, bestowing upon them essential peculiarities, persuasive consequence, intrigue, drama, and allegory.<sup>119</sup>

In an example of the way she amplifies flaws from the film *What Remains*, the artist rinses a glass plate in a nearby river instead of the distilled water required for a flawless image. In her most damaged photographs, those taken at Civil War battlefields, Mann allowed the ripples, starbursts, and flares free reign. The resulting photos appear ravaged by fire or otherwise destroyed. The artist scrapes the emulsion from the plates she does not want, repurposing the plate for a new work and thus controlling the final step of the collaboration.<sup>120</sup>

Mann not only mastered taking photographs but also printing them, inventing a finish for her prints that incorporates diatomaceous earth and, possibly, dirt from the location where she took the photograph. Ted Orland, a talented photographer who worked for Ansel Adams, described Mann as “among the half-dozen best printers in the country.”<sup>121</sup> When Mann prints the photographs, she enlarges the negative by projecting it onto light-sensitive paper. Enlarging photos from glass plate negatives poses a larger challenge as the plate or image increases in size. Mann prints photographs as large as 40 inches by 50 inches. After stopping and fixing the printed image, she coats the print using a varnish she invented to compensate for the lower paper quality she uses for the large prints. She combines a Soluvar Liquitex matte varnish with diatomaceous earth, sediment composed of fossilized microalgae found in river deltas, applying

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<sup>119</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, 224.

<sup>120</sup> “Collodion Process, Sally Mann,” *Art21: Art in the Twenty-First Century*; Cantor, *What Remains: The Life and Work of Sally Mann*.

<sup>121</sup> Stauffer, *Southern Landscape* 7.

the mixture to the surface of her prints with a paint roller.<sup>122</sup> In *Deep South/Battlefields*, Erik Stephan explains that, for her battlefield series, she also mixes dirt from the battlefield into the varnish, resulting in the print's velvety surface.<sup>123</sup> Combined with the scale of the photographs, the quality of the surface removes a barrier between the surface and the viewer, amplifying the depth of the image and giving the impression one can step into the photograph. One critic asserted that the larger scale of contemporary landscape photography indicates that the artists are grappling with the question of humanity's place in the world.<sup>124</sup>

In an image from *Deep South* that speaks to the themes of lynching and violence more explicitly than the others, Mann integrates some of the most blatant flaws to illustrate the violence that took place there (Fig. 11). Mann describes the specific location of one photograph of the Tallahatchie River, the spot where Emmett Till's body was thrown into the river.<sup>125</sup> In 1955, 14-year-old Till traveled to Mississippi to visit family. While there, he interacted with a cashier at a convenience store. The 23-year-old, white woman, Carolyn Bryant, accused Till of whistling at her and grabbing her by the waist. Her husband, Roy, and half-brother, J.W. Milam, abducted Till from his bed, ignoring his aunt's offer to pay them to let him go. They beat Till until his face was unrecognizable, shot him, then tied a 75 lb. cotton gin to his neck with barbed wire and threw his body into the Tallahatchie River.<sup>126</sup> When Emmett Till's body was retrieved, the local authorities attempted to facilitate a quick burial to minimize the crime. Till's mother, Mamie

<sup>122</sup> Mann originally used Agfa paper, but she switched to Ilford when she noticed the quality of the Agfa paper had declined. Sally Mann, "Sally Mann at Art Institute of Chicago," *Art Institute of Chicago Podcast*, (September 16, 2006).

<sup>123</sup> Stephan, *Sally Mann: Deep South/Battlefields*, 15. I have not found this mentioned anywhere else. The artist describes her varnish mixture in minute detail in some places, but she has never mentioned incorporating soil from the place she took the photo.

<sup>124</sup> Mark Feeney, "Examining Nature's Beauty with Bold Artistic Visions", *Boston Globe* (August 3, 2005), <http://archive.boston.com>.

<sup>125</sup> Sally Mann, *Deep South*, 52.

<sup>126</sup> Richard Pères-Peña, "Woman Linked to 1955 Emmett Till Murder Tells Historian Her Claims were False," *The New York Times* (January 27, 2017).

