

**WALKING, WORKING, AND TINKERING: PERCEPTION AND PRACTICE IN  
ENVIRONMENTALISM**

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*Abstract:*

*“Walking, Working, and Tinkering: Perception and Practice in Environmentalism”* examines the venerated status of certain practices in the history of American environmentalism, particularly wilderness walking, traditional farming, and the scientific fieldwork of naturalists. These practices, which, following Foucault, I call “environmental techniques of the self,” are held up as ways of enacting, restoring, or cultivating a rightful relationship to the natural world. Specifically, I examine Henry David Thoreau on walking, Wendell Berry on work, Martin Heidegger on “dwelling,” and Aldo Leopold on ecological fieldwork. Through critical engagements with these authors I show how environmental techniques of the self tend to enact ecological subjectivities with reference to various figurations of perceptual truth, and how in this way they perform “nature” as a normative and critical concept. However, I suggest that traditional ecocritical practices are ill suited to a world that no longer seems holistically natural. Seeking an alternative modality of ecological practice I explore an under-acknowledged affinity between environmental philosophy and the practice of tinkering.

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## Chapter One

### The Politics of Naturalism and Environmental Techniques of the Self

*“Humans are losing touch with nature. We are on the threshold between a real world and a virtual world...” -- Michael Samways, conservation biologist*

Arguments over the viability of the concepts of “nature,” “wilderness,” or even “reality,” often seem to be operating wholly in the cognitive realm: the realm of ideas, discourses, images, tropes, and ideals. Thus genealogies of ecological consciousness tend to focus on how different ideas and ideals interact with one another, or with artistic and literary renderings of an idealized state or situation. However, the premise of this dissertation is that concentrating only on ideals and imagery and their direct renderings makes it too easy to miss the cultural and intellectual breadth and the historical depth of environmental thought. Hannah Arendt’s warning is appropriate here: “Tempting as it may be for the sake of sheer consistency...it would be a delusion and a grave injustice to

the problems of the modern age if one looked upon them merely from the viewpoint of the development of ideas” (1958, 333). It is necessary, in other words, to periodically revisit how ideas, in their effects and in their historical dynamics, are inextricably linked with practices, and with modes of experience that involve and include various technological artifacts and material circumstances and events.

While concepts are embedded in discursive structures, and can even be firmly stabilized within binaries such as “nature/politics,” such discursive structures are also embedded in what Wittgenstein called “forms of life,” which include embodied practices and projects carried on in a material environment. Words and concepts refer to the material world of practice, but it is also within the ongoing practical projects of living that concepts originate. If nature is a concept demanding critical attention, it should be attended to not only as a discursive construction, but also simultaneously as an embodied performance, or rather a set of various embodied performances. The practice or performance of “nature” in this sense is attested to by the numerous ecocritics and nature writers who advocate, theorize, and celebrate various concrete “techniques” for restoring one-ness with nature and becoming harmonized with or at home in “the environment.” Through the careful imbrication of thought and practice, these testimonies imply, one can actually become or work toward becoming un-alienated from physical nature. Such practices, I will argue, are a primary site of affect-generation for Western environmental consciousness. They are also one of the principal ways in which the nature-alienation problematic is manifested in contemporary ecocriticism and in the critical and

philosophical traditions on which environmentalism draws. To illuminate the sense of this preliminary claim, it will be helpful to take a brief pre-amble into the terrain of American environmental politics.

In 1995, an environmental organization called “Forest Guardians” sued the U.S. Forest Service to stop commercial logging operations in the Carson National Forest in Northern New Mexico. The Forest Guardians were bearing witness to what they saw as grave and continuing threats to endangered species and old growth forests. They cited a history of cozy relationships between the Forest Service and logging corporations, which they perceived as a travesty of the ideal of environmental stewardship. The lawsuit was an attempt to implement a hard-line “zero cut on public lands” vision, which the Forest Guardians shared with other environmental groups including, most prominently, the Sierra Club. They saw themselves, in short, as the inheritors of a venerated minority tradition that values nature for its own sake--the sole defenders of not just trees and owls but the land itself as an unaltered wilderness. They were well funded and the lawsuit met with some success.<sup>1</sup>

The problem was, the National Forests in Northern New Mexico have a particular history. Federal land holdings there are contested by local Hispano communities as having been unjustly expropriated from community land grants guaranteed in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo at the end of the Mexican-American War. The treaty promised to honor prior Spanish and Mexican land grants, which had given a large amount of land to

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<sup>1</sup> In telling this story I depend largely on Jake Kosek’s excellent book on the controversy, *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico* (2006).

the communities who had historically farmed this region using a stream diversion irrigation system that functioned as a common pool resource. Hispanos of Northern New Mexico claim Spanish, Anglo, and Native American descent, but cultural memory here recalls a history of ties to the land that predate European colonization. Today, while descendants of the recipient communities no longer have legal title to most of the originally granted lands, a complex history of contention and negotiation has led to continued if restricted economic uses of the forest lands by local communities. The lawsuit brought against the Forest Service led to a temporary stoppage of all timber extraction--not just clear-cutting by Duke Timber Corporation, but also commercial logging by smaller local Hispano timber companies, and even firewood cutting, on which many families in this area depend.

The controversy that ensued--which is chronicled in Jake Kosek's excellent book *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico* (2006)--quickly began to look less like brave "defenders of the earth" against the capitalist state, and more like white, urban, outsider environmentalists against the native Hispano communities. For most of the locals, environmentalists were simply the latest group of outsiders trying to separate Hispanos from their lands. Anthony Devargas, owner of a local timber company and long-time Hispano rights activist, became the front man for the local "green backlash." By his telling, the community had fought the U.S. government, the Forest Service, big logging corporations, housing developers, and now they were fighting these elitist urban greens. But if the environmentalists were simply the latest group, they



became a particularly hated opponent. Leaders of the Forest Guardians were even hung in effigy. Others had tried to exploit and expropriate, but these environmentalists had the singular arrogance to suggest that *they* were the true protectors of the forest, that they were the ones with a direct line to the real interests of nature, and that their feelings of affection and attachment to the forest alone were valid. They were the ones who could see the ecological ethical truth of this land. These preservationists seemed to have painted the locals as exploiters, and this, perhaps, was more unforgivable than any past expropriations or despoliations, however unjust the latter may have been.

Like all such political battles, it became a battle for hearts and minds. And the environmentalists lost it badly. As a matter of fact, fault lines were exposed within the “environmentalist community” itself. North American environmentalism over the course of the twentieth century had come to rely upon a close linkage between nature and nativeness, and when this assumption was thrown into confusion by the native Hispano backlash, so were environmentalists. While some activists remained entrenched in the zero-cut preservationist vision, there were a number of high-profile defections and an unprecedented display of environmentalist breast-beating. The influential conservationist Chellis Glendenning proclaimed herself a “recovering environmentalist” and wrote an open letter to other environmentalists featured in *La Jicarita*, a local newspaper, announcing that “the idea of wilderness we have been using is flawed.” She went on to explain that wilderness advocates cannot see this because of “a chasm that separates the mindset we learn as members of a mass-dominating society from the mindset fostered in

land-based, sustainable communities.” Rather than inching toward compromise, she concludes, environmentalists should “stand behind the politics of indigenous Chicano people 100 percent” (Glendenning 1996).

Although the Forest Guardians lost in the court of public opinion, they may have nonetheless succeeded in forcing a debate in the specific terms of who had the right to speak for this forested land. This is very different from the question of who has the right to own this land, and in the context of this fight the discourse of the interests of nature became more politically powerful than the discourse of communal or individual rights to property. Many powerful political narratives were at work here: the controversy was about race, rural poverty, unjust expropriation, colonialism, and anti-urbanism. But the crucial aspect came to be the question of how a rightful affective relationship to the non-human world is properly cultivated and enacted. Wilderness preservationists talked about the spiritual connectivity that comes from the ascetic journey into the untouched wild landscape. Here is how Sam Hitt of the Forest Guardians described it:

When I go out deeper into [wilderness], I end up going deeper into myself. It does not happen all the time; most of the time I go to the forest and I see problems. I see cows in the wilderness. I see roads that are polluting sediments into the streams. I don't see the creatures that should be there... If you're not sad, you have no right to be alive in the twenty-first century. You're living inside a cocoon. You're numb. You've lost connection with the wild and you're blind to the incredible ecospasm that's going on, on the planet. It's global suicide, the greatest extinction in 60 million years... there is something about [wilderness] which makes us stronger, physically and mentally; it recharges our batteries; it restores our souls... It's these trips, both the problems and

the beauty, that reaffirm my commitment to what I am doing and remind me of why it is so important. (Kosek 2004, 138)

Hitt's adversaries not only resented the way groups like the Forest Guardians try to marshal the authority of scientific expert knowledge to their cause, they also countered that true knowledge of and communion with this landscape comes through the humble, land-based subsistence work of dwelling deeply in place. "Wilderness," according to Anthony DeVargas, "is something that is entirely a white man's invention; it is not something I relate to. It is something I have a deep reaction against. I have lived on and worked on and lived off this land my entire life. They just don't get it." "I've fought for the forest," says DeVargas, "because it belongs to me and I belong to it" (Kosek 2004, 115). Another local wood cutter talks about diminishing ties to the land, again in terms of work as the practice that negotiates the attachment: "We have forgotten our ties to the land.... people are forgetting how to do real hard work. They are not out in the woods or in the mountains any more" (ibid, xiii).

It is hard not to sympathize with the local backlash when the seriousness of work, labor, and subsistence is held up against the elite concern for wilderness as "a playground for a few rich urban environmentalists," even if the issue of historical communal dispossession in this particular case is left aside. However, the long embittering stalemate over the Carson National Forest suggests that both sides share the same problematic ideal of an unassailable personal connection with nature, be it the agrarian environmentalist vision or the ethical aesthetics of wilderness. Does this case, then,

illustrate two sides of a failed politics of naturalism? Even that may be too simple a lesson to draw from the controversy. After a few decades of bitter clashes there are hints of renewed dialogue and multilateral work towards the shared cause of a sustainable commons that includes “inhabited wilderness” (Matthews, K. 2012). Such an ecologically and politically promising outcome may not have been possible if the affective and ethical energies marshaled on both sides, with their different ways of experientially engaging this forest, had not contested this landscape.

With this sort of puzzle in mind, this dissertation aims to stop and think about the importance--to environmental politics, ethics, and philosophy--of the different practices through which attachment to nature is cultivated, performed, and negotiated. To describe these practical performances of nature, I use the term “environmental techniques of the self.” This terminology is inspired by Michel Foucault, who coined the phrase “techniques of the self” to refer to practices by which one operates on oneself intellectually, emotionally, physically, or spiritually, with the goal of ethical self-transformation (Foucault 1989, 16-49). Examples could include confession, meditation, following a code of conduct, or even physical exercise. The techniques of self I am interested in are of a particular sort, and are almost too extroverted to be called techniques of the *self* properly. We might go so far as to call them “techniques of environment,” in the sense that the purpose of such practices is to become radically environed--to become immersed in or attuned to one's physical, particularly natural, surroundings. Through these practices one makes one's physical surroundings more

affectively vivid and more fundamentally *present*. I concentrate especially on wilderness walking, agrarian subsistence work, and ecological fieldwork as ethically edifying practices that are simultaneously ways of working on the self and a “performance” of certain normative conceptualizations of nature.

*interrupted idylls*

Eco-philosophical practices of the self arise in a context of pervasive concerns about alienation from nature, a concern reflected in the rhetoric of both the wilderness advocates and their critics in the New Mexico case. Naturalist Robert Pye encapsulated this anxiety with his phrase “the extinction of experience,” (Pye 1993) which has been incorporated into the common parlance of conservation biologists (Miller 2005, Stokes 2006, Samways 2007), who worry that “humans are losing touch with nature” because in our practical everyday lives “we are on the threshold between a real world and a virtual world” (Samways 2007). Similar lamentations have become the stock-in-trade of North American ecocriticism, from the reformist politics of Al Gore to the deep ecology of Dave Foreman.

In his well-known treatise on pastoralism, *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx drew up a specifically American literary lineage for this perception of a troubling rift or rupture between our selves and our natural surroundings, which he found expressed in the literary trope of the “interrupted idyll.” Marx found the “interrupted idyll” to be an

expression of a peculiarly Anglo-American anxiety internal to an American pastoralism that is not only literary but also political. This anxiety concerns “the Machine's” steady, irreversible encroachment on the bucolic socius of the newly settled North American landscape. Marx offers an archetypal instance from Nathaniel Hawthorne's journal:

On the morning of July 27, 1844, Nathaniel Hawthorne sat down in the woods near Concord, Massachusetts, to await (as he put it) 'such little events as may happen.'... From several pages [of his journal] we get an impression of a man in almost perfect repose, idly brooding upon the minutiae of nature, and now and then permitting his imagination a brief flight.... Hawthorne is satisfied to set down unadorned sense impressions, and especially sounds—sounds made by birds, squirrels, insects, and moving leaves.... He hears the village clock strike, cowbells tinkle, and mowers whetting their scythes.

'But, hark! There is the whistle of the locomotive—the long shriek, harsh, above all other harshness, for the space of a mile cannot mollify it into harmony. It tells a story of busy men, citizens, from the hot street, who have come to spend a day in a country village, men of business; in short of all unquietness; and no wonder that it gives such a startling shriek, since it brings the noisy world into the midst of our slumbrous peace.' (1964, 14)

Marx traced the roots of this trope through Romanticism to the Virgilian pastoral, a venerated if “decadent” (1964, 75) literary mode that was retrofitted in the early modern era into a potentially realizable living reality in the “middle landscape” of New England and Virginia, and subsequently throughout the whole “New World.” Neither howling wilderness nor squalid city, “America” seemed to bring the Virgilian ideal actually within reach. The resulting “hold upon [Americans'] minds of the pastoral

ideal,” Marx concluded, was the only explanation for “their heightened sensitivity to the onset of the new industrial power” (1964, 33). The pastoral ideal, he suggested, was the traditional artistic terrain of compromise between nature and culture, but just when a realized version seemed within reach, the pan-urbanizing technologies of the industrial revolution began to disruptively encroach upon it.

Marx, like the American writers he treated, offered no resolution. Instead, he handily deflected this obligation, ultimately suggesting that resolving the seeming conflict between the demands of industry and the humane “good life” “belongs not to art but to politics” (1964, 365). The ecocritical genre that has taken off over the last half century belies this distinction to some degree, as it comprises a continuum between ecological politics and the “art” of nature writing. In spite of its own conclusion, Marx's book is a fine early example of this genre. In any case, it is ecocriticism that has most definitively taken up the challenge of seeking a resolution to the antagonisms between the barely controlled explosion of industrial activity and technological accretion on the one hand and the visions of the ideal environment that it seems to threaten on the other.

The figure of the interrupted idyll has proliferated in the era of popular environmental consciousness. Indeed, the symbolism of the “machine in the garden” could be stretched to cover almost all of contemporary ecocriticism. But doing so would obscure much. Pastoralism, even in the U.S., is only one strain of thought within the critical responses to changing technological and environmental realities. Though the pastoral ideal is an important strain in the history of environmental consciousness, it is

important to note that it exists historically in dynamic conjunction with other ideas, as well as with emergent events, practices, and material circumstances, which ferment, merge, mutate, or hive off to assemble in new formations. This is exactly the kind of process Marx traces between the Elizabethan era and the end of the nineteenth century, during which time the pastoral tradition was engaging with nascent theories of democracy, the European discovery of the Americas, the Protestant ethic, an epistemological revolution and the romantic reaction to it, the rise of capitalism, and the attendant industrial revolution. What results is something new. Marx still wishes to call it a “pastoral ideal,” but as he says, it is a “complex” pastoral—one that merges with romantic transcendentalism, while also incorporating a civic republican political vision based on a theory of innate moral sentiments, and negotiating technological primitivism as a central element.

This concatenated ideal, birthed largely in nineteenth-century America, proved profoundly influential in the development of twentieth-century environmentalism. But we have since seen new types of technological intrusion into the lifeworld, unimagined by Samuel Clemens or Nathaniel Hawthorne. The closure of the American frontier was quickly followed by the “global closure” of state-territorial frontiers worldwide. Commercial networks have extended, and the urbanization of far-flung state-territories has gone from merely virtual to largely actual in much of the world. And perhaps most importantly, “the machine” that threatens the pastoral ideal has taken on novel form as ambient anthropogenic environmental threat: dust bowls, atmospheric radiation,



pervasive pollution, global warming, ozone depletion, dissipative anthropogenic risk. Chernobyl's radiation in the snow is different from the locomotive in Sleepy Hollow. The environment itself has become the threat. The demonic steam engine, the satanic mill, and the devilish “iron horse” were, as Marx illustrates, understood in American literary proto-environmentalism as dis-integrative threats to a harmonious pastoral existence, but they were at least somewhat localized, even if the psychological or symbolic effects seemed troublingly transcendent to a few sensitive souls. In retrospect they seem less insidious.

*naturalism and its discontents*

If the character of “the machine” has changed, so has the conceptualization of “the garden”--the lost or threatened ideal that motivates much of what we now call ecocriticism. The trepidation about industry and the machine expressed through the pastoral ideal has become a more fundamental, more primarily existential anxiety about alienation from the physical environment itself. The old pastoral compromise has given way to strains of popular consciousness that extol untouched wilderness, visceral experience, or radical eco-localism, and which draw sharp distinctions between the nature-alienated, modern, Western mode of being and the naturalism of “traditional” societies. Contemporary environmental consciousness has seized on an ideal of becoming subjectively re-naturalized through a kind of ecological conversion experience.

We can use Paul Wapner's phrase and call it "the dream of naturalism" (2010), but we must emphasize that here being re-embedded in nature is figured as nothing less than being returned to *reality* itself. The normative weight that the concept of "nature" has carried since antiquity is here applied specifically to environmental ethics with a renewed potency. If it were regained, the logic goes, this unification with real nature would result in our becoming better ecological selves—we would see the ecological truth more clearly, we would feel more deeply and surely what is environmentally just, and we would gain the resolve to act accordingly.

Environmental consciousness in the age of ambient anthropogenic threats must be understood as more than a simple enlargement of ethical scope from humans to non-human entities. If it were merely that, environmental politics would probably be easier to negotiate. We would just have to demonstrate the causal ecological connections, trot out the victims, co-opt a few extant normative discourses, expose the hypocrisy, and wait for the eco-legitimation crisis to unfold. But as literary theorist Timothy Morton argues, environmental politics presents greater difficulties because ecological consciousness entails altogether new modes of experience. Morton compares this uncanny novelty with the explication of "the unconscious."

Nobody likes it when you mention the unconscious, not because you are pointing out something obscene that should remain hidden—that is at least partly enjoyable. Nobody likes it because when you mention it, it becomes *conscious*. In the same way, when you mention the environment, you bring it into the foreground. In other words, it stops being the

environment. ...When you think about where your waste goes, your world starts to shrink. (2006, 1)

Or rather, it starts to dis-integrate and diffract. It becomes suffused with the buildings, makings, doings, leavings, and beings of other selves. The risky, poisonous traces of others undoes what, at least in retrospect, seems to have been the neutral, surrounding, background-ness of the natural environment. As anthropologist Tim Ingold puts it, the “spherical” environment that we used to live *in* with experiential surety seems to have given way to the objectified, mechanistic “global environment” that calls for technological management (2000, 209-18).

Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*, the first popular book on global warming and still one of the most widely read, was dedicated to lamenting precisely this situation. “Nature” is no more, says McKibben, because humanity's mark, whether visible or invisible, is now everywhere. McKibben's interrupted idyll mirrors Hawthorne's quite closely, and yet the interruption is decidedly modern.

Almost every day I hike up the hill at my back door; within a hundred yards the woods swallow me up, and there is nothing to remind me of human society--no trash, no stumps, no fence, not even a real path.... It is a world apart from man. But, once in a while, someone will be cutting wood further down the valley and the snarl of the chainsaw will fill the woods. It is harder, these days, to get caught up in the timeless meaning of the forest, for man is near by....

Now that we have changed the most basic forces around us, the noise of that chainsaw will always be in the woods. We have changed the atmosphere and that is changing the weather.

The temperature, the rainfall are no longer entirely the work of some separate, uncivilizable force, but are in part the product of our habits, our economies, our ways of life. Even in the most remote wilderness, where the strictest laws forbid the felling of a single tree, the sound of that saw will be clear. (McKibben 1989, 40)

Ecological problems are deadly serious, but taking them seriously seems to be a deeply unpleasant business—and not only because of the moral imperative for material sacrifices it entails or the apocalyptic despair it induces. Worrying about ozone holes, carbon footprints, and pollution has a tendency to make the world of everyday experience come undone for us. When environmentalists get philosophical—and it doesn't take long—they quickly set their critical sights on Descartes for driving a wedge of doubtful conjecture between the spiritualized subject and its supposedly objective material surroundings, and on Newton for rendering the environment a disenchanted pile of inert dead matter. But for two or three centuries these matters remained, for the most part, troubling only to philosophers. It is with the advent of environmental crisis that they become broadly realized cultural problems. Environmental consciousness, as sociologist Ulrich Beck pointed out, means that “everyday thought and imagination is *removed from its moorings in the world of the visible.*” At this point, “everything must be viewed with a double gaze, and can only be correctly understood and judged through this doubling. The world of the visible must be investigated, relativized and evaluated with respect to a second reality, only existent in thought and yet concealed in the world.” “What becomes the subject of controversy” is “what everyday consciousness does *not* see, and *cannot*

*perceive*: radioactivity, pollutants and threats in the future [i.e. ecological risks]” (1991, 72-73).