Till-Mobley, requested that his body be brought home to Chicago, where she organized an open-casket funeral. Thousands of people viewed Emmett Till's body (Fig 10), and *Jet* magazine published a photo later reproduced in publication across the country. The photograph brought the violence of racism to light on a national level.<sup>127</sup>

Mann centers the photograph on a gash-like disturbance in the earth in the foreground, a V-shape echoed in a reflection in the water in the middle of the image. Mann photographed the Tallahatchie River as part of the *Deep South* series in 1998. The two darker areas bookend the glassy surface of the water, a slow, meandering river, a river bank in the foreground, and the reflection of trees and bushes toward the top of the image. The V-shape of the shadow on the surface of the water also points like an arrow, emphasizing the ruptured surface of the riverbank. In the range of Mann's compositions, with the battlefield photos as her darkest, *Deep South* represents some of her most anemic, high key images. The deepest areas of contrast lie in the corners and in the rift. The bottom corners, darkened by the lens, mimic the V shape again, and the top corners, where the collodion did not reach the edges or peeled away, also pull the viewer's eye to the center of the frame. The water almost glows, and the details of the river bank are hazy, but the fissure is more in focus, with the jagged edges emphasized. Through the collodion technique and the lack of modern or man-made elements, Mann encourages the perception that the photograph was created in the 19th century. The soft focus and dark corners make the viewer feel they are peering through a hole, into a hazy past. The glassy surface of the river glows with the reflected light of the sky above, but a fissure in the riverbank disrupts the tranquility of the slow-moving river. Though Mann sometimes adds flaws or trauma to the surface of the photo, she introduces trauma through the rift in the earth in this

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<sup>127</sup> Carmi, "Sally Mann's American Vision of the Land," *Journal of Art Historiography*, 23.

photo. The flecks of black at the edges may be a result of Mann rinsing the plate in the Tallahatchie River, where the boy's body was left for days. The texture of the split resembles Till's battered and distorted face, the violence of the churned soil emphasized by the placid water into which it recedes. In a thesis on the photograph as memorial image, Allison Hafera describes the picture in relation to Emmett Till, saying, "By removing the scream of the body Mann's photograph acts more as a mourning moan: deep, haunting, sorrowful, made out of respect, allowing the power of the story to rest within the space of discovery and in the retelling."<sup>128</sup>

In 2001, Mann photographed a cornfield in Antietam National Battlefield, the site of the deadliest one-day battle in American history. On September 17, 1862, Union soldiers advanced through the cornfield, emerging on the other side and cut down almost instantly by Confederate artillery fire. In a matter of hours, almost 8,000 soldiers died in and around the cornfield. One account of the battle describes the cornfield in the aftermath, with the soldiers fallen in their formations and every corn stalk cut down by bullets as if harvested by a knife.<sup>129</sup> Mann describes the day she visited Antietam, saying:

There are four buses and all kinds of people going by, and it's 80 degrees and the gnats are getting in my eyes, and it's the most commonplace field in the world. But I began taking pictures, and the pictures had all of the mystery in them. I can't explain it. I would be drawn to these completely mongrel-like, scrubby little places. Not the places that have all the little placards but just little orphan corners of the battlefields. I'm not mystical in any way, but I think there are places which have some kind of power.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Alison R. Hafera, "Taken in Water: The Photograph as Memorial Image in Sally Mann's *Deep South*" (Master's Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007), <https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.wm.edu/docview/304831170?accountid=15053>, 38.

<sup>129</sup> Mann, Greenough, Kennel, Daniels, Als, and Faust, *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings*, 45.

<sup>130</sup> Malcolm Jones, "Love, Death, and Light," *Newsweek* (September 8, 2003).

The ripples occur when there is a breeze over the wet collodion, so Mann took the photo during a cool breeze on a hot, summer day, surrounded by rolling, green hills and golden yellow cornfields. In Mann's photo, however, the ripple in the collodion obscures the landscape. Rows of corn stand on the left side of the photo, the only discernible natural feature. The ripples resemble flames burning through the field or spirits rising from the ground. The image expresses the violence that took place there. At the bottom of the frame, the grass seems to be close to the camera, like Mann laid on the ground to take the photo. The low angle suggests the perspective of a dying soldier.<sup>131</sup> On the right edge of the photograph and along the top edge, scratches and dirt pepper the surface, adding a layer of age and wear to the image.

In a second photo taken at Antietam (Fig. 13), Mann created a scene of haunting darkness. The nearly black clouds at the top of the image look like a violent storm. The field has been reduced to a solid gray expanse, speckled by white dots and scratches. In the sky, the white flecks look like constellations, but in the grass, they seem more sinister. The title, "Starry Night," an ironic reference to Vincent Van Gogh's impressionist painting, encourages a simultaneous awareness of the beauty of the landscape and the effect of the flaws in the skies. The overall composition is ominous and, as described by Ayelet Carmi, the simplified features resemble a gray and black Rothko painting riddled with bullet holes.<sup>132</sup> The collodion peels away from the bottom left corner of the plate, creating a pitch black corner. The jagged edge looks ripped and folded, with cracks extending into the center of the picture plane. It's as if someone has tried to claw his or her way out of the photograph. In the same way, the tree to the right brackets the corner of the photo and the other two corners have either been cut off by the lens or are darkened where the collodion failed to reach.

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<sup>131</sup> Mann, Greenough, Kennel, Daniels, Als, and Faust, *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings*, 44.

<sup>132</sup> Carmi, "Sally Mann's American Vision of the Land," *Journal of Art Historiography*, 19-20.

Mann tries to capture to the emotions she feels thinking about the violence that took place in a given location, but the flaws in the cornfield photo and “Untitled (Starry Night)” imply violence against the land, as well. In *War Upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War*, Lisa Brady considers the environment as both a victim of and an agent in the Civil War. The cornfield represents the way bullets cut down stalks of corn the same way they cut down the rows of soldiers.<sup>133</sup>

The intervention of the flaws also causes the viewer to question reality, ask what parts of the image are real, and, subsequently, doubt the truth of other photographs. The technique encourages critical engagement with the image, the landscape, and history. The two photographs from Antietam transform the yellow cornfield and green hills into a grey hellscape, with the emotion and darkness amplified by the flaws and tears. Compared to the photos from *Deep South*, these are her darkest in color. Although she created the image on a sunny afternoon, the images appear to have been taken either at night or during a storm as a result not only of Mann’s decisions, but also the chemical reaction on the glass plate, the tiny flecks of dust or other debris, and the mechanism of the camera lens, with every component acting as an agent in the process. With the embedded pieces of dirt and dust, Mann has allowed the land to embed itself in the glass plate negative. The dirt also recalls the soldiers buried on the battlefield, becoming part of the earth. Although the image still reflects human emotions and cultural constructs, it demonstrates that the artist controls only part of the process, with many technical components out of her control.

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<sup>133</sup> For further discussion of the environmental impact of the Civil War, see Lisa Brady, *War Upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

As a living artist with a background in creative writing, Sally Mann uses words to shape the understanding of her artwork. Her monographs, memoir, and interviews provide insight into her intentions, however one must consider her words as part of the artist's attempt to define her brand and establish her legacy. Mann has woven her photographs together into a narrative about family, the land, death, history, and race, and this project has examined her photography and writing from outside of that story. Using a postcolonial ecocritical lens troubles existing understandings of representations of the Southern landscape in Mann's work.

In her photography, the environment plays the role of repository for history, an agent in and witness to silenced narratives. She uses nineteenth-century technology and picturesque aesthetics, with a sentimentality implying nostalgia for the past. Her words, however, convey a twenty-first-century perspective on history and race. In Mann's description of her photographs, she communicates the sorrow she feels when considering the violence that took place in the American South. Although landscape photographers like Ansel Adams encourage an ahistorical, emotional experience of landscapes, Mann tries to resist the impulse with references to oppression.

She also describes the earth as "matter lender," as illustrated by the photographs of the body farm. She combines the idea of "mother nature" with death, portraying it as a balanced system of life and death. This approach does not imply that the earth is an infinite resource, but it risks minimizing the dangers of human-caused climate change. The body farm photos also illustrate the way humanity is intertwined with the land through death, but the photos channel Mann's meditation on mortality rather than an understanding of the ecology of death.

In the body farm and battlefield photographs, Mann's technique integrates materials from the locations she photographs and gives agency to the land by allowing the technical intervention of dust and dirt in the final image. However, Mann does not aspire to conform to the standards of postcolonial ecocriticism. She recognizes her own limited agency in the outcome of the photographs and emphasizes the importance of the land for making even her family photos possible. With the flaws, she undermines the idea of photography as an objective medium, showing how expressive and subjective the medium can be.