What seems to have been lost is nothing less than the old-fashioned, legible, homely world. Environmentalism is not just about fear of pollution and biophilia, it is also about recovering this sensually affording, deeply lived-in, legible environment. Policy-oriented environmentalists may hope to recover it by solving environmental problems—stopping sprawl, stopping global warming, stopping species extinction, et cetera. If the problems could simply be solved, and the world’s systemic ailments healed, we could stop fretting over all of these abstract existential threats. For many nature writers, it seems to be a matter of artistically rendering a restored relationship with nature (Morton, 2006), while for deeper ecologists, such as Spinozist eco-philosopher Freya Mathews, it means “reinhabiting reality,” which must be a project that is at once experiential and philosophical (2005). Modern philosophy takes the metaphysical version of the getting-back-to-nature project fairly seriously. The philosophy of Martin Heidegger, which has been influential in environmentalist thought, is said to be premised on the critique that prior Western philosophy had been mistakenly dealing with the truth of *being* in terms of concepts and principles. Heidegger, the story goes, is the first to refer “the question of being” back to the context of our ongoing active involvement in the everyday world (Dreyfus 1991, 1-9). But the contemporary popularity of this peculiar Heidegger-esque desire to experientially, philosophically, or spiritually re-situate ourselves in the very material world where we apparently always already were may need

explaining just as much as the age-old philosophical desire to get at the propositional or conceptual truth behind the mundane matters at hand does.

With the environmentalist ideal of reinhabiting the real we are, ironically, not far from conservative anti-environmentalism. The reactionary “backlash” to the green movement is only partly driven by capitalist appetites for resources and “mine-is-mine” possessive libertarianism. It is also about a desperate denial of the apparent breakdown of the environment as a realm of common sense. When water rights for thirsty California farmlands were restricted in 2009 to save an endangered darter clinging to existence in the river’s increasingly salty delta, conservative congressmen brought a specimen in a tank to put before the congressional committee. Their basic argument was, “All this, for a minnow?!” The idea was that if you could smack the environmentalists in the face with the minnow itself, they would be forced to give you the reassurance you desperately need—that it is just an old-fashioned minnow. And then we could treat it as minnows should be treated—as bait, as something to be taken for granted, as a part of nature, the mysterious underwater fate of which is nobody's fault and nobody's business. In this way the nature alienation idea is reproduced on the other side of the eco-political divide; now it is the environmentalists who need to come back to the *real world* of common sense and embodied experience and look with clear eyes at what is all around them.

Why has this notion of a clarifying radical reconnection to physical nature through embodied experience as the antidote to alienation and blind ideology become such a prominent common thread running from deep to shallow ecology and on into anti-

environmentalism? It is in part because it is democratically attractive. It holds up a vision of a world that is ethically and epistemically legible enough for the common citizen to judge and act with moral clarity. And yet this ideal is apparently belied at the outset by the contradictory plurality of political and moral lessons that are purportedly to be drawn from such a recovery of a direct, authentic experience of nature. Indeed, while it seems democratically promising at first blush, this ideal may actually pose grave problems for ecological politics if we prize democratic deliberation. The idea that nature is a touchstone of truth and right holds the promise that there are incontrovertible ecological positions out there, if only we can find them--if only we can put ourselves in the right experiential position vis-à-vis nature, if only we can get ourselves into true proximity to the real. The idea of a perfected environmental subjectivity with a direct experiential line to nature tends to collapse the distance that democratic deliberation requires, leaving little to talk about and, perhaps in a certain sense, no one to talk to.

Many theorists and critics argue that there is, in fact, a problem with the way nature itself was conceptualized in the twentieth-century environmental movement. This general post-naturalist critique houses a diversity of particular arguments. There have been ethical and political critiques of the notion of wilderness as the topological quintessence of nature. These are largely based on three insights: the paradox of managing the unmanaged, the empirical falsifiability of the assumption that currently existing “wildernesses” are unaltered by humanity, and the historical imbrication of the modern valuation of wild landscapes with injustices of European colonialism (Cronon

1995; Kosek 2004). There are also ecological critiques of the notion that nature is wholistic, balanced, harmonious, and teleological (Botkin 1991; Worster 1994). But it is so-called “social constructivist” arguments that have perhaps engendered the most vehement opposition from old-fashioned environmentalists. The back and forth that has issued from the particular lexicon of constructivist critiques of naturalism has not always been constructive. Rather than pointing out that the wilderness ideal represents a questionable environmental ethics, or that nature is non-teleological, constructivists have often resorted to provocative formulations, such as “there is no nature!” The main constructivist insight, however, is that the things we call natural do not come packaged with their own incontrovertible meaning. And despite all the fuss, this is an important contribution to ecological theory and environmental politics.

Bruno Latour is often taken to be a leader of the constructivist “nature isn’t there” camp. But when Latour claims that “Nature” is a Western invention and that the “external real world” does not exist as such, he means simply that nature/reality should not be presumed to be a realm apart from politics, a realm from which hard, value-free facts of the kind that could settle endless, value-laden political arguments can be drawn (Latour 2004). In Latour’s view, the Western concept of nature originates with the Greeks, concomitantly with democratic politics. Greek philosophy constructed nature as a realm apart, outside the allegorical cave of politics, from which philosophers could retrieve the facts that would finally put an end to political discussions. “Never, since the Greeks’ earliest discussions on the excellence of public life,” writes Latour, “has anyone



appealed to nature except to teach a political lesson” (2004, 28). Latour’s claims, despite their revolutionary tone, can be understood as simply drawing out the political implications of the ostensibly less bothersome claims of contemporary ecologists and historians of wilderness. In the first place, ecologists do not have the privilege of studying anything as unproblematically *there* as rocks, specimens, or even mountains. Ecology studies *relationships, systems, and cycles*—entities of ambiguous ontological status at best. If such systems manifest no *telos*, no stable meta-systemic order towards which nature tends--neither at the planetary level as *Gaia* nor at the biome level as the ecological “climax community” of a pure wilderness--then the objects of ecological study are not “matters of fact” but what Latour calls “matters of concern.” Far from a suggestion to abandon scientific ecology, this insight, for Latour, is all the more reason for politics to carefully attend to the work of scientists, while nonetheless understanding that any clear directives ecological politics might hope to derive from the biosphere will surely founder on the shifting reefs of nature’s ontological vagaries.

Latour’s critique concentrates on the fraught role of the sciences in ecological politics. However, while science is the most obvious inheritor of Greek philosophy’s inaugural naturalism, the politics of science is only a part, and perhaps not the most important part, of the politics of nature. There is, in addition, an aesthetic politics of nature dealing in environmental subjectivities that are connected with certain practices. The literary pastoral can itself be seen as ancient form of aestheticized nature politics. The pastoral stands *against* politics, true. But it does so, first, because it is political—that

is, because it proceeds from a standpoint of loss at the hands of political power, whether other people, the state, or war. The first Virgilian *eclogue*, usually figured as the inaugural work of pastoralism, gets scarcely two lines before Melibius, the dispossessed and uprooted shepherd, is introduced as a contrast to the happiness of Tityrus reclining with his flocks under a spreading beech tree “wooing the woodland muse” with a tune from his rustic pipe.<sup>2</sup> Pastoral imagery is about creating a subject position of innocence, positioned at a remove from power, precisely for the purpose of contesting that power (Woodbridge 2004, 199). The contemporary dream of naturalism is something like a hyper-pastoral ideal: it dreams of nature as not only a realm of innocence, but also as a space of moral truth--not precisely in the scientific sense of a realm of facts, but as a touchstone of pure perception and authentic sentiments for the experientially naturalized subject. Science itself is viewed with some measure of suspicion by many environmentalists. Science is too cool and detached for deep ecologists, too abstract and universalizing for radical localists, too interested in particulars for Gaian wholists. From this perspective, it is not the laboratory scientist who returns from the realm of nature to the political world with a payload of hard facts that can put an end to otherwise endless environmental political debates. It is rather the authentically naturalized subject, the person who has undertaken the proper environmental techniques of self by which one gains profound sympathy with Life, who sees the true beauty of nature, who authentically becomes *of* a place, and truly becomes one with the earth. It is Christopher Hitt, the Forest Guardian who has returned from his ascetic journey into the wilderness. Or it is

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<sup>2</sup> See Virgil's first *Eclogue*.

Anthony Devargas who has worked and lived in the New Mexican forest for generations. It is John Muir who lay on the bare rock of Yosemite and absorbed an understanding of the valley's glacial origin, Thoreau who has overwintered at Walden Pond and sussed out a rock-bottom ethic fit to found a nation, or Aldo Leopold who worked for years as a trained field ecologist before seeing the green fire in a dying wolf's eyes and finally divining the living will of an ecosystem.

*plan of the dissertation*

The chapters that follow comprise an attempt, alongside many others, to illuminate and critique the politics of nature. I take seriously the critiques of naturalism, but I propose to train the critical spotlight not directly on "nature" as a concept embedded in a discourse, nor directly on naturalism as an ideal or an ideology. Rather, I propose to contribute to the conversation by focusing on the level of practice, on the techniques of the self that perform the naturalism that suffuses environmental politics. I will do this by engaging a few thinkers whose ideas have been especially influential on American environmental thought, including Henry Thoreau on walking, Wendell Berry on work, Martin Heidegger on "dwelling," and Aldo Leopold on field ecology. These critical re-readings defuse the supposedly monolithic and mono-logical "Nature" concept by showing how it is already pluralized at the level of the practices through which it garners discursive power.

Moreover, this very plurality at the level of practice suggests the possibility of politically

rehabilitating environmentalism by further pluralizing or contesting nature through alternative modes of environmental practice. In other words, alongside the project of rethinking what nature is, or questioning whether it *is* at all, we might look for different techniques of the self through which ethical attachments and affective attunements to non-human beings or the physical environment could be cultivated.

Chapter two begins by exploring ascetic walking as a way of performing the wilderness as a space of truth. Here I draw on Foucault's treatment of Cynicism as philosophical practice that attempts to enact the true and natural life. I argue that we can find significant parallels between Cynicism and the treatment of walking in modern nature writing, particularly in the writings of Thoreau. The Thoreauian ascetic walker journeys on foot in this sense not with the mere goal of arriving at a destination, nor simply for exercise, but for the sake of enacting or cultivating an ideal relationship with his or her physical surroundings—that of a free, independent, and unencumbered being who is “at home” in the physical world at large. I aim to situate the prominent environmentalist practice of wilderness walking within a larger history of this ascetic mode of performing the truth of the physical environment, which I will argue runs from Cynicism through the modern “wilderness experience” to the contemporary urban practices of the Situationists' *dérive* and parkour. This exploration shows how the practice of ascetic walking has been linked to an ideal of purified perception and to the idea of wilderness as a “space of truth.” However, a close reading of Thoreau, the preeminent North American naturalist-walker, provides both an articulation of these

associations and a challenge to them: Thoreau's writings on wilderness walking ultimately render the environment not as a bedrock materiality but rather as a jumble of diverse associations and a multiplication of partial modes of perception.

Chapter three turns from walking to the more "practical" activity of work, specifically subsistence cultivation as the archetypal "work" that enacts an ecologically conceived nativeness to place. For an articulation of this agrarian environmentalist ideal, I look to Wendell Berry's conservation advocacy and Martin Heidegger's philosophy of "dwelling." Despite the apparent differences between walking and the labor of dwelling in place, these two modes of practice are similarly imagined as privileged ways of making authentic contact with nature. Where the wilderness walker as a motile body meeting a physical landscape performs wilderness as a space of truth, agrarian environmentalism imagines the work of subsistence cultivation as enacting the truth of the biochemical connection between the metabolic body and the ecological earth. In this practico-philosophical perspective, the subjective emplacement that agrarian environmentalism works toward is often rendered as a passive immersion and a de-subjectifying dissipation of the self into the ecological landscape. However, I will suggest that this ideal exists in Heidegger's philosophy and Berry's localism alongside a more complex and politically promising approach to agrarian practice as an active and experimental art, more akin to making or tinkering.

The fourth and final chapter turns to tinkering as an alternative mode of ecological practice. I trace what I argue is an under-acknowledged affinity between environmental

philosophy and the practice of tinkering. Here I make use of Levi-Strauss's distinction between bricolage and scientific thought to juxtapose two different ways of understanding ecology as a "subversive science." Aldo Leopold, along with many subsequent voices in the North American environmental movement he helped found, depict the embodied practices and experiences of the ecological fieldworker as promising a linkage with nature through which the naturalist might receive not only truths about nature but ethical directives about right conduct of human life with respect to it. I suggest, however, that Leopold himself offers two different ways of thinking about the edifying experience of the field ecologist. Leopold had his famous epiphany as a wildlife biologist when he saw the "fierce green fire" in a dying wolf's eyes and learned to "think like a mountain" (1989). Here, the ecosystem or the "land organism" speaks as "the mountain" with stable, integral, and final authority, and becoming attuned to this authoritative voice is matter of a dramatic conversion experience. However, I argue that the imagery of this account is at odds with another of Leopold's insights: that practices of ecological stewardship should take the form of "intelligent tinkering"--the first rule of which is to "keep all the parts" (1989).

Here I return to the tinkering perspective, which I argue offers a different approach to traditional environmental techniques of the self such as walking or farming, while also suggesting a new set of practices that could be considered ecological-ethical techniques of the self, such as those currently emerging in the maker's movement and the long-promised open source revolution. Embracing tinkering as an environmental

technique of the self means looking for ecologically promising ethical and affective moments in the work of junkyard mechanics, scrappers, squatters, or inventors, just as environmentalism has traditionally looked for them in the steps of the wilderness walker or the labors of the subsistence farmer. I argue that ultimately, tinkering may be better fitted than these other practices to cultivating ethical attachments to a bio-diverse world that no longer seems wholistic, teleological, or even particularly natural.

## Chapter Two

### Thoreau's Peripatetic Asceticism: Walking, Wilderness, and Truth

*“Perhaps it is easier to live a true and natural life while traveling—as one can move about less awkwardly than he can stand still.” - Thoreau*

Throughout the twentieth century, writings on wilderness, even scholarly works, mostly took the form of ecocritical eulogies and jeremiads, meeting occasional pushback from conservative defenders of frontier conquest and unfettered capitalism. However, in recent decades the “great new wilderness debate” has made what some now call “wilderness studies” a more complex terrain. There are two major contending theses in this debate, which we can call the wilderness invented thesis and the wilderness lost and found thesis. The wilderness lost and found thesis, which prevailed in twentieth century ecocriticism, holds that human societies became profoundly disconnected from wilderness at some point in the past--with the advent of farming or politics, or cities



perhaps--and that we would do well to reconnect with it.<sup>3</sup> Doing so will likely be a grand historical project--which wilderness enthusiasts have only just begun--entailing radically different ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. The wilderness invented thesis, on the other hand, suggests that wilderness--as we inheritors of Western modernity understand, experience, and value it--is an invention of the modern age. Historians like Marjorie Hope Nichols and Roderick Nash had pointed out in the mid-twentieth century that “friends of wilderness...are riding the crest of a very recent wave,” (Nash 1973, xii) but it was William Cronon’s essay “The Trouble with Wilderness” in 1996 that started the “great new” controversy by suggesting that the modern cult of wilderness is not only made-up, but actually deeply problematic, and that environmentalism would be better off without it.

Is the love of wilderness a natural and noble human sentiment? Or is it a cultural contrivance--even a potentially pernicious one--specific to a historical moment? In short, the wilderness question for environmentalism is the ontological cum phenomenological one, “*what is wilderness, that we love it so?*” Wilderness has several affective valences, and so the question has been addressed in several ways. The Kantian aesthete might argue that we love wilderness because it is fundamentally a space of the beautiful or the sublime. According to the biophilia hypothesis of E.O. Wilson, we love wilderness because it is the space of life. A Freudian could tell us that wilderness is the space of the *Id*, where civilization’s repressed discontents seek some vestige of primal freedom.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the writings of Earth First founder Dave Foreman, as well as George Sessions’ *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, Max Oelschlaeger’s *The Idea of Wilderness*, Calvin Martin’s *The Spirit of the Earth*, and Paul Shepard’s *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*.

American historians point out that wilderness preservationists at the end of the nineteenth century framed their project explicitly in terms of recreating the Western frontier. Here, wilderness is the space of the Anglo-American national past. There is also an undeniable connection to the advent of Deism in the eighteenth century, such that wilderness became the space of the sacred. And one contributor to the debate has recently made the Deleuzo-Guattarian argument that wilderness takes its meaning from its ontological opposition to the “striated space” of the State. Here wilderness is “smooth,” or historically ungoverned space.<sup>4</sup>

The wilderness idea wears many hats. And yet, at the risk of spreading it too thin, I suggest another: wilderness as a space of truth, in both an epistemological and an ontological sense. That is, wilderness has been understood as offering experiences and facilitating modes of perception that reveal truths of the natural order or the human condition. And relatedly, wilderness has been understood as a manifestation of a kind of negative ontological truth--the truth of a bare reality that is left after that which is false, artificial, extraneous, or merely conventional has been stripped away. This is to say, wilderness is a space of truth insofar as it is a space of nature.

The concept of “nature,” going back to the Greek usage of *phusis*, has a long history of association with the philosopher’s notion of an underlying “truth” independent of opinion, artifice, and will. And while the association of wilderness with nature seems tautological today, there is a sense in which wilderness itself only becomes a space of “nature,” and thus of truth, in the modern era. Previously, it was mostly viewed as

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<sup>4</sup> See Maskit 2008.

chaotic wastelands wrought by perverse or demonic forces. It was the work of poet-naturalists in the late 1700s and then the emergence of biology and ecosystem dynamics that revealed wilderness as a complexly ordered natural system. As the science of ecology developed, unpopulated landscapes, especially biotically rich ones, came to represent both a kind of natural perfection and a site of stable objects for scientific analysis. At this point humans were, in a sense, the only actors left to play the role of nefarious forces. Equipped with increasingly powerful and destructive technologies, “Man” was coming to be seen as the disrupter of wilderness and the natural order that “was intended” behind and before the plural, partial, and flawed human will and its artifacts. The howling wilderness was now also the pristine ecosystem, the virgin forest, the tall-grass prairie. Ecologists used the term “climax communities” to describe the supposedly steady state of wilderness biomes, and the idea persists that in order to best study ecology the field scientist should go to “untouched” places.<sup>5</sup>

My contention in this chapter is that this association of wilderness with truth is expressed in the prominent place given to the practice of walking in North American ecocriticism and nature writing. We can in fact point to a plurality of practices interwoven with the different affective and ideological valences of “wilderness”--the use of tinted, handheld “Claude glasses” by nineteenth century nature-voyeurs, the seeking out of “sublime” phenomena in nature, specimen collecting and botanical drawing, the imperial explorations of the colonial era, the military campaign, Boy Scouting, hunting, extreme sports. Perhaps we could even include some kinds of “criminal” activities such

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<sup>5</sup> See Worster, 1994, especially chapters 11 and 17.

as vagrancy or being “on the run” from the Law. All such practices are likely to involve walking, so there is an incidental sense in which wilderness and walking are connected. However, in the modern aesthetics and ethics of wilderness, walking emerges as more than a means to other ends; the walking itself takes on a special significance and becomes an explicit object of philosophical celebration and critical scrutiny. To merely walk--with emphasis on the very *mere*-ness of walking--is the way to properly be in the wilderness. It is, moreover, the way to fully and properly *be*, period. To walk is to “*truly live*.” And wilderness is the ideal habitat for the walking body.

In this chapter I will discuss Edward Abbey, John Muir, and especially Henry David Thoreau, whose writings remain some of the best articulations of this particular modern approach to corporeal locomotion. I use the term “peripatetic asceticism” to refer to this peculiarly self-conscious mode of moving over a landscape, and after an in-depth engagement with Thoreau’s peripatetic asceticism, I explore some commonalities, at the level of philosophical or critical praxis, between Thoreau’s walking, Greek Cynicism, and the contemporary urban activity known as “parkour.”

### *walking and the wilderness ethic*

The founders of the North American wilderness preservation movement were famed wanderers in the wilderness. John Muir, perhaps preeminent among them, characterized his entire career as one long walk, beginning with his solitary trek from Louisville,

Kentucky to Florida. “I wandered away on a glorious botanical and geological excursion, which has lasted nearly fifty years and is not yet completed, always happy and free, poor and rich, without thought of a diploma or of making a name, urged on and on through endless, inspiring, Godful beauty” (1913, 142). Muir represented a rapidly growing sect that would include figures like Charles Lumis, who struck out to cross the continent on foot, seeking “neither time nor money, but life--not life in the pathetic meaning of the poor health-seeker, for I was perfectly well and a trained athlete; but life in the broader, sweeter sense, the exhilarant joy of living outside the sorry fences of society, living with a perfect body and a wakened mind” (Charles F. Lumis in Solnit 2000, 127). This idealistic tradition would be carried on into the twentieth century by trekkers, tramps, and poet-wanderers, including Bob Marshall, Gary Snyder, Everett Ruess, and Edward Abbey. Of course, the ones we know about are the ones who also wrote or were written about. Perhaps the most recent wilderness wanderer to become widely renowned was Christopher McCandless, the ill-fated subject of John Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*, whose abbreviated manifesto was found near his frozen body in the Alaskan bush in 1992:

TWO YEARS HE WALKS THE EARTH. NO PHONE. NO POOL. NO PETS. NO CIGARETTES.  
ULTIMATE FREEDOM. AN EXTREMIST. AN AESTHETIC VOYAGER WHOSE HOME IS THE  
ROAD. ESCAPED FROM ATLANTA. THOU SHALT NOT RETURN, CAUSE “THE WEST IS THE  
BEST.” AND NOW AFTER TWO RAMBLING YEARS COMES THE FINAL AND GREATEST  
ADVENTURE. THE CLIMACTIC BATTLE TO KILL THE FALSE BEING WITHIN AND

VICTORIOUSLY CONCLUDE THE SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE. TEN DAYS AND NIGHTS OF FREIGHT TRAINS AND HITCH HIKING BRING HIM TO THE GREAT WHITE NORTH. NO LONGER TO BE POISONED BY THE CIVILIZATIONS HE FLEES, AND WALKS ALONE UPON THE LAND TO BECOME LOST IN THE WILD. ALEXANDER SUPERTRAMP MAY 1992. (Christopher McCandless quoted in Krakauer 1993, 111)

Attempts to describe this naturalistic footloose compulsion are often plaintive and stammering, yet poetic--as if something must be said that cannot be said. An anonymous wilderness enthusiast made the dilemma explicit in a *New York Times* editorial: "How can you explain that you need to know that the trees are still there, and the hills and the sky? Anyone knows they are....No, you cannot explain. So you walk" (Anonymous, 1967). Walking as an ecocritical praxis has something to "say" about the limits of words to express truth--the practice itself picks up, perhaps, where words fail. What often comes to be expressed through the breathless stutterings of wilderness walkers is an idealization of the real and the true--the real world, real life, true life, *life itself*, existence in the grandest sense. I propose the experiment of taking these expressions seriously. True wilderness walking entails a quest for the real that places its hopes in bodily engagement with a physical landscape. It may be, in part, an inward journey of self-discovery or self-transformation. But if there is an inward journey it is inextricable from the outward one. The spiritual pilgrimage is also an "aesthetic voyage": a quest to achieve a deeper and richer experience of the materiality of the very environment through which one walks. In

this way the wilderness experience is about perfecting sensual perception and affective openness, and this is a project that takes on great ethical importance in environmental thought.