Looking at Mann's photographs of the American South, one sees the complexity of Mann's relationship with the environment, the artist simultaneously pragmatic with her understanding that she will one day become a part of the earth and romantic in her emotional response in beautiful settings. Postcolonial ecocriticism shows the importance of considering her work as a reflection of the context in which she lives. With the 2018 retrospective exhibition, *A Thousand Crossings*, at the National Gallery of Art and the artist's 2015 memoir, *Hold Still*, scholars have new photographs and primary sources to mine for ideas. A larger project might consider other postcolonial ecocritical interpretations of her work. For example, one might study her photographs of the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve as a representation of the environmentalist objective to preserve areas of pristine wilderness. For the project, Mann photographed a biosphere reserve located in the Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico. The project, titled *In Response to Place: Photographs from the Nature Conservancy's Last Great Places*, tasked photographers with capturing one of the nature reserves established by The Nature Conservancy, nicknamed "Last Great Places."<sup>134</sup> It would be fascinating to look at the reserve's specific conservation initiatives, assess the relationship between the reserve and indigenous populations, and

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<sup>134</sup> Andy Grundberg, *In Response to Place: Photographs from the Nature Conservancy's Last Great Places*, (Boston, Mass.; London: Bulfinch, 2002), 15.



consider the encounters between the Mayan and Spanish empires. Additionally, Mann's current exhibition at the National Gallery of Art includes new work on the theme of race, with photos of Virginia Carter, African American men, the Great Dismal Swamp, and nineteenth-century black churches. An expanded project could consider these photos in combination with *Deep South* and *Mother Land* in a discussion of race and the landscape, especially using Nixon's application of double-consciousness to the land.

Ecocriticism unsettles conventional interpretations of Mann's work, and it also adds to the discussion of some of her less frequently cited projects. For example, a discussion of non-human animals in ecocriticism could contribute to an analysis of the role of dogs and horses in Mann's books and photos, especially the chapter in *What Remains* about the death of her greyhound Eva. These ecological considerations, however, benefit from dialogue with postcolonial issue of race, class, and gender. Mann's work weaves the land together with history, so an ecocritical lens risks ignoring her objective. One could discuss any of Mann's photographs by considering the way that, as Timothy Morton suggests, "all art-- not just explicitly ecological art-- hard-wires the environment into its form."<sup>135</sup>

Mann creates work that evokes emotional reactions, creates controversy, and stimulates debate. Her manipulation of old techniques provides ideas for the next generation of artists who will also grapple with how to represent the environment and repressed histories. She successfully expresses her emotional connection to the American South and to the land. Rather than avoiding the subject of race, she grapples with it visually and tells stories of her own prejudices and inherited family shame. In Graham Huggan's introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, he explains that postcolonialism "does not seek a corrective

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<sup>135</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 11.

to the past as much as to trouble accepted versions of it,” and postcolonial ecocriticism complicates existing understandings of art rather than providing answers.<sup>136</sup> Like the image of the roots on Lake Pontchartrain (Fig. 1), Mann’s understanding of the landscape is tangled, messy, and hazy. It is complicated by ideas of death and history. It represents more than the scene in front of the lens, with the true appearance of the landscape blurred by time and obscured, as always, by the “angel of uncertainty.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Huggan, “General Introduction.” *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, 10.

<sup>137</sup> Mann, *Hold Still: A memoir with photographs*, 224.