Edward Abbey's nature writing is especially indicative of this connection between the practice of walking and environmental "true seeing" figured as an ethical imperative. Abbey's poetically acerbic celebrations of the wild landscapes of the southwestern U.S. made him one of the most popular nature writers of the twentieth century. He found that:

The love of wilderness is more than a hunger for what is always beyond reach; it is also an expression of loyalty to the earth, the earth which bore us and sustains us, the only home we shall ever know, the only paradise we ever need—if only we had the eyes to see. Original sin, the true original sin, is the blind destruction for the sake of greed of this natural paradise which lies all around us—if only we were worthy of it. (1968, 147; italics added)

Being worthy of the wild paradise that is all around us yet somehow not sufficiently present to us begins with overcoming this blindness. Developing "eyes to see" true nature is the precondition for having an ethical relationship with it. But you have to see the environment "intimately, as can only be done on foot, through some direct personal engagement with sand, stone, sun, space, moon, stars, craggly hills" (2006, 106).

It sounds simple enough, but for Abbey this is not something you are just going to go and do. With wry condescension artfully balanced with self-deprecation, he excoriated his unworthy readers. In the first place, he says, "You've got to get out of the goddamned [car] and walk." But no, even that is not ordeal enough for a true encounter.

“Better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus.” If the experience of being in the desert is to be as profoundly transformative as Abbey thought he remembered it was, well then you will have to work for it. No, you’ll have to suffer for it—payment will be accepted in pounds of flesh. “When traces of blood begin to mark your trail, you’ll see something, maybe. Probably not” (Abbey 1968, preface).

Environmentalism often employs the trope of blindness and sight. A perceptual ignorance linked to bourgeois greed and over-civilized, house-dwelling slothfulness is juxtaposed with an affective environmental openness linked to getting off your butt and covering some natural ground. Recall the words of the self-styled wilderness guardian quoted at the beginning of the first chapter: “If you’re not sad, you have no right to be alive in the twenty-first century. You’re living inside a cocoon. You’re numb. You’ve lost connection with the wild and you’re blind to the incredible ecospasm that’s going on, on the planet” (Hitt in Kosek 2006, 138). The wilderness walker, by contrast, is something like a modern mystic, a “seer,” or a *martyr* in the old sense of one who bears witness to a truth. That is, one *walks* towards becoming a seer and bearing witness—not in the old religious sense of receiving divine revelation from a personal God, but in the specific sense of seeing a place, a landscape, or an environment for what it really is—making “the environment” one’s *own* intimate environment, which surrounds and radiates out from one’s own motile body.



That the truly-seen landscape of the walker should be a wilderness landscape is, moreover, not incidental. If wilderness is sometimes figured as the space of *life*, the organic (*bios*), it has also become the space of “life” in the other, existential sense--the realm of authentic existence, true experience, and true perception. And to enter this space of truth requires ascetic abnegation. “Only by going alone in silence, without baggage,” says Muir, “can one truly get into the heart of the wilderness. All other travel is mere dust and hotels and baggage and chatter” (John Muir, quoted in Oelshlager 1991, 182).

You must pare down, cut off, leave behind, relinquish, and refrain from all that is superfluous. Then you may begin to see and feel. But how will you know if you have relinquished enough? How can you be sure you have excised all that is false and unnecessary--all that is not *life*? How can you make sure that you are prepared to receive the full aesthetic and ethical force of real wilderness? You cannot, but the first step and the best bet is to put one foot in front of the other. Are we there yet? Is it nature now? Around the next bend, deeper into the wilderness, over that higher pass yonder. There the gestalt will shift, there the scales will fall from my eyes, there perhaps life will come to me. Probably not.

### *Thoreauian walking and the true life*

Modern peripatetic ascetics like Abbey or McCandless were following, usually quite consciously, in the footsteps of Thoreau, whose somewhat tongue-in-cheek didactic essay

“Walking” was one of the earliest and still one of the most influential defenses of the “wilderness experience.” Of course, before Thoreau there were other walking poets and naturalists such as Wordsworth or Bartram. Sometime in the eighteenth century, inheritors of the genteel pastime of the leisurely stroll ventured out of the manicured gardens and promenades and began to walk in ways, in places, and for reasons that were distinctive in the West to the modern era. Yet in North America it is Thoreau who provides the foundational expression of this new enthusiasm for walking in the wilderness. I focus on Thoreau not only because he was an early adopter of the wilderness ideal, and not only because he has influenced and inspired so many, but also because he was uncommonly articulate and philosophically curious for a peripatetic ascetic.

Thoreau’s most famous experiment in philosophical praxis was an experiment not in wandering, but in ascetic house-holding at Walden Pond. And even apart from his two years at Walden, Thoreau never led a houseless life of wandering for any extended period of time. Nevertheless, he “travelled widely in Concord,” as he put it, and the seemingly simple activity of walking was central to his thought and his life. It is through his writing that we know his walking, but Thoreau’s walking, like his solitary house-holding at Walden Pond, is as legitimate a mode of expression of his ideas and his philosophical vision as his writing. Sharon Cameron (1985) has suggested that Thoreau’s *Journal*, though less accessible than *Walden* and his other book-length works, might be seen as his greatest literary work. Likewise, I would suggest that Thoreau’s daily walks, interrupted

by his occasional longer excursions, rather than his short tenure at Walden Pond, might be seen as his grand opus of philosophical praxis.

Walking can simply be a way of exploring one's environment and getting a little exercise. Thoreau was curious about his surroundings, he was healthy, and he had some time on his hands. But walking also held for him a more fundamental meaningfulness that we can see reflected in the words of his intellectual and peripatetic progeny. "The walking of which I speak," said Thoreau, "has nothing in it akin to taking exercise, as it is called, as the sick take medicine at stated hours—as the swinging of dumb-bells or chairs; but is itself the enterprise and adventure of the day. If you would get exercise go in search of the springs of life. Think of a man's swinging dumb-bells for his health, when those springs are bubbling up in far off pastures unsought by him" (1954, 111). Walking, Thoreau sensed, is a physical philosophical practice uniquely suited to the subtle work of crafting and maintaining a natural self and living a "true life," which ultimately, as I will show, tends towards a project of perfecting one's perception of nature. I will use Foucault's terminology in speaking of Thoreau's walking as a "technique of the self." However, as I have indicated, this kind of walking is not only focused on the self, but also directed outward into the environment. Its distinctiveness lies in being at once a technique of self-transformation and something like a calling forth of the landscape into true presence. Thoreau's walking is oriented by the notion that if one takes off bodily with the proper "spirit" and "shakes off the village" then one may find, if only fleetingly,

that most real and true existence, or perhaps more precisely, coexistence--as a child of the universe, living what is *really life*, on the true “surface of God's earth” (1954, 117).

The wilderness idea, I want to suggest, exists as this possibility, and as such it is not determined by any physical, objective, geographical realities, nor is it reducible to a state of mind or an idea. It is more accurately a *performance*, where walking is the headline act. It sounds odd to say that wilderness is a performance, but what I mean is that the particular *way*, *where*, and *why* of walking that Thoreau expounds is integral to wilderness as a “construct.” I do not mean that there is no wilderness outside the brain: without things outside the mind there would certainly be no wilderness idea. I simply mean that what we think of as wilderness is *conditioned*--by geophysical realities, patterns of land development, and even legal statutes, as well as by the embodied practices I have discussed, and the relevant discourses, concepts, and ideas, all of which are very real. Some large areas of land have undergone minimal human alteration, by accident or on purpose. Some types of places come to mind when we say wilderness. A short-grass prairie doesn't work quite as well as a forested mountain range. If all of the large animals in a forest are tagged and tracked by satellite, or if certain key wildlife species vanish from it, it is in some meaningful way less of a wilderness. If you fly over the Smokey Mountains National Park, it is less of a wilderness than if you walk through it. In all of these ways and others, which have everything to do with reality, wilderness is “constructed,” which, as many others have pointed out, really means “co-constructed” in

the sense that both human and non-human forces and bodies are involved. I intend “performance” here to capture the idea of a co-construction in this sense.

But to say wilderness is performed entails a further commitment: there should be an audience. This makes thinking in terms of performance even more suited for our purposes, because techniques of self are performative in precisely this sense. We become ourselves by playing ourselves. This means being what Nietzsche called “play-actors of [our] own ideals” (Nietzsche 1966, 83), but it also means *playing* ourselves like a recursive musical instrument. Here we are both the audience and the performer, but crucially, we also perform with and before others. In this way, subjectivities are formed and performed in relational fields that include other people as well as things--what Latour calls “the social” in an expanded sense.<sup>6</sup> Peripatetic asceticism is such a performance, a performative technique of the self, and therefore my claim is that wilderness as we inheritors of Western environmental consciousness know it, value it, and seek to protect it, is closely connected to this peripatetic mode of subjectivation, this way of performatively cultivating an environmental subjectivity.

Thoreau writes, “it is easier to live a true and natural life while traveling, as one can move about less awkwardly than he can stand still” (1887, 158). Easier perhaps, but that is not to say easy. Like Abbey, Thoreau stressed the deceptive difficulty and subtlety of this simplest of human practices, claiming “I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks,--who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering” (1954, 108). In what follows, I describe

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<sup>6</sup> See Latour 2005.

Thoreau's "genius for talking walks" as having three related elements or goals:  
becoming-a-body, making yourself at home, and immaculate perception.

*returning to your senses/becoming a body*

It might be objected that there is a danger of placing too much stock in the particular practice of walking. Could sitting on a mountaintop, or floating down a river not work just as well for getting "into the heart of the wilderness?" Perhaps, but this points to why "peripatetic asceticism" is a more apt term here. Even it requires some hedging-in. Asceticism is often supposed to be inimical to sensuality or even sense-experience and is sometimes associated with a denial or even mortification of the flesh and body, for the purposes of attending to a higher, immaterial, spiritual realm. But if Thoreauian asceticism seeks to transcend or to ascend, it also seeks to descend; as Thoreau says, to "settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward" (1960, 37). For the author of *Walking*, this means "descending" into the body and the senses—into the hard bottom of material nature. The mind is involved, but the mind here is "a tool for burrowing," downward, into the materiality of life, not for escaping or transcending it. Peripatetic asceticism is a more sumptuous asceticism. No equipment, no money, companions, servants, or masters are required. "No wealth can buy the requisite leisure, freedom, and independence which are the capital in this profession" (1954, 109). Yet the peripatetic ascetic "goes without" in order to enhance the embodied going itself. This may entail

hardship, travail, the denial of comforts, and even painful ordeals, but if the idea is to become somewhat anesthetized to hardships, it is for the purpose of becoming further “aesthetized” with respect to the myriad materiality of one’s whole environment.

Thoreau, it will be noted, occasionally made his excursions in nature by boat. Perhaps a peripatetic ascetic would occasionally go on horseback. And maybe one could even go forth by car or other modern means in something of the same spirit. There is no need to rule it out altogether. But it would be imperfect. The point is to afford freedom of movement over the landscape. Freedom is important--“the freedom of the woods.” And yet this freedom of movement should not take the form of heedless wandering. One must heed matter, heed nature.

It may help define this way of walking if we compare it to a different attempt to experientially access wilderness. Werner Herzog's *The White Diamond* (2004) documents the efforts of an eccentric aeronautical engineer, Dr. Graham Dorrington, to build a silent helium airship to fly through the jungle canopy of Guyana. The airship itself was an imperfect approximation of Dorrington's truest fantasy. Dorrington dreams of flying—but slowly, and above all silently. What he really desires is to fly or float, *himself*, without the need for the airship. A jet-pack would be better, maybe, but he thinks that would be too loud. Dorrington wants to “become light,” to become a zephyr, and to float above life silently, observing. Dorrington has an environmental fantasy—which is to say, his airship would afford him the totality of his environment. He can go anywhere. This whole fantastical landscape will be afforded to him in his ideal

flying machine, in a way that it is not afforded to the human body with its limitations, its heaviness. But Dorrington's fantasy is too free, too detached for the peripatetic ascetic. Too disembodied. Dorrington's monomania takes him too far in the quest for what we might call a truly environmental experience. He loses contact.

Herzog's film illustrates the allure, as well as the subtlety and fragility, of projects that seek to perfect an environmental aesthetic. It also indicates how the "freedom" of the peripatetic ascetic is not simple. In *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau expressed exhilaration and relief on making the transition from riding in a stage-coach to walking into the wilderness. "We were at length fairly embarked," he writes. "We who had felt strangely as stage passengers and tavern lodgers were suddenly naturalized there and presented with the freedom of the lakes and the woods" (1988, 225). But we find that the "freedom" of the woods is intimately associated with a kind of *unfreedom* imposed intimately and ubiquitously by the very materiality of the landscape. "My imagination personified the slopes themselves," Thoreau said of the Maine woods, "as if by their very length they would waylay you and compel you to camp again on them before night" (1988, 251). The peripatetic ascetic may dream of being untouched and uncompelled by the powers and contrivances of *human* agency, whether these take the form of chains, walls, fences, buildings, human bodies, laws, conventions, opinions, or even the too-civilized thoughts in one's own head. But bound up in the same fantasy, as both end and means, is the desire to be *more* intimately, *more* surely, and *more* constantly



*touched and compelled* by the power, or powers, suffusing the *non-human* material environment.

Making contact in this way with natural matter, precisely because it carries its own kind of modulated bodily unfreedom, works toward the subtle liberation of the walker from the intersubjective human world.

Man and his affairs, church and state — and school, trade and commerce, and manufactures and agriculture, — even politics, the most alarming of them all — I am pleased to see how little space they occupy in the landscape. Politics is but a narrow field, and that still narrower highway yonder leads to it. I sometimes direct the traveller thither. If you would go to the political world, follow the great road, — follow that market man, keep his dust in your eyes, and it will lead you straight to it — for it too has its place merely, and does not occupy all space. I pass from it as from a bean field into the forest, and it is forgotten. In one half hour I can walk off to some portion of the earth's surface where a man does not stand from one year's end to another and there consequently politics are not, for they are but as the cigar smoke of a man. (1954, 113-14)

It is as a walker that Thoreau claims the power to restore to politics its physicality.

Politics is a place, or places. It is human bodies, built spaces, and the artificial things in them, all doing what they do. And yet it is also a sort of phenomenal haze that hangs around such places, things, and bodies. It is like cigar smoke or dust, which cannot be grasped quite, but hovers around. It somehow spoils our sensual contact with nature. It mediates, distracts, intrudes. In the village, says Thoreau, "I am out of my senses." The

peripatetic ascetic seeks to escape this haze by walking out and away. “In my walks, I would fain return to my senses” (1954, 112).

Returning to your senses is fundamental to Thoreau’s peripatetic asceticism. A hiking enthusiasts’ website at the time of this writing sums up the peculiar, vaguely normative freight of this modern pastime: “Enthusiasts regard hiking as the best way to see nature. It is seen as better than a tour in a vehicle of any kind because the hiker’s senses are not intruded upon by distractions such as engine noise, airborne dust, and fellow passengers.”<sup>7</sup> The word “hiking” originated in Thoreau’s time, but he never uses it. Nevertheless, this statement, with its emphasis on the senses (as well as the peculiar preoccupation with dust), is faithful to the Thoreauian ideal. But how exactly are one’s senses “intruded upon” by other sensed things? Why is experiential contact with dust, fellow passengers, and windows inimical to the senses? And what does it mean to be, as Thoreau puts it, “out of my senses?”

This concern with more truly inhabiting the senses is a theme in Romantic thought. It is even prefigured by ancient critiques of Platonism. Thoreau sometimes portrays the walker’s goal as achieving unmediated contact with the physical landscape. Ideally, perhaps, it would be like one billiard ball striking another—the unmistakable contact of efficient causality. One should be *compelled* by the elements. But of course the human body is not a billiard ball, and rather has its own internal springs of action and affect, whether it be a rational will, simple habits, instinctual drives, socially conditioned propensities, or some kind of spiritual possession. The senses are avenues through which

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.splendidarabia.com/trekking/trek\\_terms/](http://www.splendidarabia.com/trekking/trek_terms/)

the body is physically acted upon, but the sensed effects—sound waves, photons, the cold air—never fully determine even the sensations and responses of an active organism. The senses are clearly physical—they are “natural”—but at the same time they begin to involve us also in the realm of subjectivity. And it is subjectivity that opens the door to artifice, opinions, politics—the “un-natural.” This liminal status of the senses is what makes them so philosophically fraught, and it is what makes Thoreau’s desire to be “returned to his senses” seem somehow very understandable and yet, on reflection, almost nonsensical.

Can a walk return us to our senses? Maybe. Walking can take us “out there,” away from the walls, laws, and other people that “stand between” our selves and...and what? Thoreau's answer is “Nature,”—or “wilderness.” It seems that the spaces of wild nature offer more varied effects, more abundant offerings for the senses. More “contact.” And the tops of mountains are exemplary for Thoreau in this regard—they are *super* natural. “You must ascend a mountain,” he advised a friend, “to learn your relation to matter, and so to your own body, for *it* is at home there, though *you* are not” (1954, 153). On top of Ktaadn, Thoreau rapturously exulted in this sheer materiality.

Nature here was something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was the Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man’s garden, but the unhandseled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable land, nor waste land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth,

as it was made forever and ever,--to be the dwelling of man we say,--so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific,--Not his mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or be buried in, no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there,--the home, this, of Necessity and Fate. There was clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites,--to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we. We walked over it with a certain awe, ...What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home! I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one,—that my body might,—but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on your cheeks. The *solid* Earth. The *actual* world! The *common sense*! *Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?* (1988, 95)

The reader has the feeling that this rapturous prose could go on and on and never reach its destination; “...your feet on the *true earth*, the *actual rocks*, the *real soil*!...” Thoreau makes much of the strangeness and “awfulness” of this landscape, where his soul and spirit feel almost alien, but the double of this *unheimlichkeit* is the profound at-home-ness attributed to the body, pared down here to its most essential being, and returned to its sheer senses. Walking through such a landscape seems to be a desubjectifying experience.

Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends... There is less of substantial thought and fair understanding in him than in the planes where men inhabit. His reason is dispersed and shadowy, more thin and subtile, like the air. Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. (1988, 85-6)

Roderick Nash suggested that Thoreau's excursion to the Maine Woods was a profound shock and a turning point in his thinking. On this interpretation, "it was a rude awakening" that dampened his enthusiasm for the wild. "On the mountain," Nash writes, Thoreau's "transcendental confidence in the symbolic significance of natural objects faltered" (Nash 1973, 91). I argue, however, that transcendental significance was not the primary ingredient in Thoreau's love of wilderness. It was something closer what Christopher Hitt calls the "ecological sublime": an encounter with the raw materiality of nature, the power of which is beyond human control and the effusive fullness of which is beyond our conceptual categories.<sup>8</sup>

The questions Thoreau poses are real: "*Who are we? where are we?*" Are we the body whose subjectivity is diffusing through our ribcage? Or are we the spirit that stands in awe of our body? Thoreau suggests it is through a certain compromise, a modulation, or perhaps even a total sublimation of our "higher," intellectual, even spiritual selves—our all-too-human, cognizing, social selves—that we begin to overcome our

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<sup>8</sup> See Hitt, 2001.

alienation from nature. This is the “return to the senses” that the walker walks toward.

Does Thoreau contradict himself in “Walking” when he speaks of getting “into the woods *in spirit*?” “When we walk, we naturally go to the fields and the woods; what would become of us if we walked only in a garden or a mall?...Of course, it is of no use to direct our steps to the woods if they do not carry us thither. I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily without getting there in spirit” (1952, 112). Or does “getting into the woods in spirit” require that one allow something of the “spirit”—our understanding, reason, or even “substantial thought”—to flee the body, or diffuse outward from it into the surroundings, to become more “subtile?” We ourselves would not altogether flee with it but “descend,” so to speak, more substantially into this ambling body. The “you” becomes an *it*. The walker becomes material--becomes more perfectly *a body*--precisely in order to “get *there* in spirit,” where “there” is *here*—wherever one is at this present moment.

In my afternoon walk I would fain forget all my morning occupations and my obligations to society. But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head, and I am not where my body is—I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods if I am thinking of something out of the woods? (1954, 112)

In the passages from “Ktaadn” in *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau is preaching to the unconverted, and might count himself among them. That is to say, there is a sense in which one can never speak, can never quite honestly write, *as* the “titan that has possession of me [the writer].” Perhaps this is why the evaporation of the beholder's divine faculty through his ribcage is conveyed in the third person. The writer writes after returning to “the plains where men inhabit.” That is to say, “it is after we get home that we [the writer, the speaker] really go over the mountain, if ever” (1954, 153 Letter to H. Blake). It is the speaker and the listener, the writer and the reader, not the walker, who “stands in awe” of matter, who “trembles” to meet bodies, and who can only be asked to “*Think of our life in nature—daily to be shown matter*” [italics added]. The strangeness, awe, and terror of the out-of-body experience that the prose evokes has the effect of pointing the reader to both the power and profundity of our material existence as a body, but also—because we all the while really believe at some level that “the solid earth” and “the actual world” are not strange at all but quite mundane—it has the effect precisely of pointing to the strangeness of our life in “society.” How strange our lives must be!—that we can actually find ourselves convinced by Thoreau that to be a body among bodies is such a sublime and awful novelty! The purpose of walking—of *actually walking*—is to become otherwise than the writer, otherwise than our hyper-socialized and “over-civilized” selves, and to do more than merely *think* of our life in nature: it is to become matter enough to actually come in contact with matter, to somehow *become* the “titan” who is kin to the rocks and trees, and at home in the unhandseled cosmos.

In Thoreau's language, this going-under of the “spiritual” self is both mental and physical one. “What would become of us if we walked only in a garden or a mall?” or, worse, if we did not walk at all? The straining we hear and feel in Thoreau's passages on body, spirit, and wilderness seem to indicate that the philosophical exercise that was Thoreau's life began to outgrow the spirit-matter distinction with which he began. In order to accomplish the becoming-a-body that Thoreau celebrates, getting physically “out there” is necessary. Moreover, it matters where out there you go. That is to say, if it is indeed easiest to live a true life while traveling, this kind of traveling is easier to do in some environments than in others. The perfect place would have a Goldilocks-style just-rightness—not too hard, not too soft. A landscape not too forbidding, but not too friendly:

Sometimes it is some particular half-dozen rods which I wish to find myself pacing over, as where certain airs blow; then my life will come to me, methinks, like a hunter I walk in wait for it....Is it some influence, as a vapor which exhales from the ground, or something in the gales that blow there, or in all things there brought together agreeably to my spirit? The walls must not be too high, imprisoning me, but low with numerous gaps. The trees must not be too numerous, nor the hills too near, bounding the view, nor the soil too rich, attracting the attention to the earth. It must simply be the way and the life. (Journal, July 21, 1851)

Perhaps Thoreau is looking for a niche, in the ecological sense. Some historical anthropologists and socio-biologists have suggested that the optimal human environment is an “edge habitat” between forest and grassland, or a landscape interspersed with forest



and open ground. This theory has even been suggested to account for the persistence of the pastoral ideal.<sup>9</sup> Although European historical consciousness tends to posit forests as the primeval landscape, the northeastern African savannah is supposed to be the more original environment of *Homo sapiens*. The pastoral tradition, on this view, does not celebrate the “middle landscape,” the geographical compromise between civilized urban space and wild nature, but actually a landscape more primeval, more “natural” than “the woods.”

Henri Bergson suggested that too often our philosophies have been such that could be suited to any world whatsoever. Philosophy should instead attend to the specificities of particularly *this world*, where people are born, grow old, and die.<sup>10</sup> Our embodied, experienced human life takes place among the myriad conditions of precisely *this* universe in which we live on *this* earth: where the movement of time, he thought, is characterized by creative evolution. Bergson called this philosophical closer-hewing “precision.” To think with Bergsonian precision means recognizing a certain gap between experience and much of philosophical thought. The part of our minds that we regard as the most rational seems particularly suited to understanding inanimate objects and geometrical and mathematical relations. And yet the phenomenon of life itself is somewhat more mysterious, and even very strange. And what could be stranger to rational thought than bodies, brains, and minds? Not to mention *our own* bodies, *our own* brains? That which is so near, so intimate with us, is yet so uncanny and hard to fathom.

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<sup>9</sup> See Paul Shepard’s *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*, 37-86.

<sup>10</sup> See Bergson 1992, Introduction.

How strange a shape we are! Neither cube nor circle—roughly bilateral at best. Our rational minds seem to find Euclidean space normal—but think of the space in which we pass our lives. Think of our earthly environment, conditioned just so by astral or quantum-physical processes and forces. Think of the strangeness of the real. That I am this body, contending with gravity on this strange earth, which has a surface fairly solid and regular, though everywhere different in uncountable ways.

If walking is a philosophical practice, it aims at this kind of Bergsonian precision. The walking body, in its marvelous capacities, seems fitted to just this world. Perhaps this accounts for the recurrence of this idea, not only in Thoreau’s writing, but also in that of Muir, Abbey, and others, that walking is especially “natural,” and an antidote to unnatural or stunted modes of life. As Gary Snyder writes, “Walking is the great adventure, the first meditation, a practice of heartiness and soul primary to humankind” (1990, 18). So if you crave only reality, go forth, walk, and then you may see and feel the world as it *really is*—the *solid earth*, the *actual world*.

*making yourself at home*

Being ready to walk, and truly walking, is an ascetic act in the sense of cutting ties and freeing oneself from comfortable attachments.

we should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return—prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms. If

you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again—if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs and are a free man—then you are ready for a walk. (1954, 109)

But if the point is to leave possessions, friends, hearth and home, it is in order to become more truly at home in the wider material world. In *Walking*, Thoreau writes, “some would derive the word [sauntering] from *sans terre*, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean: having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering” (1954, 108).

To be equally at home anywhere, on “the true and natural surface of the earth,” requires an attitude of indifference to boundaries, roads, fences, and paths, and walking is a way of cultivating and performing this indifference. If walking in nature or wilderness is pursued as an edifying good in itself or as a means of opening up sensual awareness, these motivations cannot be cleanly separated from the subtle power politics of walking. It is a kind of civil disobedience. Theodore Adorno highlights the political potential of the modern leisurely stroll, in which he discerns a subtle bourgeois triumph over the old feudal order. He writes of walking, “It was the bourgeois form of locomotion: physical demythologization, free of the spell of hieratic pacing, roofless wandering, breathless flight. Human dignity insisted on the right to walk, a rhythm not extorted from the body by command or terror. The walk, the stroll, were private ways of passing time, the heritage of the feudal promenade in the nineteenth century” (Adorno 2005, 162). Walking is a way of making a claim to one’s own body, but it is also a way of making a

claim to space--if only in the rather unassuming sense of claiming the right to temporarily and unhurriedly *be* where one pleases. In this sense, wilderness walking takes its place alongside other political attempts to re-partition and re-organize social space, such as “Take Back the Night” rallies or the Occupy Wall Street movement, in which protestors proclaimed the publicness of Wall Street by squatting in Zuccotti Park. (If Thoreau were among them, he would have been pleased to see that Wall Street, after all, occupies but little of the landscape.)

By claiming the seemingly uncontroversial right to merely exist as a walking body, Thoreau makes a certain practical and performative claim to a vast “vicinity” defined by the natural capacities of his walking body. Thoreau makes this explicit with respect to his “afternoon walks” around Concord. “There is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles’ radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the three-score-years and ten of human life. It will never become quite familiar to you” (1954, 113). We could imagine Thoreau’s walking as an “Occupy Nature” movement, and part of its platform was to contest the emergent bourgeois spatial order of private land ownership in nineteenth century New England. “At present, in this vicinity,” he wrote,

the best part of the land is not private property; the landscape is not owned, and the walker enjoys comparative freedom. But possibly the day will come when it will be partitioned off into so-called pleasure grounds, in which a few will take a narrow and exclusive pleasure only, — when fences shall be multiplied, and man traps and other engines invented to confine men to the *public*

road; and walking over the surface of God's earth, shall be construed to mean trespassing on some gentleman's grounds. (1954, 117)

Thoreauian walking is a critical practice insofar as it critiques and contests conventional ways of using and making claims about social space. The innocent freedom of the walker is juxtaposed in particular to the contrivances of legal ownership. This critical potential of walking has been taken up by other nature writers as well. Leopold, for example, ridiculed the idea of sovereign ownership of the living landscape precisely from the perspective of the walker: "One hundred and twenty acres, according to the County Clerk, is the extent of my worldly domain. But the County Clerk is a sleepy fellow, who never looks at his record books before nine o'clock....at daybreak I am the sole owner of all the acres I can walk over. It is not only the boundaries that disappear, but also the thought of being bounded" (1949, 44).

Like Abbey, Thoreau often seems to be straining to reveal to his readers the paradise of the real that lies all around us. But seeing it is not just a matter of changing your mind's eye, it is also about changing your body's eye. You need to comport yourself differently in your environment. For Thoreau, we fail to live so much of life, in part because we leave off *living* such a great portion of our own vicinity. Wendell Berry, whom I engage in the next chapter, expresses a similar incredulity towards his contemporaries a century after Thoreau, writing: "I walk often through places unknown by name or fact or event to people who live almost within calling distance of them, yet more worthy of their interest, I think, than the distant places to which they devote so

much of their attention” (1970, 49-50). Partiality is its own kind of obfuscation. To see nature more truly, then, you need to see more of the nature that is all around you. We should inhabit our immediate surroundings more broadly and more attentively. One way of doing this is to orient your daily round by different criteria. You might follow a subtle natural feature, or a set of animal tracks, rather than a road or socially prescribed route. Or you might wander in search of certain botanical varieties, or trace a straight path over otherwise avoided terrain to some chosen destination.

Thoreau’s project of becoming at home on the earth quickly reveals a sense in which it is actually quite difficult to be truly “at home” in the civilized world. The real challenge of wilderness walking, and in a certain sense, the ultimate expression of Thoreau’s love of the wild, lies in his approach to the artificial. In other words, the eye for nature that the walker aims to perfect is eventually turned back toward the built environment itself.

As Thoreau makes clear, physicality--the material specificity of place and of bodies--matters when it comes to walking. “It is not indifferent to us which way we walk,” nor, we may add, where we walk. It matters that we have places that are “unhandseled,” untamed, and unexplored—that we should have a wide diversity of such places, and that we should have even places that are in their very materiality somewhat hostile to human bodies, such as the tops of mountains. And yet, the key to proper wilderness walking is that wherever one walks (if one walks very well) nature or wilderness comes about. Thoreau insisted there was no greater wilderness than that

which he himself imported into some “recesses of Concord.” The physicality of the Thoreau’s environment is at once always crucial and never determinate. Leo Marx shows how Thoreau, like other writers of his day, fretted over the locomotive and its incipient urbanization of the countryside and wilderness. But Thoreau re-appropriates the physicality of the locomotive and the railroad itself, snaring this unnatural artifact within an unusual matrix of signification, which is afforded in part, it seems, by the very act of walking the tracks, which Thoreau notes is not the usual way of engaging the space and materiality of the railroad.

The railroad is perhaps our pleasantest and wildest road. It only makes deep cuts into and through the hills. On it are no houses or foot-travelers. The travel on it does not disturb me. The woods are left to hang over it. Though straight, is wild in its accompaniments. All is raw edges. Even the laborers on it are not like other laborers. Its houses, if any, are shanties, and its ruins the ruins of shanties, shells where the race that built the railroad dwelt, and the bones they gnawed lie about. I am cheered by the sound of running water now down the wooden troughs on each side the cut. Then it is the driest walking in wet weather, and the easiest in snowy. This road breaks the surface of the earth. Even the sight of smoke from the shanty excites me to-day. Already these puddles on the railroad, reflecting the pine woods, remind me of summer lakes. (1887, 9:342)

In *Walden*, he poetizes from a similar mood.

What is the railroad to me

I never go to see

Where it ends  
It fills a few hollows  
And makes banks for the swallows  
It sets the sand a blowing  
And the blackberries a growing

But I cross it like a cart-path in the woods. (1960, 86)

It is good for nature to be natural, but it does not have to be. That is the true art and the true test of wandering. When you achieve a true genius for taking walks, the passing train, or the telegraph lines, or even “the village,” may become objects of a curiously detached wonder. A kind of wonder that some of Thoreau’s readers might find more convincing if its object were the moon, a river, or a blade of grass. “In one direction from my house” Thoreau writes, “there was a colony of muskrats in the river meadows; under the grove of elms and buttonwoods in the other horizon was a village of busy men, as curious to me as if they had been prairie dogs” (1960, 115). This is the environmental vision that Thoreau carefully cultivates in his walks--a studied ambulatory indifference that encounters the railroad or even an urban center of bourgeois commerce as a part of the natural landscape. Thoreau's excursion to Ktaadn, for example, gave him not only a profound view of nature, but also a new and more affirmative view even of the “over-civilized” parts of the human world. “We have not seen nature,” he writes of being on the summit, “unless we have seen her thus vast and drear and inhuman, *though in the midst of cities*” (1988, 94; italics added). When you meet the landscape as a walking body in just



the right way, you will not merely *understand* that even the built environment is part and parcel of nature and “the true surface of God's Earth”—you will not merely accept the premise—but truly *see and feel* it as such. In his journal, later, he writes “though the city is no more attractive to me than ever, yet I see less difference between the city and some dismalest swamp than formerly” (1887 4:47 Journal). Becoming a body ultimately entails a wholistic re-inhabitation of both the hinter-regions of the world and the made places of the built environment.

*the walker and the Cynic; walking as an alethurgic practice and the ideal of immaculate perception*

At the beginning of this chapter I pointed to the argument made by Cronon and other environmental historians that the idea and ideal of wilderness is both modern and historically contingent, and for Cronon, is also deeply problematic. However, if we understand Thoreauian walking as one of the main ingredients of the wilderness idea, we can find a striking historical antecedent in Greek Cynicism. The affinity between the wilderness ideal and Greek Cynicism becomes visible, particularly, if we attend to *practice* as opposed to doctrines, ideas, and imagery. Foucault contrasted the Platonic metaphysics of the soul with the Cynic’s “stylistics of existence.” Where Socratic philosophy was concerned with caring for the self by seeking truth in a higher realm or

another world, Cynicism was concerned with practicing truth, or living an alternative life, a “true life.” It is with Cynicism, according to Foucault, that the concern with living a beautiful, excellent, and memorable life is coupled with to a philosophical will to truth. “In Cynic practice,” Foucault writes, “the requirement of an extremely distinctive form of life--with very characteristic, well defined rules, conditions, and modes--is strongly connected to the principle of truth-telling” (2008, 165).

Foucault lays out three “alethurgic ” (truth manifesting) functions of the Cynic life. First, the Cynic mode of life functions as the experiential condition of possibility of truth telling. Being free of all social attachments and happy to endure the hardships this brings, the Cynic subject has no investments in false pleasantries. Second, Cynic praxis is a performative “reduction of all pointless conventions and all superfluous opinions.” That is, it has a “reductive function with regard to conventions and beliefs.” This is related to the third alethurgic function of the Cynic life, which is to function as a test, an existential experiment that reveals some essential truths of mortal existence. “It brings to light, in their irreducible nakedness, those things which alone are indispensable to human life or which constitute its most elementary, rudimentary essence” (2008, 171).

The wandering Cynic, with his characteristic beggar’s pouch, staff, and ragged cloak, bears an undeniable resemblance to the central figure of modern nature writing-- the solitary walker in the wilderness, the peripatetic ascetic ranging freely over the earth,

at home in the unbuilt spaces of nature.<sup>11</sup> We may expand Foucault's analysis to note that the Cynic's embodied performance of the rudimentary essence of human life, like Thoreau's walking, also attempts to restore attention to the materiality of social space. "It brings to light, in their irreducible nakedness" not only those things that are essential to human life, but also the *things* that make up the environment, by *living* that environment in a way that at once seeks to be heroically ascetic and sensually unrestrained. Diogenes the Cynic, we are told, "used any place for any purpose, for breakfasting, sleeping, or conversing. And then he would say, pointing to the portico of Zeus and the Hall of Processions, that the Athenians had provided him with places to live in" (Laertius 1991, 25).

Common to both Cynicism and modern peripatetic asceticism is an experimentation with alethurgic practices--that is, practices that, while not necessarily resulting in propositional truths, have the effect of removing certain illusions or

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<sup>11</sup> It is written that when asked where he was from, Diogenes replied, "I am a cosmopolitan." If the story is true, it marks the first known use of the term "cosmopolitan." While the meaning of this first usage is not altogether clear, it most likely does not mark the beginning of "cosmopolitanism" as we understand it, as a claim to an international culture transcending various parochialisms. In the accounts of Diogenes and other Cynics we find evidence to suggest a much more literal meaning for the term, one that bears a strong resemblance to the Thoreauian ideal: that the cosmos was his homeland, that he was fully at home in the world at large. According to Maximus Tyrius, Diogenes "divested himself of all unfavorable circumstances, freed himself from bonds and moved about the earth without ties, like a bird endowed with reason--fearing no tyrant, constrained by no law, occupied with no state's business, unencumbered by the care of children, unhampered by marriage, not fastened to a farm nor burdened with military affairs nor driven from one place to another by trade. Rather, he laughed at all such men and at their pursuits" (1997, 147). Exactly how to place the Cynic notion of cosmopolitanism is up for debate. One reasonable interpretation concentrates upon Diogenes' rejection of the artificiality and partiality of the polis. I contend the negative interpretation misses an important part of the Cynic mood, which goes beyond the rejection of particularity and partiality to embrace something like what classicist John Moles calls "a positive allegiance to the whole earth" (Moles 1996, 111). We hear this positive cosmopolitan idealism that Cynicism shares with the modern peripatetic ascetic in the words of a later anonymous Cynic: "My prayer is that my feet may be just like hoofs, like Chiron's in the story; that I may need bedclothes no more than the lion, and costly food no more than a dog. Let the whole earth be my sufficient bedchamber, the universe my house; and the food I would choose is that which is easiest to get. As for me, my own feet carry me wherever I need to go. I am able to endure cold and heat alike, and so 'miserable' am I that I feel no discontent with any of the works of God." (Boas and Lovejoy 1997, 144)

dispelling superfluities, and thus placing the subject in a renewed proximity to the real, or in a position of greater perspective, clarity, awareness. Toward this end, the Cynic reduction often makes use of what we could call a hermeneutics of the desiring body--the body pared down to its sheer senses and its most basic drives, needs, and capacities. The Cynic “regarded the sense-organs which nature has given him as gods” (Boas and Lovejoy 1997, 129). Thoreau’s walking, on the other hand, entails what we might call a hermeneutics of the motile body. The peripatetic ascetic seeks, through a kind of studied ambulatory disregard to accomplish a descent into the body that encounters the world as a wilderness of pure reality—a world stripped, in Thoreau’s language, of all the “mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and delusion, and tradition, and appearance...a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin” (1960, 44).

Occasionally, though, Thoreau seems to be aiming beyond any hermeneutics of the body to an even more purified mode of perception. The ideal of pure sensation, true seeing, or “immaculate perception” lurks as a strange attractor within Thoreau’s peripatetic asceticism. It is the limit case, as it were, of “returning to your senses.” In *Walden* he wonders, “If a man should walk through this town and see only the reality, where, think you, would the “Mill-dam” go to? If he should give us an account of the realities he beheld there, we should not recognize the place in his description. Look at a meeting house, or a court-house, or a jail, or a shop, or a dwelling house, and say what

that thing really is before a true gaze and they would all go to pieces in your account of them” (1960, 112).

For Thoreau, walking can be not only a way of “de-humanizing” the environment, but also a way of *producing* the social space in the first place. This space can be undone by peripatetic asceticism for the same reason that it was first *accomplished* by equal and opposite means. Bourgeois space and the governed space of the modern state is itself performed, and ambulatory practices play a role in creating them as well: the commute, the morning constitutional, window shopping, et cetera. Thoreau articulates this insight in a journal entry after seeing an uncharacteristic sight: another “gentleman” walking in the vicinity of the railroad tracks.

It then occurred to me that I had never seen Mr. H on the railroad, though he walks every day, and moreover it would be quite impossible for him to walk on the railroad, such a formalist is he, such straight-jackets we weave for ourselves. He could do nothing that was not sanctioned by the longest use of men, and as men had voted in all their assemblies from the first to travel only on the public way, he would confine himself to that. It would no doubt seem to him very improper, not to say undignified, to walk on the railroad; and then, is it not forbidden by the railroad corporations?...How much of the life of certain men *goes* to sustain, to make respected, the institutions of society. They are the ones who pay the heaviest tax. (1887, 4:465 Journal)

Much life is in the *going*, and insofar as the *going* is constrained, *life* is extracted—a heavy tax indeed. Moreover, *life*, *walking*, and *seeing* are intimately connected for Thoreau, and they are connected in a way that gestures toward the ideal of immaculate

perception. There is “nothing,” Thoreau testifies, “like a little internal activity called life—if it were only walking much in a day—to keep the eyes in good order; no such collyrium” (1887 9:185). Walking helps give us true life, true reality; not just a true gaze but true hearing as well: “turned loose into the woods, the only man in nature, walking and meditating to a great extent as if man and his customs are not. The catbird and the jay is sure of the whole of your ear now. Each noise is like a stain on pure glass” (1887, 9:442).

Thoreau was tempted to seek the “what” of matter, whether the Mill-dam or a meadow, beyond or behind what human consciousness adds—behind the conventional, political, and social meaning, but sometimes even further than that, behind the signification conferred by any human desire, or even beyond any meaning conferred by the cognizant mind itself. “I begin to see...an object,” he writes, “when I cease to understand it—and see that I did not realize or appreciate it before—but I get no further than this. How adapted these forms and colors to my eye—a meadow and an island; what are these things?” It is this aspect of Thoreau's writings that Cameron explores in a detailed study of his *Journal*. “The *Journal*,” Cameron writes, “is the record of a man who would abandon not simply human concerns but perceptual givens. Although Thoreau acknowledges the eye’s determination, he conversely insists that seeing can be made to precede the imposition of meaning” (1985, 50). “Thoreau's attention to the landscape is scrupulously chaste” (1985, 111). Thoreau's prayer is this: if thought itself cannot finally be excised from perception, at least “give me pure mind, pure thought. Let

me not be in haste to detect the universal law, let me see more clearly a particular instance of it” (Thoreau quoted in Cameron 1985, 130).