Figure 1. Sally Mann, *Untitled (Deep South)*, 1998

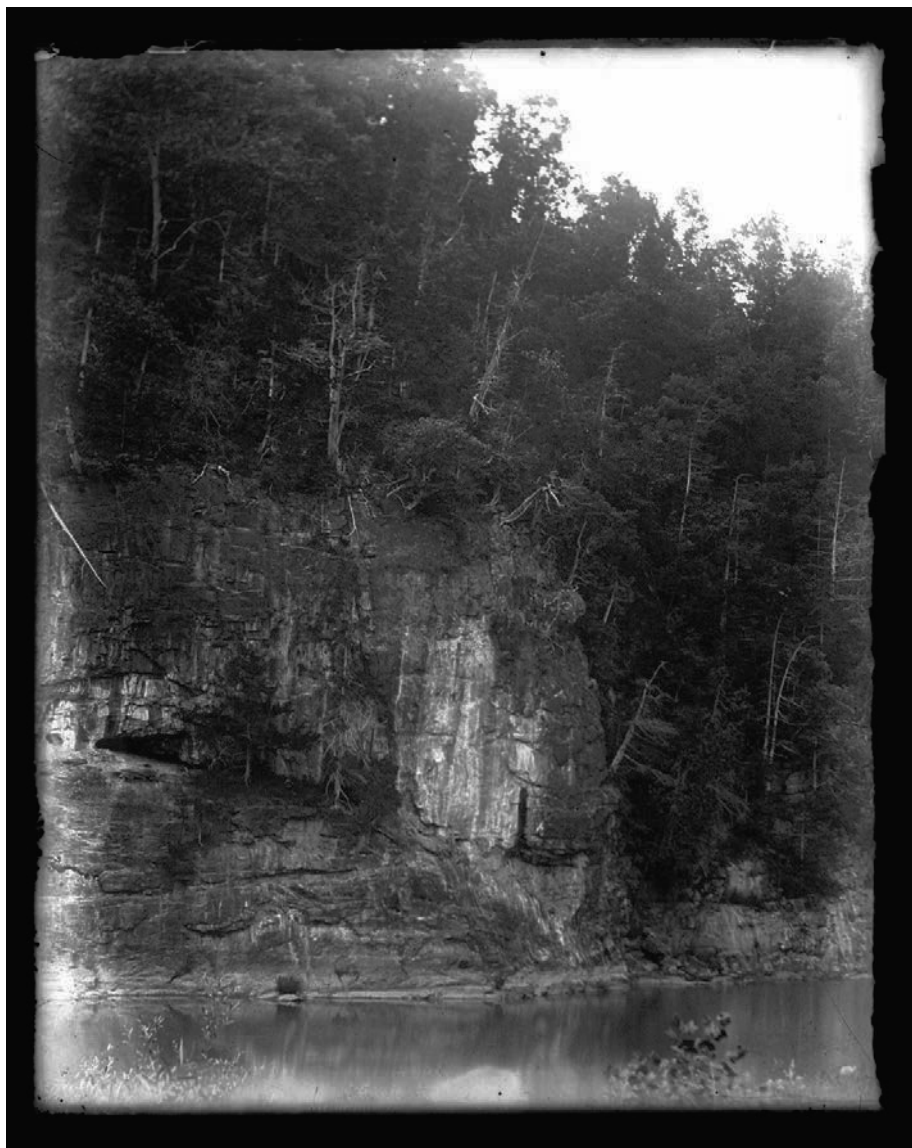


Figure 2. Matthew Miley, Photo of Rockbridge County, undated, In *Hold Still: A memoir with photographs*, 95.



Figure 3. Sally Mann. "The Perfect Tomato." 1994. Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago.

<http://www.mocp.org/detail.php?t=objects&type=browse&f=maker&s=Mann%2C+Sally&record=8>



Figure 4. Sally Mann. "Untitled (Fontainebleau, Louisiana)." 1998. Retrieved from <https://www.reynoldsgallery.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/image-1.jpeg>.



Figure 5. Sally Mann. "Untitled (December 8, 2000)." 2000. Retrieved from <https://historyofourworld.wordpress.com/2010/04/14/what-remains-sally-mann>.



Figure 6. Sally Mann. "Untitled (Body Farm)." 2000-2001. Retrieved from <http://sallymann.com/selected-works/body-farm>.



Figure 7. Sally Mann. "Untitled (Body Farm)." 2000-2001. Retrieved from <http://sallymann.com/selected-works/body-farm>.





Figure 8. Sally Mann. "Untitled (Body Farm)." 2000-2001. Retrieved from <http://sallymann.com/selected-works/body-farm>.



Figure 9. Sally Mann. "Untitled (Body Farm)." 2000-2001. Retrieved from <http://sallymann.com/selected-works/body-farm>



Figure 10. David Jackson. "Emmett Till." 1955. Retrieved from <http://100photos.time.com/photos/emmett-till-david-jackson>.



Figure 11. "Untitled," 1998 Deep South/Emmett Till. In *Hold Still: A memoir with photographs*, 235.



Figure 12. Sally Mann. "Untitled (Antietam #9)." 2001. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Va. <https://www.vmfa.museum/piction/6027262-110471110>.



Figure 13. Sally Mann. "Antietam (Starry Night)." 2001. Alan Kirshner and Deborah Mihaloff Art Collection. Retrieved from <http://www.historynet.com/landscapes-light-new-sally-mann-exhibit-explores-civil-war-american-south.htm>.



Figure 14. Sally Mann. "Untitled #848 (Yucatan)." 1999. Retrieved from [http://www.luminous-lint.com/\\_\\_phv\\_app.php?p/Sally\\_\\_Mann](http://www.luminous-lint.com/__phv_app.php?p/Sally__Mann).

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