Cameron sets out to “explore the ramifications of this fiction” (1985, 50) of immaculate perception, and her analysis reveals a consistent tension in the *Journal*, as Thoreau’s attempts to see and render with “pure mind” and chaste eye, and to “take the civilization all out of the landscape,” is always running up against the perspectival situated-ness of the inescapably mindful and embodied observer of nature. That it is ultimately a fiction or an impossibility also has ramifications for Thoreau's peripatetic asceticism and the wilderness idea it performs. We find hints of this in Thoreau's writing. When we closely examine those passages in which Thoreau appears to be stripping the landscape of social meaning, we often do not find a true decoding that would render the landscape in its bare materiality as much an over-coding on some new basis. In spite of his zeal for real-izing materiality, Thoreau often ends up with a more complex entanglement of perspectives, meanings, and comparisons--a profusion of thoughtful, affective, and material connections--in his experiential accounts. Let us return to the railroad as an example. What are the tracks to Thoreau? He never goes to see where they end. That is, he brackets the whole troubling notion of the city, and how near it is by rail. Thoreau would attend instead to the *right-here-ness* of the railroad,

It fills a few hollows

And makes banks for the swallows

It sets the sand a blowing

And the blackberries a growing

But he does so not as plate of “pure glass.” He does so as someone with a taste and an eye for blackberries. Or, perhaps, as a swallow, or at least one who knows what looks like a good home to a swallow. And he does so as a walking body, after all, who steps easily over the tracks--”I cross it like a cart path in the woods”--somehow chastening them lest their all-too-human significance as tentacles of industrialization should get too big for its material britches.

If Thoreau's experiments in becoming a body and wholistically re-inhabiting space do not finally accomplish immaculate perception, perhaps they make possible a greater variety of overlapping and subtly interweaving significations and extra-human connections. The peripatetic ascetic may never find nor create a space of truth in quite the sense anticipated, but may nevertheless work to open spaces, so to speak, fishing up from the depths of materiality some fresh possibilities of embodied coexistence and affective connection. Peripatetic asceticism may not bring us into seamless, immaculate sensory contact with the ocean of pure matter, but by walking some of the human out of the landscape and walking some of the landscape into the human, it can perhaps make us see things differently by opening inadvertently closed lines of contact and congress with the non-human world.



*the troubles with wilderness, and parkour*

Critics of environmentalism have long manifested antipathy toward the notion of “pure” wilderness and towards the preservationist policies that would protect it. But more recently, as noted at the beginning of the chapter, environmentalists themselves have taken aim at the idea of wilderness. According to Cronon in particular, the love of wilderness too often renders unlovely, and therefore unworthy of care, any place that does not conform to the ideal of a place utterly devoid of the human trace, arguably neglecting the vast majority of actually existing ecosystems. But we risk missing some of the potential of wilderness if we attend too strictly to ideas, to the exclusion of their attendant practices. The ideal of pure wilderness entails certain political problems, as Cronon shows, however the very practice of peripatetic asceticism which has sustained the ideal can also transform it. We can see this in Thoreau’s evolving attitude to the built landscape. And indeed, if we were to look for contemporary Thoreauian peripatetics, we should look not only to the woods, but also to the cities and suburbs.

Lisses, France is one place to start. If you go there today you will probably find a lot of people in their late teens and twenties running seemingly at random through streets, lawns, and parking lots, vaulting over walls, jumping between rooftops, and scaling buildings. This is parkour, a novel mode of peripatetic asceticism. It looks dangerous and vaguely illicit, but its mix of edginess, childlike playfulness, and incredible athleticism is captivating. Not all Parisian suburbs are quite as thick with “freerunners,”

or *traceurs* and *traceuses*, as practitioners of parkour call themselves. They come to Lisses on a sort of pilgrimage because it was here that parkour was “invented” in the early 1990s by two self-described bored teenagers, Sebastian Foucan and David Belle.

Parkour, or freerunning is sometimes described as moving from point A to point B. Belle and Foucan called it “*l’art de déplacement*.” Foucan believes that the freerunning they supposedly invented has in fact always been around. “It’s really an ancient art,” says Foucan in the 2003 BBC freerunning exhibition film, *Jump London*. “Neanderthals,” he imagines, must have been freerunners. “The thing is that no one gave it a name. We didn’t put it in a box” (Foucan, quoted in BBC 2007). But as with wilderness walking, the simplicity is deceptive. If freerunning is a perfectly natural art that was always already there, something happened in Lisses to make it a *thing*, which could be given a name, and perhaps put in a box. It seems that it took just the right environment for the movement of one’s own body through space to become a radical art. If parkour is natural movement, it needs an unnatural backdrop against which to appear. But this was not the Edenic half-dozen rods Thoreau dreamt of. It does not happen in the countryside or the wilderness. Nor, however, was parkour born in the gritty inner city-- this is a common misconception that Foucan would like to dispel. If there is anything peculiar about Lisses, it would be its suburban normalcy. “For us growing up in Lisses,” Foucan explains, “it’s a beautiful town with nature and all that, but there was nothing to do” (Foucan, quoted in BBC 2007). Not an uncommon complaint among the young and the restless, perhaps. But Belle’s and Foucan’s ingenious solution to this problem was to

refuse to grow up in one very particular sense--they continued to interact corporeally with the built environment in the way that children do. Moreover, through a gradually intensifying regime of training they perfected their ability to re-appropriate the whole suburban environment as a sort of playscape.

We are close here to the Thoreauian walker. But where the wilderness walker may wander on an aesthetic whim, the freerunner seems to take more drastic measures, manufacturing territorial indifference by drawing a highly abstract line of flight in Euclidean space--from point A to point B--at as close to a full run as possible. "Draw a straight line on a map of your home town. Start from point a, and go to the point b. Don't consider the elements which are in your way (barriers, walls, wire fences, trees, houses, buildings) as obstacles; hug them: climb, get over, jump: let your imagination flow: you're now doing parkour" (Daskalaki 2008, 58).

A sense of being at one with the environment is not usually associated with landscapes of sheer walls, fences, truck traffic, and homogenized expanses. If early wilderness walkers reclaimed the wilderness, it would seem in retrospect to have been none too soon, as the "civilized" world of industrial modernity would soon begin to close in around them. Of course Thoreau foresaw it: "fences shall be multiplied, and man traps and other engines invented to confine men to the *public* road; and walking over the surface of God's earth, shall be construed to mean trespassing" (1954, 117). But most of the thrill for Belle and Foucan and their followers seems to have been in the challenge and novelty of unselfconsciously being and moving in spaces they had been conditioned

to ignore, and architecturally compelled to eschew. "From then on we developed," says Foucan, "And really the whole town was there for us; there for parkour. You just have to look, you just have to think, like children." This is what Foucan calls "the vision of parkour" (Foucan in BBC, 2007).

Parkour vision, like the vision of the wilderness walker, is an aesthetic, or even a hermeneutics, of the motile body. And if you dig deep enough you will find a kernel of eco-ethics. Freerunners do not offer a literary genre as sophisticated as that of wilderness walkers. However, as the rapid global spread of parkour is largely a function of video sharing sites, commentaries in chatrooms, blogs, and social fora, which constitute something like a vernacular literature of freerunning that could almost be seen as a new species of nature writing. "I could feel myself flowing in the environment," one enraptured enthusiast writes, "No normal everyday person can view the world like we freerunners do...if everyone saw more of parkour and how we use all of the environment to its full potential, they might actually start to realize, this world is truly a wondrous place!" Another contributor laments that "Many take advantage of the world," while "Traceurs are the only people that can truly see the world for what it is."<sup>12</sup>

The explication of the critical aesthetics of parkour is not left entirely to the chatrooms and bloggers. The parkour phenomenon has also attracted its fair share of scholarly attention, much of which focuses on the similarities to Debord's critical situationist practices of *détournement* and *dérive*, with the attendant idea of the capitalist

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<sup>12</sup> Commentary found online on 8-27-2013 at [http://www.youtube.com/all\\_comments?threaded=1&v=QrdSBvtYn2M&page=1](http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?threaded=1&v=QrdSBvtYn2M&page=1)

city as a “spectacle.”<sup>13</sup> Debord’s “spectacle” is the “environmental” equivalent of the fetishized commodity, the reality (use value) of which lies beneath mere appearance and the spuriously intersubjective attributions of exchange value. As a critical concept, “spectacle” bespeaks the falsity of appearance, and registers a certain distrust of vision, which, although in everyday speech it often stands in for perception in general, can also be seen as the most suspect of the senses--the least immediate, and most easily deceived. Isn’t the very light that comes to the eye a trickster--willfully deceiving as both wave and particle? Debord writes, “Since the spectacle’s job is to use various specialised mediations in order to show us a world that can no longer be directly grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special pre-eminence once occupied by touch: the most abstract and easily deceived sense is the most readily adaptable to the generalised abstraction of present day society” (Debord 2010, 18). The key to “parkour vision,” like the exalted vision of the wilderness walker, is that it is not *merely* seeing. The non-oculocentrism of the traceur as a “seer” is important. Parkour, as one theorist suggests, “functions to reinscribe the ‘pre-eminence once occupied by touch’ by falsifying the false reality of the spectacle” (Lamb 2010, 93).

Parkour, as a quest for wholistic or true “seeing,” can be seen not only as a new version of a Marxist critique of capitalist space, but at the same time as a practical analogue of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological critique of objectivist philosophies. The task Merleau-Ponty set for phenomenology was to elucidate the experience of the world that is prior and integral to philosophical reflection or objective conceptualization. If we

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<sup>13</sup> See for example Daskalaki 2008 and Lamb 2010.

seek the real, Merleau-Ponty advised that we seek it here, in the apparentness of existence rather than in what philosophical reflection or objective thought tells us *must be* the case. The phenomenological method requires throwing off the prejudice in favor of objectivism, which he argued is entailed in both common sense and scientific thought. Thus, phenomenology “consists in relearning to look at the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1994, xx). “Our task will be, moreover, to rediscover phenomena, the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us, the system of self-other-things as it comes into being; to reawaken perception and foil its trick of allowing us to forget it as a fact and as perception in the interest of the object which it presents to us and of the rational tradition to which it gives rise” (1994, 57). For Merleau-Ponty, the objective world posited by science is the twin of the opposite and equally mistaken notion “of the universal constituting subject.” Both conceptualizations “leveled out experience,” (1994, 56) in such a way that it now becomes necessary re-achieve “a direct and primitive contact with the world, and [endow] that contact with a philosophical status” (1994, vii).

This notion of a depletion, devaluing, or leveling out of everyday experience, and the need for a more direct and vital contact with the world recur in phenomenology, and they are nothing if not faithful to the peripatetic ascetic’s ecocriticism. Where Merleau-Ponty suggests a mode of thought that pays homage to embodiment and the “intentional arc,” the peripatetic ascetic provides a regime of practices and a distinctive mode of life that can restore and remake the “system of self-other-things.” By matching extraordinary

bodily capabilities to a particularly resistant environment, the freerunner pursues the extremes of physical motion through built space in an attempt to become material and thus connect directly to the materiality of the cityscape. “You feel connected to your environment, you feel connected to your body and you feel connected to the forces at play around you and within you, and between you and your environment. You feel sort of not in control of them, but sort of half in control of them and half controlled by them. But you’re 100% there, in your environment, you can’t afford to be thinking about something else... it’s a very dynamic feeling, you feel very alive, vibrant, sort of full of power” (“Dan Edwardes” quoted in Angel, 2006). When freerunners talk about the beauty of “nature,” which they often do, a Thoreau-esque confusion of the moving body and the physical environment sometimes creeps in: “...and to take the time to stop and enjoy the beauty around you. How can I say this, it’s like the body can be the most beautiful thing on earth because of how it can move. That kind of nature is beautiful, not things you buy in a store” (“Patrick” quoted in Atkinson 2009, 189).

In performatively recovering a lived system of self-other-things, the freerunner remakes or reveals the built landscape as a kind of hyper-Thoreauian wilderness of the made. The affinities with the wilderness ideal have not escaped the notice of parkour theorists. Atkinson interprets parkour as an anarcho-environmentalist movement, using Lyotard’s concept of a “scapeland” to describe this performatively razed space. On this interpretation, “Lyotard’s scapeland is a place and state of being therein which “is” before description and definition; it is that which appears as the erasure of an ideological or

narrative support. A scapeland is characterized by the absence of direction and destination provided by cultural scripts or modes of thinking and understanding, such as technocapitalist ways of mapping and defining urban infrastructures or physical cultural practices within them. A scapeland is raw, open, primitive, and decolonized space” (Atkinson 2009, 192).

Parkour generates a valuable critique of the contemporary cityscape, and it works to reveal the hidden agency of what Jane Bennett (2010) calls the “vibrant matter” of everyday environments. And in a significant way it stretches peripatetic asceticism, fulfilling Thoreau’s vision of “nature, vast, drear and inhuman, though in the midst of cities,” and constitutes an enlightening “commentary” on our quotidian failures to apprehend the richness of material environments that do not conform to the ideals of pure wilderness or bucolic nature. At the same time, however, parkour remains within the wilderness problematic as described by Cronon. Cronon warns that wilderness encourages “the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world” (1996, 80). Parkour seems tempted by this ideal.

Cronon is concerned about a kind of wilderness escapism that is both a symptom and a cause of a certain environmental subjectivity--what Timothy Morton, taking a cue from Hegel, calls “environmental Beautiful Soul syndrome.” Not just the wilderness idea, but peripatetic asceticism itself at risk here. It is comforting to identify with the true



and natural life of the moving body. Adopting and performing such a green subjectivity seems to promise a perceptual foundation on which we can build an edifice of unassailable environmental truth and authentic ecological sentiments. It allows us to suppose that, surely, our day-to-day environmental sins are the fault of society, of this fallen human world in which I am compelled to live as a social, political, speaking, eating person with more complex desires than to simply move through my world.

Parkour, therefore, may creatively complicate the wilderness ideal, but it also reproduces some of its problematic aspects. Nevertheless, if the wilderness that environmentalists celebrate is something performed, then there is always the possibility of performing it differently. Each performative iteration usually bears a seed of critique of other performances, as parkour and Cynicism can cast critical light on wilderness walking. The point of building a concept like peripatetic asceticism is to facilitate its creative undoing, pushing forward its self-critical potentials. Toward this end it will be helpful to juxtapose other modes of ecocritical practice. Thus, the next chapter turns from the wilderness ideal to agrarian environmentalism and to work as an ecocritical practice.

## Chapter Three

### Perception and Practice in the Agrarian Environmentalism of Wendell Berry and Martin Heidegger

*"The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings." - Masanobu Fukuoka*

*"Et in Arcadia ego." - Death*



While walking was, for Thoreau, a privileged mode of engaging the non-human world, it was not his only mode.<sup>14</sup> In a passage from *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, for example, we find a different Thoreau from the author who told us it is “easier to live a true and natural life while traveling.”

I can fancy that it would be a luxury to stand up to one’s chin in some retired swamp a whole summer’s day, scenting the wild honeysuckle and bilberry blows, and lulled by the minstrelsy of gnats and mosquitoes! A day passed in the society of those Greek sages, such as described in the Banquet of Xenophon, would not be comparable with the dry wit of decayed cranberry fines and the fresh Attic salt of the moss-beds. Say twelve hours of genial and familiar converse with the leopard frog; the sun to rise behind alder and dogwood, and climb buoyantly to his meridian of two hands’ breadth, and finally sink to rest behind some bold western hummock. To hear the evening chant of the mosquito from a thousand green chapels, and the bittern begin to boom from some concealed fort like a sunset gun! Surely one may as profitably be soaked in the juices of a swamp for one day as pick his way dry-shod over sand. (1980, 300)

Being still and settling into place can be an environmental technique of the self in very much the same sense that we have seen walking to be, in spite of a certain opposition between them at the level of practice. Perhaps we could take Thoreau’s entire tenure at Walden Pond, and the famous book that chronicles it, as a showcase of this technique of getting in touch with nature by settling and growing roots, but Thoreau remained too much a walker even there to exemplify the environmentalist ideal of dwelling in place.

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<sup>14</sup> The above image is a painting by Isabelle Chu.

Nevertheless, this passage from *A Week* foregrounds the juxtaposition between walking and what we might call “dwelling,” while nonetheless suggesting that these two different environmental techniques of self have coexisted in environmentalist thought and practice for some time.

There is a prevalence, in current Western environmental political discourse, of the language of place, locality, and rootedness,<sup>15</sup> and agrarian localism has overtaken peripatetic asceticism in environmentalist discourse if not in practice, even though the generic ideal of “getting back to nature” usually fails to differentiate between the two. But if these two modes of anticipating, visualizing, and cultivating connection with the environment are not distinguished from one another--if they are subsumed by environmental theorists under the idea of a single “dream of naturalism”<sup>16</sup> or are indiscriminately implicated in the reproduction of a failed concept of “Nature”<sup>17</sup>--then we will not fully understand how such ideals and concepts can be not only produced and reproduced, but also complicated and pluralized, at this very fundamental, praxial level. Agrarian localism, homesteading, and the diverse but localized practices of traditional farming are environmental techniques of self that are often portrayed as enacting a project of authentic existential emplacement of the self within the natural world.

Needless to say, not all agriculturalists engage in husbandry and cultivation with a view to becoming more deeply connected with nature or more authentically at one with

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the written work of Thomas Berry, David Orr, Daniel Kemmis, Gary Paul Nabhan, Bill McKibben, Gene Logsdon, and Wes Jackson among many others.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Wapner 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Morton 2006.

the earth, but traditional agricultural practices and the agrarian “way of life” have been defended in precisely those terms by many critics of industrial modernity. Following the mid-twentieth-century industrialization of agriculture, discontents of “Progress” have consistently advocated an agrarian return to the land as antidote to our alienation from nature, and unlike some other movements midwifed by the ‘60s counterculture, this “new agrarianism” has steadily gained traction over the past half century under the rubrics of “organic” or “sustainable” agriculture, “biodynamic farming,” the “slow food” movement, “bioregionalism,” “food democracy” and “food sovereignty,” and even in the growing enthusiasm for “buying local.”

This chapter will critically examine the ecocriticism of Wendell Berry and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, reading each as a theorist of “dwelling” and an advocate of agrarian attachment to place in environmental ethical terms. Heidegger brought to philosophical expression many of the most fundamental ideas and ideals that Berry would later espouse, a generation later and a continent away. I focus on the category of “work,” which I will show functions for both Berry and Heidegger as an environmental technique of the self, particularly by grounding and centering a hermeneutics of the environment in the human body conceived in its metabolic capacities.

*Wendell Berry and work as a connection to the earth*

Wendell Berry has authored over forty books of fiction, non-fiction, essays, and poetry, and his career as a published writer has spanned over five decades. He has contributed numerous essays to national publications, and citations of his work are ubiquitous across a wide range of disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Berry also recently received the National Humanities Medal at the White House in honor of a lifetime of “conservation advocacy.” Berry’s thought has also attracted the attention of a few political theorists. Patrick Deneen dubs him the “Kentucky Aristotelian,” noting the affinity, been explored by several scholars,<sup>18</sup> between Berry’s social critique and the classical republican tradition. The comparison is apt insofar as republican political thought always propounds a notion of “the good life.” Berry’s vision of the good life, however, is not grounded in a human good alone, but indeed in a cosmic good understood in wholistic ecological terms. It is the greater good of the whole earthly “Creation,” which he understands to house the human good life that depends upon it and ultimately must serve it. The good life, in other words, is a life lived in vital contact with nature/earth/Creation.

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<sup>18</sup> Shadrui 2003, Smith 2003, Deneen 2006, and Stephens 2009.

In this sense Berry's, thought partakes of a politics of Nature that has had growing salience since the nineteenth century, and which is central to environmental politics.<sup>19</sup> Although the idea that nature is a touchstone for the Good, the Right, and the True is older than modern science, that notion was greatly bolstered when the science of ecology began to reveal order, harmony, and beneficence in wildernesses previously associated with chaos, waste, and evil in the pre-modern West. Thoreau gave us one early modern articulation of this viewpoint that the good life, the life that ethically prepares a person for self-government, is necessarily a life lived in contact with nature. Berry's ecocritical essays give us another prominent articulation of this idea. Berry's vision of a life in contact with nature, while it is mostly agrarian, also necessarily includes an intimacy with the wildness and "mystery" of Creation--that which we have not made and, according to him, cannot hope to nor should try to make. But it is the particular mode of this contact with nature, and the techniques that enact and modulate it, that gives Berry's conservation advocacy a flavor distinct from that of the walking wilderness enthusiast. Rather than shaking off the human world and striking out on foot to make unmediated sensual contact with Nature's raw materiality, Berry seeks a deep settling into place, which would cultivate and coax forth a direct and fully integrated relationship with nature. Moreover, this profound connection with nature's mysterious infinitude is not accomplished by

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<sup>19</sup> The scholars who have made valuable explorations of the intellectual history and the philosophy of the politics of nature in this sense are too numerous to list. But a few recent works that take up the topic as a central concern are John Meyer's (2001) exploration of two opposed Western traditions of thought linking politics and nature--the "dualist" conception, in which politics marks our escape from nature, and the "derivative," wherein politics is derived from nature, forming a logical unity with it (whether that means human nature or a more totalizing conception of the natural world). The notion that Nature is a touchstone for truth and justice is integral to the "derivative" tradition, and Bruno Latour's book *The Politics of Nature* (2004) contains in its early chapters one of the best articulations of the political and philosophical dilemmas surrounding this historical viewpoint.

gaining a comprehensive overview, scientific or otherwise, of a landscape or an ecosystem, much less the planet or the universe. It is accomplished, rather, through establishing a single intensive point of contact in a particular place, where one *lives* deeply.

This point of contact, for Berry, is the farmstead--the dwelling place, or subsistent “household” in the traditional enlarged sense of that term--and the most meaningful connection to the earth comes precisely from the *work* of cultivating the land to meet one’s vital needs. “The real name of our connection with the everywhere different and differently named earth,” says Berry, “is ‘work’” (1992, 35). This assertion is central to Berry’s thought. In a shallow sense, this statement simply asserts that all actual economic activity enacts a real physical and metabolic connection to the earth. We depend upon the earth, and what we do towards making our living affects it. Our *work* affects it. This is just another way of stating the central tenet of ecological economics: the economy is a subsystem of a finite global ecology. But the crucial thing is that we must, Berry says, distinguish between “good work” and “bad work.” In order to understand just what Berry means by the “good work” of the traditional farmer, which is how we will grasp the deeper sense in which work establishes a connection with the earth, we have to go through his criticism of “bad work.”



*good work and bad work*

Berry is rightly called an “ecocritic” insofar as the critical aspect of his writing is his principal contribution to environmentalism. Probably his most influential writings have been the continuous string of polemical essays against the industrialization of agriculture. Modern “agribusiness,” he points out, is singularly fixated on increasing yields, and to this end it has become reliant on technological innovation, economies of scale, monocropping, petroleum-based fertilizers and energy inputs, synthetic pesticides, and, most recently, genetic engineering. This has sent agriculture on the familiar trajectory of industrial modernization: more and more mechanized production on larger and larger farms employing fewer and fewer people on the land. Topsoils are depleted and eroded, but yields are kept up with petroleum-based fertilizers and synthetic pesticides. Agriculture has thus come to share in the linear, acquisitive logic of mining and fossil fuel extraction rather than a cyclical participation in natural cycles. For Berry, this can all be seen as a problem of metaphors, or at least it is a problem that can be metaphorically expressed. At some point, “the Machine,” Berry says,

replaced the Wheel of Life as the governing cultural metaphor. Life came to be seen as a road, to be travelled as fast as possible never to return. The Wheel of Life became an industrial metaphor; rather than turning in place, revolving in order to dwell, it began to roll on the “highway of progress” toward an ever-receding horizon. The idea, the responsibility, of return weakened and

disappeared from agricultural discipline. Henceforth, *any* resource would be regarded as an ore. (2002, 287)

The consolidation of agribusiness and the consequent steep decline of family farms has been one of the latest-coming developments of industrialization. But if agriculture, by its own messy biotic nature, resisted the mechanization and rationalization processes of industrial capitalism, in the last sixty years it has finally fallen in line with the dictates of a technologically driven capitalist growth economy. It is important to note, however, that Berry's criticism is not reserved just for the agricultural sector. The global economy, and the utter dependence of the average contemporary citizen upon it, is the larger target of his critique. Particularly, he focuses critical attention on three aspects of life in the global economy: economic specialization, social atomization, and cultural homogenization. Agriculture, however, has a special place in this overall critique because the fate of the "small independent farmer" in the global economy is especially symbolic and illustrative--almost archetypal--in these regards. As opposed to the professional specialist, the small farmer can be seen as the economic generalist par excellence: an independent producer and consumer of a wide range of life's essentials. We can imagine an idealized Robinson Crusoe version, the rugged individual who provides his or her own food, fiber, and shelter, but Berry's language of freedom and self-sufficiency is always joined to an even more insistent language of *community*. And this is a crucial point. Although his writing, and particularly his fiction, shows a normative commitment to the nuclear family, his critical essays place far more emphasis on

community, and particularly on the importance of strong farming communities, in which individuals and families are connected by the close bonds of collective memories, mutual aid, and most importantly for Berry, a mutual *practical* relationship to a particular place. The relative economic isolation of such agrarian communities IN the past and the intergenerational continuity of ways of living and working, in Berry's view, generated a diversity of distinct local cultures that constituted specific and careful responses to the particularities of different places. Thus, ideals of cultural pluralism, strong communities, economic self-sufficiency, and environmental consciousness are joined in an agrarian environmentalist vision where each grows out of a practical connection with the land.

But when work is organized by the global capitalist economy, this vital contact with nature is broken.<sup>20</sup> We are alienated from nature, and each of these links is undermined. Unfettered global capitalism asks for ever-more specialized workers with ever-more-specialized knowledge, which means ever-more fragmented engagement with the world, and ever-fewer occasions for *whole* actions and *completed* cycles. In place of the daily opportunities for concrete experience of economic and ecological realities afforded by farming, specialist-consumers have only the abstractions of informational facts or political sound-bites and the mediations of machines and commodities. The distinctive local cultures that previously constituted careful economic/practical responses to specific places on the earth are going extinct. As the practices that bind communities together erode, they leave behind lonely, anxious, unhappy, and perpetually unfulfilled

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<sup>20</sup> Berry's views here are similar to Karl Marx's analysis of the "metabolic rift" between humans and the earth ushered in by the enclosures of the English Commons. See Foster, Clark, and York, 2010.

consumers ready to assimilate to a national or global mass-society that devours the earth's resources at an exponentially increasing rate. All of these lamentable results of industrial "progress" are both symptoms and causes of our alienation from the earth. This is what Berry means when he says, "The name of our present society's connection to the earth is 'bad work' – work that is only generally and crudely defined, that enacts a dependence that is ill understood, that enacts no affection and gives no honor" (1992, 36).

The central claim here is that the machines, corporations, and absentee owners that have replaced small farmers as the principal agents *working* the land cannot care for the earth the way people can. Berry does not claim that pre-modern farmers have always been ecologically careful and far-sighted, but that the amalgamations of disembodied monetary self-interest that we call corporations will *never* be. In the first place, the argument turns on the question of motivation--of what we might call *ethical energies*--but which Berry usually speaks of in terms of love or affection. "The primary motive for good care and good use of the land-community is always going to be affection," says Berry (2012). However, "the corporations and machines that replace [free-holding farmers]," Berry writes, "will never be bound to the land by the sense of birthright and continuity, or by the love that enforces care" (1970, 76). Corporate energies are, by design, both directed and nourished by profits to the near exclusion of all other possible

motives.<sup>21</sup> In the second place, Berry's argument is about *perception and praxis*. The new corporate workers of the earth are ham-handed, reductively rational, big-thinking, single-minded, and tunnel-visioned. Economies of scale cannot see and respond to details even if they did have the desire to do so. Small farms worked by people, on the other hand, can and often do operate by motives other than economic gain. Moreover, small farmers can "think little"; can see details and engage with the earth in the way of an artist or craftsperson. "The discipline proper to agriculture...is not economics but ecology," Berry insists. "And Ecology may well find its proper disciplines in the arts, whose function is to refine and enliven perception, for ecological principle, however publicly approved, can be enacted only on the basis of each man's perception of his relation to the world" (1970, 96).

*cultivating the earth and cultivating the self*

These two aspects of Berry's argument are related; that is, the practices out of which love and care for a place grow are the same practices that bring us a clarified perception of the ecological gestalt. This is what "good work" does. The small free-holding farmer is the

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<sup>21</sup> The greening of corporations is a limited but real emergence of the last few decades. To the extent that consumers and investors express preferences for environmental values, firms have responded with green marketing campaigns, the lofty claims of which usually carry at least a grain of truth. However, as Mark Sagoff (2006) points out, there are probably stark limits to the suitability of the economic sector for forging and expressing environmental values. According to Sagoff, preferences expressed through market decisions are fundamentally distinct from the values expressed in political discourse, judgment, and decision. Sagoff's often-cited argument can be understood as parsing, within the language and rationale of economics, Hannah Arendt's (1998) distinction between political judgment and consumption as distinct modes of the human condition. We can, moreover, read Berry as accepting Sagoff's critique and adding to his argument with the assertion that the "values" Sagoff speaks of also need to be cultivated within an agrarian culture through the everyday embodied practices of living on the land.

great ecological hope because his or her craft is an environmental ethical technique of the self. It cultivates an enlivened perception of the earth's metabolism and our place in it, as it also cultivates affective attachment. It performs "our *proper* connection to the earth...for good work involves much giving of honor. It honors the source of its materials; it honors the place where it is done; it honors the art by which it is done; it honors the thing that it makes and the user of the made thing" (1970, 35). "Honor" here is directed to the things, places, and beings of this world, and yet the word also carries a religious depth and importance. The paragon of the good work that gives honor is *agriculture* in the true and ancient sense. "The word 'agriculture,'" Berry writes,

means "cultivation of land." And *cultivation* is at the root of the sense both of *culture* and of *cult*. The ideas of tillage and worship are thus joined in culture. And these words all come from an Indo-European root meaning both "to revolve" and "to dwell." To live, to survive on the earth, to care for the soil, and to worship, all are bound at the root to the idea of a cycle. (1977, 87)

The etymology lends profundity to Berry's normative agrarianism. Agriculture is in its essence connected with human life itself. Our existence as humans, our human *being*, is revealed as dwelling, which is a revolving in the metabolic and ecological cycles that is essential to agriculture. The work of sustainable cultivation therefore grounds us in the truth of our own ongoing existence and connects us *essentially* with the surrounding world.

If cultivation is the true human connection to the ecological earth, it is not just a theme to abstractly appreciate, or a metaphor to theorize or celebrate. It is something we should *do*. *Do* try this at home. “Go into the countryside,” writes Berry in no uncertain terms, “and make a home there in the fullest and most permanent sense: that is, live on and use and preserve and learn from and enrich and enjoy the land....it offers the possibility of a coherent and particularized meaningfulness that is beyond the reach of the ways of life of ‘average Americans.’” Going back to the land is not a means of “dropping out,” Berry writes, it is rather “a way of dropping *in*” (1965, 89). Committing oneself in this permanent, practical, fundamental way to a particular place is a way of plugging in to the greater cyclical logic of the living world at large, or of the Universe itself. Farming is an art, Berry says,

But it is also a practical religion, or a religion of practice, a rite. By farming we enact our fundamental connection with energy and matter, light and darkness. In the cycles of farming, which carry the elemental energy again and again through the seasons and the bodies of living things, we recognize the only infinitude within reach of the imagination. How long this cycling of energy will continue we do not know...But by aligning ourselves with it here, in our little time within the unimaginable time of the sun’s burning, we touch infinity; we align ourselves with the universal law that brought the cycles into being and that will survive them. (1977, 87)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The Manichean themes of this passage are not out of place in Berry’s thought. Not only do they inflect his pantheistic-leaning Christianity, they are also reflected in the stark moralism of his agrarian philosophy. Berry’s stance has hardened in his later years into an unapologetic Manichean vision of the American character, divided between “boomers” and “stickers”--a distinction he appropriates from his mentor Wallace Stegner. Boomers are those who exploit a place and then move on, “motivated by greed, the desire for money, property, and therefore power....Stickers on the contrary are motivated by affection, by such love for a place and its life that they want to preserve it and remain in it.” (Berry 2012, lecture)

In Berry's depiction the traditional farmstead is thus a microcosm. It is a privileged access point for the cosmically envired life--the dwelling place where human existence is authentically realized. Through the labor of subsistence farming, one establishes a kind of direct connection, both in consciousness and in fact, between the planet and the household--between the metabolic body and the ecological earth. "Those are the poles," Berry writes, "between which a competent morality would balance and mediate, the doorstep and the planet....These two poles of life and thought offer two different points of view, perspectives that are opposite and complimentary. But morally, because one is contained within the other and the two are interdependent, they propose the same consciousness and the same labor" (1965, 79). The labor fosters the consciousness and affective attachment, and this affectively enlarged consciousness disciplines and gives meaning to the labor.

*farming and true vision*

As with wilderness walking, the ethical edification that comes from farming is linked in Berry's essays to its own subtle ideal of true or immediate perception. The life-long practice of cultivating a place on the earth opens the senses to the physical real as the immediate environment, and in Berry's language, that true opening of perception to the immediate milieu is often just a hair's breadth from the intuition of ecological moral



Truth. As a farmer, “the elemental realities of seasons and weather affect one directly,” Berry testifies, “and become a source of interest in themselves; the relation of one’s life to the life of the world is no longer taken for granted or ignored, but becomes an immediate and complex concern” (1970, 84).<sup>23</sup> Berry’s language of perceptual authenticity comes close to the immaculate perception of the walking body anticipated by Thoreau. But here it is not the primordial physical simplicity of the act of walking that grounds perception, it is the cyclical, metabolic, elemental labor of subsistence cultivation and the permanent, habitual association with a single place that it entails. The farmer’s concern with growing the food that sustains the body is so primordial, so fundamental to existence, and the labor of cultivation makes such an intimate intercourse with the totality of this one place on earth, that the farmer’s senses gain privileged access to matter. Even a token participation in cultivation, such as growing a kitchen garden, can do the trick.

A person who undertakes to grow a garden at home, by practices that will preserve rather than exploit the economy of the soil, is making vital contact with the soil and the weather on which his life depends. He will no longer look upon rain as an impediment of traffic, or upon the sun as a holiday decoration. And his sense of man’s dependence on the world will have grown precise enough, one would hope, to be politically clarifying and useful. (1970, 84)

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<sup>23</sup> The slippage in the word “life” serves Berry in such formulations. The word has for a long time and in many languages housed two meanings: it means one’s own lived life, and it also means life as the transcendent principle of living things, as Nature, or as the total ongoing phenomenon of the biosphere, et cetera. Berry does not worry over the etymology, but he suggests that these different meanings share one word for a good reason--he insists we must (re)engage and (re)connect our lived lives with the *Life* of the world.

It is hard to miss the unwritten “mere” in this sentence before “traffic impediment” and the unwritten “only” before “holiday decoration.” It is the fundamental down-to-earth concerns of farming that makes one see the sun, wind, and rain in their true significance. And this concrete opening of perception to the immediate environment is crucial to a more figurative or ideological ecological enlightenment.

What will cure us? At this point it seems useless to outline yet another idea of a better community, or to invoke yet another anthropological example. These already abound, and we fail to make use of them for the same reason that we continue to destroy the earth: *we remain for the most part blind to our surroundings*. What the world was, or what we have agreed that it was, obtrudes between our sight and what the world is. If we do not see clearly what the nature of our place is, we destroy our place. If we cannot see how our own lives are drawn from the life of the world, and how they are involved and joined with that greater life, then such efforts as we may make to preserve the greater life will be inept and destructive. (1991, 38-9)

Clarified perception, in other words, leads to clarified politics because it grounds morality in the truths of the ecological earth.

*becoming a place and becoming of a place*

Where Thoreau often held up an ideal of absolute perceptual contact with nature, for Berry the imagery of connectedness with place proliferates beyond a model of true seeing or immaculate perception into a vision of literal and physical one-ness with the local

ecology of plants, animals and natural processes. When Berry narrates his own return, as a young man, to his “native hill” in Port Royal, Kentucky, he is also narrating the process of becoming opened to, enveloped by, and eventually dissipated into his immediate surroundings.

I had come back to stay....And once that was settled I began to *see* the place with a new clarity and a new understanding and a new seriousness....I walked over it, looking, listening, smelling, touching, alive to it as never before. I listened to the talk of my kinsmen and neighbors as I never had done, alert to their knowledge of the place, and at the qualities and energies of their speech. I began more seriously than ever to learn the names of things--the wild plants and animals, the natural processes, the local places--and to articulate my observations and memories. My language increased and strengthened, and sent my mind into the place like a live root system....I came to see myself as growing out of the earth like the other native animals and plants. I saw my body and my daily motions as brief coherences and articulations of the energy of the place, which would fall back into the earth like the leaves in autumn. (1965, 178)

Berry describes his homecoming as a kind of conversion experience, in which one’s own essence comes to meld with the essence of this place. Here is a process of becoming native in a radical sense of that word. It is a process of becoming rooted like a plant and making oneself not only at home in a place, not only living in harmony with the elements of a place, but becoming an articulation of the place--a natural outgrowth. The image of rootedness is frequently invoked in Berry’s ideal of place-belonging. He draws occasionally on the example of native animals, but the imagery of the rooted plant is an

even more perfect expression.<sup>24</sup> The plant is bound fast, in place. It grips the soil that *is* its place, and the plant--the pattern of its growth, its very physical form, the fact of its own thriving--is dictated continuously, intimately, and in infinite nuance and detail by its immediate environment. By patterns of light and shade, qualities of soil, weather, atmosphere. Animals are moved by their own internal animus, but plants, we can imagine, are merely there--in a mode of total responsiveness, as perfect expressions of the environment and the place in which they are rooted.

That is to say, the naturalism of being 'native' suggests a dimension of non-agency and de-subjectivation. One way to imagine being native to a place is to be an unthought product and expression of a landscape in which one is so fully immersed it does not even come to consciousness as a place. The narrator of Berry's *A World Lost* exemplifies this "naive" mode of nativeness-to-place as he recalls an idyllic moment of his boyhood in a simple idiom: "I was nine years old, going on ten; having never needed to ask, I knew exactly where I was; I did not want to be anyplace else" (1996, 12). Even if this "world lost" is not merely an artificial pastoral ideal projected back onto a misremembered childhood, Berry would likely agree that it is hardly sustainable into adulthood. Such a seamless world is perhaps necessarily lost. But Berry's localism suggests the ideal of being fully *of* a place can be closely approximated through the labor of dwelling, of making yourself at home *in* place. If you hew closely enough to the dictates of the immediate physical environment--the lay of the land, the weather patterns,

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<sup>24</sup> Thoreau made recourse to the same imagery of the rooted plant as an ideal of natural belonging, particularly in *Walden*; though even there it does not have the importance and prominence it has in Berry's writings.

the ecological workings--perhaps your own will could become indistinguishable from the animus of the place itself, which is of a piece with the animus of the world. "I slowly fill with the knowledge of this place, and sink into it, I come to the sense that my life here is inexhaustible" (1965, 210). To fully sink into it would be to become de-subjectified, absolved of your own agency--as perfectly peaceful and blameless as the earth itself. "[My native hill] has killed no one in the service of the American government," says Berry. "Then why should I, who am a fragment of the hill? I wish to be as peaceable as my land, which does no violence, though it has been the scene of violence and has had violence done to it" (1965, 36).

This desire to become a fragment of a place is reminiscent of the experience of spiritual dissipation Thoreau describes on Mount Ktaadn. But where Berry's experience of becoming one with material nature is peaceful, Thoreau's becoming-matter was more disturbing and awe-ful. Berry's nature writing does not usually dwell on the grand expanses of howling wilderness that capture the imagination of the Thoreauian walker. But in a few places we can catch a glimpse Berry's own peripatetic asceticism. Berry's *The Unforeseen Wilderness* chronicles a several-days' hike through Kentucky's Red River Gorge; this short book grew out of Berry's participation in a movement to save the Gorge from a planned impoundment that would have buried this wilderness under a large reservoir. Like Thoreau, Berry finds it takes several hours of walking to get himself truly *in* the wilderness, but finally Berry is exalted in true peripatetic ascetic style.

I am afoot in the woods. I am alive in the world, this moment, without the help or the interference of any machine. I can move without reference to anything except the lay of the land and the capabilities of my own body. The necessities of foot travel in this steep country have stripped away all superfluities....I am aware that I move in the landscape as one of its details. (1991, 63)

Berry remains a localist, though, insofar as his peripatetic asceticism tends to serve a becoming-emplaced. The connectivity that this wilderness walk affords is ultimately depicted not in terms of the flux of ever-new terrain confronted by the enraptured walking body. Berry returns rather to the imagery of immersion and absorption in the wilderness as a place, meditating especially on moments of stillness. Immersion in this wilderness strips away the occluding barriers of artifice and reveals the wholistic, cosmic truth of place.

This wild place where I have camped lies within an enormous cone widening from the center of the earth out across the universe, nearly all of it a mysterious wilderness.

Wilderness is the element in which we live encased in civilization, as a mollusk lives in his shell in the sea.

And so, coming here, what I have done is strip away the human facade that usually stands between me and the universe, and I see more clearly where I am. What I am able to ignore most of the time but find undeniable here is that all wildernesses are one: there is a profound joining

between this wild stream deep in one of the folds of my native country and the tropical jungles, the tundras of the north, the oceans and the deserts. (1991, 54)

An important aspect of this absorbing wilderness for Berry is its mysteriousness and unknowability. And yet, if this realer-than-real world of wilderness cannot be totally known, it seems to be open to a communion that is more profound and direct and whole than any form of knowledge ever could be. “Lying in my bed in the dark tonight,” Berry muses, “I will be absorbed in the being of this place, invisible as a squirrel in his nest” (1991, 54).

Berry’s absorptive emplacement ultimately bears some resemblance to death, and is even drawn to it insofar as it imagines making contact with the infinite through a metabolic melding with the stillness of place. Berry likens the wilderness experience both to unalloyed *life*--“I am alive in the world...”--and to death.

The man who walks into the wilderness is naked indeed. He leaves behind his work, his household, his duties, his comforts. Even, if he comes alone, his words. He immerses himself in what he is not. It is a kind of death. (1991, 57)

After all, one way to collapse one’s own lived life with the *Life* of Creation is to die. On the last page of *The Long Legged House* Berry leaves us with a moving vignette that proposes a curiously dark form of the pastoral idyll.

The newly fallen leaves make a dry, comfortable bed, and I lie easy, coming to rest within myself as I seem to do nowadays only when I am in the woods.

And now a leaf, spiraling down in wild flight, lands on my shirt front at about the third button below the collar....And suddenly I apprehend in it the dark proposal of the ground. Under the fallen leaf my breastbone burns with imminent decay. Other leaves fall. My body begins its long shudder into humus. I feel my substance escape me, carried into the mold by beetles and worms. Days, winds, seasons pass over me as I sink under the leaves. For a time only sight is left to me, a passive awareness of the sky overhead, birds crossing, the mazed inter-reaching of the treetops, the leaves falling--and then that, too, sinks away. It is acceptable to me, and I am at peace.

When I move to go, it is as though I rise up out of the world. (1961, 213)

*the nature alienation problematic and the dwelling ideal in Heidegger's philosophy*

My exploration of Berry's place-based ecocriticism has focused on "work" as the set of practices that ground his normative localism, and on the state of total emplacement that this localism works toward. But it may be helpful to take a step back to look more broadly for a moment at the theme of place and placelessness in philosophy and social criticism. It is by no means peculiar to environmentalism or agrarianism. A focus on the particularity of place runs through counter-Enlightenment romanticism, into the pastoral tradition of English literature,<sup>25</sup> communitarian and republican democratic theory,<sup>26</sup> and

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<sup>25</sup> See especially Lash 1991, Morton 2006, and Marx 2000.

<sup>26</sup> Tocqueville is the classical example, but among contemporaries, see especially Sheldon Wolin, Paul Virilio, and Charles Taylor.



various versions of nationalism. But perhaps the most thoroughgoing philosophical meditation on place has come from the phenomenological tradition.

In particular, environmentalists have found Martin Heidegger's focus on everyday experiential praxis and the phenomenology of "environment" and "dwelling" amenable to their hopes of re-inscribing sympathies upon what has been revealed as or mistaken for a disenchanted, external, objective world. The Heideggerian influence on deep ecology is almost as well documented as his notorious involvement in the Nazi party. Heidegger shared many intellectual proclivities with environmentalists like Berry, including anti-urbanism, a favorable view of pre-industrial ways of life, and a critical stance toward the technological advancements of the twentieth century. Here, though, I put forth the argument that the most substantial point of contact between Heidegger and Berry's strand of environmental thought lies in the idea that agrarian practice is an environmental technique of the self that opens an authentic relationship between the self and the environment-as-place. I will argue that this idea is fundamental to Heidegger's philosophy, and I suggest that the ideal of place-belonging is a significant part of what Heidegger's sympathetic readers have found compelling in his thought.<sup>27</sup>

In my reading, what is at stake in Heidegger's philosophical project is nothing less than the authentic apprehension of the world--a mode of apprehension that would fulfill the affective potential of human existence in the most general sense--which he thought was threatened by certain cultural, intellectual, and historical forces. He believed

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<sup>27</sup> This is so particularly in the case of environmentalist readings of Heidegger that link his rhetoric of existential authenticity with his imagery of immersion in a surrounding environment. See for example, Foltz 1994, McWhorter 2009, McWhorter and Stenstad 2009. See also Ingold 2000.

this fundamental relationship of the modern human being with its world was gravely and deeply, albeit subtly, imperiled, particularly by the modern techno-scientific “enframing” of nature and by Western philosophy’s view of the world as a mere expanse of “present-at-hand” objects. These terms, for Heidegger, indicate the alienating modes in which the things, events, beings, and places of the world are revealed as so many mere objects or as so much calculable and measurable “standing reserve.”

Heidegger’s story of alienation from nature--told through his critique of philosophy’s objectivizing vision of things, “enframing,” and the existentially deadening “world picture” of the scientific age--also finds expression in the obverse concepts and ideals he articulates as philosophical correctives for these harbingers of existential estrangement. Heidegger’s extraordinary reputation as a philosopher was built largely on the analysis in his early masterwork, *Being and Time* (1962), which was dedicated to showing how the overweening idea of a “present-at-hand” objective reality is built on the back of a more primary but under-acknowledged mode in which the world is revealed to us as the “ready-to-hand” realm of our on-going, embodied, practical engagement. His later writings diverge from this foundational analysis, introducing a series of palliative concepts that includes “language,” “clearing,” “the turning,” “the event of appropriation” (*Ereignis*), “earth,” and “dwelling” (Heidegger 1968, 1971, 1977, 1982, 1999).

Heidegger’s development of these concepts in his later essays is not infrequently left to the side by philosophers, many of whom have found it perplexing and suspiciously

poetic and mystical. However, there are plenty of sympathetic scholarly readings of the later work, and a large part of them have been addressed to the problematic of environmental ethics.<sup>28</sup> Eco-philosophy has been particularly drawn to Heidegger's critique of industrial technology in "The Question Concerning Technology" (1977) and to his poetic exploration of the metaphysics of "dwelling" as "caring for the earth" articulated in the essays collected under the title *Poetry, Language, Thought*--particularly "The Origin of the Work of Art," "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," and "The Thing." (1971). It is in these latter essays (which I will refer to simply as "the fourfold essays") that Heidegger develops one of his most perplexing concepts: "the fourfold" [*Das Geviert*].<sup>29</sup> Environmentalist readings of Heidegger have been drawn to the notoriously difficult fourfold essays as Heidegger's most sustained effort to portray a better mode of living within the natural world. In this sense the critique of modern technology and the poetic-ontological idea of "the fourfold" developed in the essays of "Poetry, Language, Thought" appear to be complimentary projects,<sup>29</sup> and taken together they represent well the Heidegger that environmentalism has taken as its own.

In broad strokes, Heidegger's critique in "The Question Concerning Technology" shares a good deal with the some of the foundational critiques in American environmental

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<sup>28</sup> For example, see Foltz (1995), Whortter et al. (2005), Dolores Lachapelle (1978); Devall and Sessions (1985)

<sup>29</sup> As Albert Borgmann puts it, "anyone familiar with Heidegger can tell you on the spot that his discussion of technology pivots on the notion of the *Gestell*--the framework of technology, and that his vision of a better world revolves about the *Geviert*--the fourfold world of centering things" (Borgman, 2003). One author who counts Heidegger among "fifty key thinkers on the environment" refers to these essays as "a series of 'poetic' meditations on the nature of a wholesome, non-technological way of life" in which he "develops a quasi-mythic account of a world consisting of the 'fourfold' of 'earth, sky, mortals and gods'." (Palmer 2001, 192)

thought, such as Lynne White's *Cultural Roots of the Environmental Crisis* (1967). Both White and Heidegger take to task the industrial paradigm of Nature-as-resources. White laid the blame for contemporary environmental destruction largely on the Judeo-Christian notion of Man's divinely conferred dominion over nature. Many other American environmental Jeremiads have been true to this form while substituting liberal individualism or other signature Western ideological trappings where White indicted Abrahamic monotheism. But in these kinds of accounts, technological advancement simply instrumentally aids and abets a problematic worldview, which is understood to be essentially intellectual in origin. In Heidegger's treatment, on the other hand, modern technology itself takes center stage as the antagonist. It is not a question of getting technology "spiritually in hand" (1977, 5) by a change of values or an extension of ethics. Heidegger asserted, rather, that modern technologies themselves, and our practical involvements with them, constitute a problematic mode of revealing, or bringing-to-presence, in which the environment can appear only as a "standing reserve" of exploitable resources. Heidegger indicated this mode with the terms "enframing" [*Gestell*] and "challenging-forth" [*Herausfordern*]. This essay is often acknowledged as portending the proliferation of philosophical treatments of technology in the later half of the twentieth century, and it may even be understood as a precursor to the recent turn toward a "new materialism" in critical social and political thought.

Where "The Question Concerning Technology" is a decidedly critical essay, the fourfold essays contain Heidegger's attempt to access a better mode of "presencing" that

must lie beyond or beneath enframed nature. Attempts to make philosophical sense of the fourfold have yielded a wide divergence of interpretations and an utter lack of consensus. Here I suggest that we hold the conceptual-analytical questions in abeyance, and attend instead to the tone and imagery--the rhetoric--of these writings. The various possible linkages between the four elements or "regions" of Heidegger's fourfold and certain other philosophical concepts from earlier works is not more worthy of the reader's attention than the balanced, encompassing, wholistic image of human existence in a re-enchanted pre-Galilean environment that it portrays. The figures of earth, sky, gods and mortals lend a mythic, timeless aura to Heidegger's voice in this text. They also reflect Heidegger's abiding interest in the cosmological aesthetic of Greek Antiquity, where earth's below-ness bears the hidden mystery of fertility, and the superlunary sky is a world apart, qualitatively different from the earthly realm. Most notably, however, the imagery of authentic "dwelling" that Heidegger invokes is also strikingly reminiscent of the self-sustaining agricultural existence celebrated by Berry. Like Berry, Heidegger looks to ancient etymologies to establish the existential primacy of "dwelling" as caring for and cultivating the earth.

*Bauen* originally means to dwell. Where the word *bauen* still speaks in its original sense it also says *how far* the nature of dwelling reaches. That is, *bauen*, *buan*, *bhu*, *beo* are our word *bin* in the versions: *ich bin*, I am, *du bist*, you are, the imperative form *bis*, be. What then does *ich bin* mean? The old word *bauen*, to which the *bin* belongs, answers: *ich bin*, *du bist* mean: I dwell, you dwell. The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is

*Buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. The old word *bauen*, which says that man *is* insofar as he *dwells*, this word *barren* however also means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine. Such building only takes care--it tends the growth that ripens into its fruit of its own accord. (1971, 147)

Dwelling, as Heidegger's etymology tells us, is the mode of existence peculiar to humans. It is the proper name of the very being of mortals. And yet in simply being alive there is no guarantee that true dwelling takes place. Human existence, Heidegger tells us, must enter into its own essence through a certain mode of living in place. And it is crucial here that it is "in place." "The Old Saxon *wuan*, the Gothic *wunian*, like the old word *bauen*, mean to remain, to stay in place" (1974, 147). It is hard to put your finger on it, but Heidegger seems to know true dwelling when he sees it, and he illustrates with one of his more famous examples:

Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter *in simple oneness* into things, ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. It gave it the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and which, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights. It did not forget the altar corner behind the community table; it made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbed and the "tree of the dead" - for that is what they call a coffin there: the *Totenbaum* -- and in this way it designed for the different generations under one

roof the character of their journey through time. A craft which, itself sprung from dwelling, still uses its tools and frames as things, built the farmhouse. (1971, 160)

This farmhouse was built by the “dwelling of peasants,” Heidegger tells us. But “dwelling” itself, which is here formulated as “the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things,” is the impersonal “It” that acts in these sentences. “It” orders, *it* makes room, *it* places--*it* designs, gives form, does not forget--and the it-ness of this “It” consists in the timeless, generational cycles of life and death, and in the materiality of *just this place* with its specific weather patterns, its mountain slopes and long winter nights. By this sheer existing-in-place the farmhouse comes to be just as it is--a naturally determined outgrowth of its environment--and mortals, in so dwelling, are vaguely de-subjectified as they become centered in the fourfold--wholly, cosmically environed. Around the peasant, or the peasant’s dwelling, the world falls into place--into its own balanced wholeness, the “simple one-ness of the four” (1971, 149).

What is the relationship of this agrarian ideal of dwelling to Heidegger’s larger philosophy? *Being and Time* has proven so philosophically groundbreaking and so fertile that there is a certain temptation to write off such passages--if not the entirety of his later work--as thought-provoking but ultimately unsuccessful experiments by an otherwise great philosopher. I assert, however, that we cannot so neatly excise Heidegger’s ideal of dwelling-in-place from his most important intellectual contributions without missing an important aspect of his own philosophy as well as eliding its deeper connection to

environmentalist thought. In fact, *Being and Time* lays the foundation for Heideggerian dwelling.

*environmental vision and the ready-to-hand in Being and Time*

In *Being and Time*, the principle conceptual distinction is between “readiness-to-hand” (*Zuhandenheit*), or the way the world is encountered in our everyday practical lives, and “presence-at-hand” (*Vorhandenheit*), or the way science tells us things must objectively exist--that is, as things with discernible properties. Heidegger believed the successes of the scientific worldview that sees reality as composed of substances and entities bearing certain properties such as weight, volume, shape, et cetera, had effectively occluded any deep consideration of the primary mode of our existence in the world. Thinking of things as present-at-hand entities is only possible in the first place, Heidegger asserts, because we always already live in a world that appears to us continually not as mere objects but as the equipment seamlessly incorporated into the totality of our practical, embodied dealings with the world. The door handle, for example, does not first appear in its object-hood, as a radially symmetrical piece of metal protruding from a wooden panel, nor visually, as a brass-colored reflective region amid a white background; rather it exists embedded in a ready-to-hand environment as part of a possibility of going out to the front stoop, for example, to pick up the paper, to read the news, to learn about the war... The understanding of things as present-at-hand objects,



which Heidegger suggested had preoccupied Western philosophy for centuries, is therefore a derivative “special case” of the more primary and primordial mode of being-in-the-world. This conceptualization of present-at-hand objects has yielded great technical successes, but what it misses becomes important when we begin to ask questions about ourselves--about mind and body, or the meaning of our existence in the world. Or worse yet, it makes it impossible to properly ask such questions. The world, Heidegger thought, is in fact much *nearer* to us than we think, and in his view our way of thinking and living ignores and covers over this *nearer* world to our existential detriment.

Heidegger’s interpreters have offered many differing accounts of the transition between the “early” and “later” works of Heidegger. Where some scholars depict Heidegger’s “turn” as a radical break, others see his work as a coherent corpus in spite of a shift in emphasis, while still others suggest an evolving and exploratory path of thought. Likewise, Heideggerian scholarship has produced little in the way of consensus about the proliferation of guiding concepts in his later work and the relationship of those concepts to the “tool analysis” in *Being and Time*. Where some highlight ruptures and reversals, others cast the later writings as iterative explorations in the evolution of a more or less coherent philosophy.<sup>30</sup> Graham Harman, to take one recent example from the latter category, has boldly asserted that the idea of the ready-to-hand/presence-at-hand distinction is the central concept of Heidegger’s entire philosophical corpus, and moreover that it is his most important contribution to philosophy in general. In Harman’s words,

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<sup>30</sup> See Olafson 1993 for a summary of this longstanding and still unresolved debate.

Heidegger poses the question of being by launching a ferocious attack on all forms of presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*). He does this phenomenologically through the tool-analysis; he does it rhetorically through his repetitive use of the word “mere” to dismiss all ontic arguments; he does it historically through his assertion that presence-at-hand has dominated the history of metaphysics. The Goal of Martin Heidegger’s career was to identify and to attack the notion of reality as something present-at-hand. (Harman 2002, 16)

Whether the analysis of *Zuhandenheit* is a revolutionary event the history of metaphysics or not, I am in agreement with Harman about its central significance within Heidegger’s thought. I suggest it is in that analysis that the ideal and imagery of being-fully-in-place (which haunts the whole of Heidegger’s work) is rooted. Moreover, I will show in the following sections that this ideal is closely related in that analysis to a certain genre of praxis--the labor of agrarian subsistence--that functions as what I have been calling an environmental technique of the self.

*Being and Time* lays out what Heidegger saw as a groundbreaking discovery: that it is in our largely unthought, everyday, practical “involvement” with the world of the ready-to-hand that true being, the true “worldhood” of the world, which we all too easily miss, is brought forth. By contrast, Heidegger suggests that the intellectualized distance of philosophical or scientific contemplation, which tempts heavy thinkers to pose the “object” as a philosophical problem, is where the enfolding “aroundness” of Being-in-the-world (*Inderweltsein*), which is the “ownmost” essence of the human mode of being, is lost to itself.

Heidegger's celebratory philosophical exposition of readiness-to-hand might seem to involve a kind of Thoreauian dream of immaculate perception, whereby one's everyday task-oriented embodied dealings with things yields, as a kind of secret in plain sight, a direct contact with or apprehension of reality. But Heidegger is well aware of the pitfalls of basing perceptual or existential authenticity on any notion of something like a transparent, transcendent eyeball. He explicitly condemns that idea as precisely the conceit into which Western philosophy's orientation to the present-at-hand is ever leading us--we are always trying to get behind or beyond our seeing of things *as* this or *as* that in order to get to the primacy of the thing/percept/phenomenon in its truth. One of Heidegger's major revisions of the phenomenological tradition lies in his assertion that the "'as'-structure" goes all the way down--is part of the structure of being-in-the-world in the most fundamental sense.<sup>31</sup>

And yet, for Heidegger there are different modalities of this basic structure of "seeing-as." Most notably, Heidegger distinguishes between the "existential-hermeneutical 'as' [and] the "apophantical 'as'" of the assertion--which is to say, "the kind of interpretation which is still wholly wrapped up in concerned understanding [or circumspection] and the extreme opposite case of a theoretical assertion about something present at hand" (1962, 201). When this distinction is situated within the overall existential primacy Heidegger accords readiness-to-hand, the ideal of Thoreauian-style true-seeing is tipped on its head. Authentic contact with materiality is here situated in the everyday meaningfulness through which things appear as significant to us *as something*

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<sup>31</sup> See Heidegger (1962, 188-211) and Lafont (1999, 59-60).

*or other*, rather than in a chaste “mere staring.” Nevertheless, this hermeneutical insight introduces a complex uncertainty into Heidegger’s theory of the ready-to-hand, since the full proximity and pure presence of entities is never accessed--neither in the thing itself present-at-hand before us, nor in that with which we are circumspectively involved. Presence-at-hand elides what is “nearest” to us, while the ready-to-hand always necessarily withdraws itself. “The ready-to-hand,” Heidegger writes, “is not grasped theoretically at all, nor is it itself the sort of thing that circumspection takes proximally as a circumspective theme. The peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand is that, in its readiness-to-hand, it must, as it were, withdraw [*zuruckzuziehen*] in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically” (1962, 99). And yet Heidegger suggests that it is nonetheless through this very interplay of presence and withdrawal of the ready-to-hand that the *Umwelt* or “totality of involvements” properly comes into being: “That with which our everyday dealings proximally dwell is not the tools themselves. On the contrary that with which we concern ourselves primarily is the work--that which is to be produced at the time; and this is accordingly ready-to-hand too. The work bears with it that referential totality within which the equipment is encountered” (1962, 99).

We will return later to the theme of withdrawal, which takes on added significance in Heidegger’s later work. But for now it suffices to note the close connection between everyday familiar embodied practices and the “aroundness” of the environment in Heidegger’s language.<sup>32</sup> The particular readiness-to-hand of tools and

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<sup>32</sup> The similarity to Berry’s ideas about work are already hinted at here, but that connection will become clearer as our reading of Heidegger progresses.

familiar objects of everyday use provides a model for the most fundamental and authentic relationship we can have to our world, but for Heidegger the environment (*Umwelt*) exists in its own right, so to speak. More than a mere collection of tools, beings, or things, Heidegger's analysis of things as ready-to-hand casts the environment as "the totality of involvements for which the ready-to-hand, as something encountered, is freed" (1962, 137). This "totality-of-involvements" comprises a totally involving environment that is somehow even more primary to existence, even more ready-to-hand, than any given ready-to-hand entity.<sup>33</sup> It "has the *character of inconspicuous familiarity*, and it has it in an even more primordial sense than does the Being of the ready-to-hand...this spatiality has its own unity through that totality-of-involvements in-accordance-with-the-world [*weltmassige*] which belongs to the spatially ready-to-hand" (1962, 138).

Now, if the "environment" (*Umwelt*) is this background "totality of involvements" in which we are always already absorbed when we are engrossed in some familiar task, Heidegger finds it is threatened, as such, by the present-at-hand world that we are always problematically positing for ourselves. And moreover, for Heidegger, it is by failing to attend to this primordial inconspicuous familiarity that we risk losing sight of the true wonder, grandeur, and poetry of Nature.

As the "environment" is discovered, the "Nature" thus discovered is encountered too. If its kind of being as ready-to-hand is disregarded, this Nature itself can be discovered and defined simply

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<sup>33</sup> Foltz (1995) explicates a Heideggerian vision of nature as more primordial than the ready to hand.

in its pure presence-at-hand. But when this happens, the Nature which “stirs and strives,” which assails us and enralls us as a landscape, remains hidden. The botanist’s plants are not the flowers of the hedgerow, the “source” which the geographer establishes for a river is not the “springhead in the dale.” (1962, 100)

In other words, the grandeur of nature is, for Heidegger, closely related to the familiar, habitual, local environment--a perspective quite different from that of the Thoreauian walker, for whom the raw matter of nature is celebrated rather more for its tendency to disrupt everyday human habits and associations. Heidegger’s relationship to the romantic vision of pastoral nature, which becomes so apparent in his later work, is already strongly indicated in passages like this one from *Being and Time*. That is to say, finding our true eyes for nature is central to Heideggerian thought. Charles Taylor (1993) contends that the primary importance of Heidegger’s philosophy of the ready-to-hand lies in the great headway it makes against modern rationalism, yet it is clear that this critical/corrective project does not exhaust Heidegger’s aims. His later work culminated in the assertion that the most urgent task of modern humanity and its philosophical vanguard is to make a space or open a “clearing” for Being itself, but even in the beginning of *Being and Time* we can sense a very similar positive project. It is hard to avoid the impression that the tool analysis already aims to offer a glimpse of the “springhead in the dale” in its true Being--an authentic glimpse of what is all around us, what is “nearest” to us--with a vision un-compromised by our modern cultural, philosophical, and technological inheritance. And somehow the simple daily tasks of just “getting by” are the key to an

authentic relationship with physical nature--to truly and fully dwelling-in-the-world as an embodied being. We thus begin to see the outlines of a very close connection between the “tool analysis” of *Being and Time* and the “dwelling ideal” of the later work explored in the previous section.

*agrarian praxis and Heidegger's environmental hermeneutic of the metabolic body*

The early Heidegger's consistent point of departure in this regard is the “concernful circumspection” of the task-oriented person, and it only takes a little attention to notice just which sorts of tasks matters to Heidegger. His classic example is the swinging of a hammer. We might suppose that this particular activity was chosen for its simplicity as an archetypal example of tool-use. And surely that is at least partly the case. But it is notable that in both *Being and Time* and Heidegger's later works, the tasks that exemplify being-in-the-ready-to-hand world center on the practical and productive work of traditional rural life. Conversely, the somehow-less-than-fully-practical engagements of the meteorologist, the botanist, or the geographer, or the “hurried and harried” routine of the city dweller are elided or offhandedly implicated in problematic modes human existence, in which the world is confronted inauthentically, or as the “merely” present-at-hand. Heidegger's environmental techniques of self, in other words, tend to be agrarian. The countryside, the farmstead, and the craftsman's workshop are the predominant settings where the anonymous characters that populate *Being and Time* and later works

live their *Zuhandenheit* lives, while the rationalizing tasks associated with industrial production and scientific study--tasks of measuring and calculating especially--bear the brunt of Heidegger's criticism.

Heidegger does not specifically explain this predilection, but there are clues as to why and how these tasks carry such importance in the discussion of "the totality of involvements," which constitutes the authentic nexus of *Dasein* and the ready-to-hand. Heidegger writes, "when an entity within-the-world [such as Heidegger's hammer] has already been proximally freed for its Being, that Being is its 'involvement.' With any such entity as entity, there is some involvement" (1962, 116-7). For Heidegger the hammer has its being, its readiness to hand, within a concentric schema of subjective spheres of concern. With the hammer, "there is an involvement in hammering; with hammering, there is an involvement in making something fast; with making something fast, there is an involvement in protection against bad weather; and this protection 'is' for the sake of [*um-willen*] providing shelter for *Dasein*—that is to say, for the sake of a possibility of *Dasein's* Being" (1962, 116-7). As Heidegger goes on to make clear, it is the possibility of *Dasein's* own being that stitches together these involvements into one coherent "totality of involvements."

In a workshop, for example, the totality of involvements which is constitutive for the ready-to-hand in its readiness-to-hand, is "earlier" than any single item of equipment; so too for the farmstead with all its utensils and outlying lands. But the totality of involvements itself goes back ultimately to a "towards-which" in which there is *no* further involvement: this "towards-which" is



not an entity with the kind of Being that belongs to what is ready-to-hand within a world; it is rather an entity whose Being is defined as Being-in-the-world, and to whose state of Being, worldhood itself belongs. This primary “towards-which” is not just another “towards-this” as something in which an involvement is possible. The primary “towards-which” is a “for-the-sake-of-which.” But the “for-the-sake-of” always pertains to the Being of *Dasein*, for which, in its Being, that very Being is essentially an issue. We have thus indicated the interconnection by which the structure of an involvement leads to *Dasein*'s very Being as the sole authentic “for-the-sake-of-which.” (1962, 116-7) <sup>34</sup>

With Heidegger it is always a specific kind of practical activity that establishes an authentic relationship to the environment as the “totality of involvements.” In essence, it is *Dasein*'s “being-toward-death” that ensures this linkage. This, it seems, is what distinguishes certain tasks and modes of activity as proper techniques of environment for Heidegger. That is to say, this peculiarly central thematization of mortality is the key to

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<sup>34</sup> The entire passage reads as follows: “When an entity within-the-world has already been proximally freed for its Being, that Being is its ‘involvement’. With any such entity as entity, there is some involvement. The fact that it has such an involvement is *ontologically* definitive for the Being of such an entity, and is not an ontical assertion about it. That in which it is involved is the “towards-which” of serviceability, and the ‘for-which’ of usability. With the “towards-which” of serviceability there can again be an involvement: *with* this thing, for instance, which is ready-to-hand, and which we accordingly call a ‘hammer’, there is an involvement in hammering; with hammering, there is an involvement in making something fast; with making something fast, there is an involvement in protection against bad weather; and this protection ‘is’ for the sake of [*um-willen*] providing shelter for *Dasein*—that is to say, for the sake of a possibility of *Dasein*'s Being. Whenever something ready-to-hand has an involvement with it, *what* involvement this is, has in each case been outlined in advance in terms of the totality of such involvements. In a workshop, for example, the totality of involvements which is constitutive for the ready-to-hand in its readiness-to-hand, is ‘earlier’ than any single item of equipment; so too for the farmstead with all its utensils and outlying lands. But the totality of involvements itself goes back ultimately to a ‘towards-which’ in which there is *no* further involvement: this ‘towards-which’ is not an entity with the kind of Being that belongs to what is ready-to-hand within a world; it is rather an entity whose Being is defined as Being-in-the-world, and to whose state of Being, worldhood itself belongs. This primary ‘towards-which’ is not just another ‘towards-this’ as something in which an involvement is possible. The primary ‘towards-which’ is a ‘for-the-sake-of-which.’ But the ‘for-the-sake-of’ always pertains to the Being of *Dasein*, for which, in its Being, that very Being is essentially an issue. We have thus indicated the interconnection by which the structure of an involvement leads to *Dasein*'s very Being as the sole authentic ‘for-the-sake-of-which.’” (1962, 116-7)

Heidegger's consistent concern with subsistence activities, and particularly with the habitual, situated work of rural, agrarian life. The mortal condition, ultimately, is what puts the "concern" in "concernful circumspection," thus drawing together the "circum" for our "spection."

Heidegger de-sanitizes and de-rationalizes the philosophico-scientific world picture by showing that the as-structure, or what we might call the "modality of meaningfulness," goes all the way down, and is the necessary ground for any objectivist viewpoint. But Heidegger's modality of meaningfulness (the hermeneutic "as-structure" of "concernful circumspection") is here given a particular orientation. It is centrally human, and more specifically its human-centeredness lies in the trace of death that runs through it--a gravely human significance grounding, centering, and gathering the surroundings. For lack of more dramatic term, we could call this Heidegger's environmental hermeneutic of death, but perhaps it would be no less accurate to associate it with "life," so let us call it a hermeneutic of the metabolic body.

We can see this hermeneutic at work in *Being and Time's* treatment of "place" and "region." In rejecting Descartes' understanding of space, Heidegger turns to the readiness-to-hand of an environment of "regions." "Churches and graves, for instance, are laid out according to the rising and setting of the sun--the regions of life and death, which are determinative for Dasein itself with regard to its ownmost possibilities of Being in the world" (1962, 137). When we recognize the hermeneutic importance of the metabolic body we can see how the agrarian themes of Heidegger's examples of the

“acceptance” of the primordially significant environment are overdetermined. “If, for instance,” writes Heidegger,

the south wind “is accepted” [*gilt*] by the farmer as a sign of rain, then this “acceptance” [*Geltung*]—or the “value” with which the entity is “invested”—is not a sort of bonus over and above what is already present-at-hand in itself—*viz*, the flow of air in a definite geographical direction. The south wind may be meteorologically accessible as something which just occurs; but it is *never* present-at-hand *proximally* in such a way as this, only occasionally taking over the function of a warning signal. On the contrary, only by the circumspection with which one takes account of things in farming, is the south wind discovered in its Being. (1962, 111-12).

The similarities with Berry are striking. Like Berry, Heidegger grounds authentic unadulterated contact with the immediate surrounding world in the biological, metabolic realities that link the mortal human body to the earth. And as with Berry, this grounding passes *through* agrarian praxis as the archetype of “work.” Graham Harman discounts Heidegger’s thematic preoccupation with what in 1920s Germany could still be referred to as “peasant life” as an inconsequential authorial eccentricity (Harman 2002, 180-90), but I argue that Heidegger is not merely a philosopher with agrarian proclivities and a penchant for romanticized rustic imagery; rather his is truly an *agrarian environmentalist* philosophy. Like Berry, Heidegger finds *work* to be the name of our truest relationship to the world, where “work” is a name most appropriately applied to the serious labor directly concerned with subsisting on the earth, and “the world” is the “here” of one’s

immediate environment, the habitual lifeworld or dwelling place, which Berry called the “everywhere different and differently named earth.”

### *Heidegger's work world*

Even so, Heidegger the philosopher was never entirely comfortable with his agrarianism. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger claims an official agnosticism about the alethurgic status of agrarian practices.

a distant mountain range under a vast sky--such a thing “is.” What does its Being consist in? When and to whom does it reveal itself? To the hiker who enjoys the landscape, or to the peasant who makes his daily living from it and in it, or to the meteorologist who has to give a weather report? Who among them lays hold of Being? All and none. (1961, 37)

But Heidegger's readers know his sympathies lie with the peasant. The special place of *work* as such in Heidegger's thought is nowhere more plainly shown than in a short publication titled “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?” which Heidegger wrote after quitting his rectorship of Freiburg University in 1934 and turning down a position in Berlin. It is worth quoting at length here. Heidegger begins the dispatch with an ode to his own Black Forest dwelling and its surroundings.

On the steep slope of a wide mountain valley in the southern Black Forest, at an elevation of 1,150 meters, there stands a small ski hut. The floor plan measures six meters by seven. The low-hanging roof covers three rooms: the kitchen which is also the living room, a bed-room and a study. Scattered at wide intervals throughout the narrow base of the valley and on the equally steep slope opposite, lie the farmhouses with their large overhanging roofs. Higher up the slope the meadows and pasture lands lead to the woods with its dark fir-trees, old and towering. Over everything there stands a clear summer sky, and in its radiant expanse two dark hawks glide around in wide circles. (2006, 16)

But this mere description of the present-at-hand landscape is then disavowed, and juxtaposed to a oneness-with-place that is deeper than observation.

This is my work-world – seen with the eye of an observer: the guest or summer vacationer. Strictly speaking I myself never observe the landscape. I experience its hourly changes, day and night, in the great comings and goings of the season. The gravity of the mountains and the hardness of their primeval rock, the slow and deliberate growth of the fir-trees, the brilliant, simple splendor of the meadows in bloom, the rush of the mountain brook in the long autumn night, the stern simplicity of the flatlands covered with snow – all of this moves and flows through and penetrates daily existence up there, and not in forced moments of “aesthetic” immersion or artificial empathy, *but only when one’s own existence stands in its work. It is the work alone that opens up space for the reality that is these mountains.* The course of the work remains embedded in what happens in the region. (2006, 16; italics added)

Working, in other words, is the no-nonsense mode of existing that enacts a true and deep connection with the environment-as-place. “My work-world” is the true name for

Heidegger's environment, and it is existing-as-working that opens a clearing for the true being of place to bear itself forth. But wait—the “work” Heidegger is speaking of in this passage is his own philosophical work, and not the labor of living off the land. Stay tuned though; Heidegger makes it clear in the next breath that it is only by virtue of the special kinship that *his* philosophy has with the peasants' work that it affords this opening of place into its own true being.

This philosophical work does not take its course like the aloof studies of some eccentric. It belongs right in the middle of the peasants' work. When the young farm boy drags his heavy sled up the slope and guides it, plied high with beech logs, down the dangerous descent to his house, when the herdsman, lost in thought and slow of step, drives his cattle up the slope, when the farmer in his shed gets the countless shingles ready for his roof, my work is of the same sort. It is intimately rooted in and related to the life of the peasants. (2006, 16-7)

As the theorist of the ready-to-hand, Heidegger had found the philosophical analogue of the physicality of habitual praxis, and thus of Being itself. He had crafted a special layer of thought that could be superimposed without adulteration onto the gestures and habits that are “nearest” to human existence. It would be the thought *closest* to praxis--*Zuhandenheit* 2.0--praxis itself philosophized. As such, Heideggerian phenomenology is itself an environmental technique of the self, or a technique of the

environmental self.<sup>35</sup> It is a path of thinking that is ultimately meant to cultivate a profound sinking-into-place--a means of truly and deeply apprehending the existence of the physicality that is all around us.

The fact that Heidegger's ideal of dwelling in place is embedded in one of the most influential philosophical projects of the modern era is circumstantial evidence of the powerful allure of the modern notion that we might somehow, through a certain mode of thought or practice, make truer, more profound, or more vital contact with the physical environment. And because Heidegger's philosophical project is so carefully and insightfully comprehensive, it helps explicate the essentialism agrarian localism is prone to. It is an essentialism of the metabolic body--the body as the site of bare life processes, which tends to be defined in the negative by death as its essential and ever-present possibility. It is an essentialism that tends to imagine a timeless, or very slowly evolving natural setting, and a peaceful quiet life. It tends to imagine harmonious inhabitants who merge with the surrounding world, or, perhaps, whose subjectivities are undone by dissipating harmonious vibrations of emplacement between body and earth.

Does this hermeneutics of subsistence, then, serve the very metaphysical desire for true seeing and "pure presence" that Heidegger believed Western philosophy had been mistakenly pursuing? Does our analysis of a certain image of *work* catch Heideggerian environmentalism falling short of Heidegger's own philosophical goals? Have we shown

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<sup>35</sup> Merleau-Ponty is perhaps more candid about this normative project of phenomenology. In his Heidegger-inspired *Phenomenology of Perception* (1989) he explicitly says that phenomenology functions as a means of "relearning to look at the world" and "recovering a sense of wonder in the face of the world" (1989, xxii and xv).

how Heidegger struggles against himself within a metaphysical arena but is ultimately overcome? Do we find his extraordinary excavations undermining the original foundation on which his philosophy of Being is built? If so, then our analysis maps closely the outlines of Derridean deconstruction.

Derrida, who was Heidegger's most critical disciple and most devoted critic, explored from numerous angles what he portrays as Heidegger's nuanced record of eventual failure on his own terms--his eventual failure, that is, in this most important and most fundamental aim of his philosophical project--the overcoming of the Western "metaphysics of presence." And yet Derrida points out that to charge Heidegger with anthropocentrism is, if not exactly wrong, at least imprecise, and at worst naively simplistic. The anthropocentrism we detect in Heidegger is not the result of a naive narrowness of thinking. It is far more "unprovable" than that. It lies, Derrida asserts, in the stubborn link between the humanistic "we" of philosophical discourse and the very enigma of "Being" with which philosophy, not excluding Heideggerian philosophy, is concerned. That is, it is a result of "the hold which the 'humanity' of man and the thought of Being, a certain humanism and the truth of Being, have over one another" (Derrida 1969, 44-5). It was, Derrida avows, never exclusively, nor even principally "Man" that Heidegger--or Husserl, Hegel, or Kant before him--sought to elucidate. Rather, for Heidegger, as he himself tells us in the opening of *Being and Time*, the question of Being [*Seinsfrage*] is the formal question of the book. The goal is to think Being itself, the is-ness of what exists. *Dasein*, human being, is taken up as a mere



expedient--as that “‘exemplary being’ (*exemplarische Seiende*) which will constitute the privileged text for a reading of the sense of Being” (Derrida 1969, 46). *Dasein* is privileged because, if we want to know being, it is necessary to inquire about the being that is closest to hand--the being of *that being that inquires about being*, which is thus the site of the absolute *proximity* of being to its own questioning: *Dasein*.

Thus, perhaps not “presence” precisely, but “proximity,” according to Derrida’s reading, is the true name of Heidegger’s perhaps reluctant, though not unwitting, anthropocentrism. “It is within the enigma of a certain proximity, a proximity to itself and a proximity to Being that we shall see [in Heidegger’s work] constituting itself against humanism and against metaphysical anthropologism, another instance and another insistence of man, relaying, ‘relevant,’ replacing that which it destroys according to the channels in which we are, from which we will no doubt emerge and which remain to be questioned” (1969, 45).<sup>36</sup> And ultimately it is this enticing enigma of proximity, drawing Being toward a human inwardness--that can be seen also in Heidegger to ground this human center in “being towards death”--death as that difference against which the Being of *Dasein* is defined.

That a philosophically irresistible enigma of proximity drew Heidegger in, not only toward a centering of “Being” as the arche-word [*Urwort*] of his corpus, grounding and assuring the meaning of all other words, but ultimately *also* towards a centering of the question of Being in the human, in mortality, and in the laboring body, seems to have

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<sup>36</sup> Derrida’s expression here about the prospect of “emerging” from the metaphysical “channels” of Heideggerian thought is notably optimistic when set against the rest of Derrida’s work, which insists upon and demonstrates the great difficulty of doing so.

been recognized obliquely by Hannah Arendt, another of Heidegger's devoted critics, who likened him to a fox caught all alone in his own beautiful trap.<sup>37</sup> Arendt, moreover, recognized Heidegger's onto-aesthetics of bare life as a hostility to politics in his thinking, and she sought to consign Heidegger's Being-towards-death to the private realm of "labor," "raw-nature," "earth," and the *oikos* (Arendt, 1998). Arendt then made recourse to a rigid delineation of this "private realm" from politics. In the context of the present ecological age, however, Arendt's purifying distinction may not be tenable, if indeed it ever was. What we used to call "natural" has forcefully intruded into the public and the political, and increasingly has mixed itself with the technological. This suggests that it is necessary to question the centrality of the environmental hermeneutics of the metabolic body, rather than ghettoize it as Arendt tried to do.<sup>38</sup> And to this extent, it is worthwhile to note how, in certain halting steps, Heidegger himself begins to do this in his later work.

*the Heideggerian earth and the human stratum*

Jeff Malpas points out in a study of *Heidegger's Topology* (2006) that Heidegger's "turn" post-*Being and Time*, was, among other things, an abandonment of the earlier privileging of *time* as a transcendent organizing dimension of being (which he had posed against

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<sup>37</sup> "Heidegger the Fox" was published in English in *Essays In Understanding* (Arendt 1994).

<sup>38</sup> See Greear 2013 (forthcoming) for a discussion of the environmental political implications of Arendt's encompassing distinction between public and private.

space as the Cartesian bogeyman of presence-at-hand). For this reason, *Being and Time*, Malpas observes, “seems to make spatiality...dependent on the projective activity, ultimately grounded in temporality, of individual being-there [Dasein]” (2006, 156). In the later work, on the other hand, the particularity of place becomes an important theme and temporality is less central. In *On Time and Being*, Heidegger acknowledges that his earlier prioritizing of temporality is problematic; “the attempt in *Being and Time*, section 70, to derive human spatiality from temporality was untenable” (1972, 23). Malpas argues, moreover, that the increasing attention to place in the later work is part and parcel of Heidegger’s conscious attempt to pivot away from the aspects of *Being and Time* that Heidegger came to see as dangerously close to a subjectivist ontology.<sup>39</sup> Heidegger seems to have been concerned throughout his later work to express the subtleties of “the relationship between being and human being” and to forestall the idea that humans *produce* existence itself--an idea that he feared the language of *Being and Time* had made “all too possible” (Heidegger quoted in Malpas 2006, 200). What ties together the concepts Heidegger develops in the later work--“the event,” “Being,” “the thing,” “earth,” “language,” et cetera--is what we might call a general ec-static movement or a reaching-outward-beyond-the-human. However, if Heidegger came to view human temporality--which he anchored specifically in human finitude, or *Dasein’s* being-towards-death--as not ontologically primary, this insight was not carried forward in a

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<sup>39</sup> See chapter four of Malpas 2006 for a discussion this self-critique inherent Heidegger’s later work.

form robust enough to fundamentally change his ideal of dwelling.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, by consciously seeking to displace his philosophy from its center in human finitude, Heidegger does start down a path toward conceptualizations of place that would go beyond the image of the enfolding work-world.

That path seems to be promisingly embarked upon by Heidegger's otherwise somewhat perplexing concept of "earth." In the fourfold essays, Heidegger uses the term "earth" to name the necessary concealing ground of Being-as-revealing. (Although Heidegger at this point would say that it is *language* that uses the speaker--language first calls upon *us*.) Earth is the self-withholding, extra-human well-spring of potentiality out of which being unfolds. Heidegger's "earth" here marks both this displacement of the "site," so to speak, of being/revealing at a certain remove from the human, and a renewed emphasis on the importance of withdrawal and concealment, which was already hinted in *Being and Time* but which takes on increasing ontological importance in the later work, such that by the time Heidegger writes *The Question Concerning Technology* he is prepared to say that "all revealing belongs to a harboring and concealing" (1977, 25).

But what exactly Heidegger means by "earth" is far from clear. Arendt called it a "mythologizing confusion" that amounted to a conceptual stopgap (Arendt 1946). To be more charitable, we might say that the concept is as recalcitrant and mysterious as the *magna mater* it evokes. Heidegger's investment in the concept complicates the

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<sup>40</sup> In other words, even though the Heideggerian environment, conceived as a firmly emplaced work-world, is most explicitly rendered in Heidegger's later work, it can actually be understood as an aspect of his thought that persists *in spite of* and remains largely unchanged by the broader "turn" in his thought. In this sense, if it is a turn *to space*, as Malpas suggests for example, it is arguably fundamentally incomplete as such.

inconspicuousness and familiarity of “the environment” as associated with readiness-to-hand. Bruce Foltz, who reads Heidegger as a foundational thinker for environmental ethics, acknowledges this tension. On Foltz’s reading, “earth” comes out meaning *both* the habitual habitat of the “work-world,” and the unknowable mystery, darkness, otherness, and wildness of nature (Foltz 1995). Indeed, alongside and closely connected to Heidegger’s later emphasis on the mystery and recalcitrance of earth, we find the very familiar imagery of Heideggerian dwelling. “Earth,” Heidegger writes in *Building Dwelling Thinking*, “is the serving bearer, blossoming and fruiting, spreading out in rock and water, rising up into plant and animal....Mortals dwell in that they save the earth” (1971, 149). Dwelling, as we have seen, is a “preserving and sparing” that is rendered in largely agrarian language--a cultivating, caring for, and safeguarding of something that sounds very much like fertility but approaches the comprehensiveness of “Being” itself. Between dwelling and the earth, in Heidegger’s language, there is a mutual safeguarding such that dwelling is a protecting and harboring of the harboring and protecting of Being.

What I am trying to point out here is that Heidegger’s earth is something of a Janus-faced concept, and is therefore not necessarily a corrective to the humanist agrarian essentialism within Heideggerian environmental ethics. In its unknowability, mysteriousness, and withdrawal, the Heideggerian earth can serve crossed ontological purposes. On one hand, it undoes the claim of unmediated access and full belonging to place, environment, or Nature. On the other hand, this same language insinuates the

possibility of an even more primary and mystical mode of connectivity with the earth. Recall that we found a very similar subtlety in Berry's prose. Let us look more closely at this Heideggerian withdrawal of beings. Beings, Heidegger tells us, withhold themselves and withdraw, but it is important to note that "withdrawing" as Heidegger originally conceives it is primarily a self-concealment of the *particular* in favor of the revealing of the enveloping *ambient whole* (Heidegger 1962, 99 and 103). To the extent that we are blind to the hammer we are all the more authentically *in* the world. Moreover, the Heideggerian withdrawal of being seems to be first and foremost a withdrawal from the kind of philosophical sight that aims to apprehend the things-in-themselves--that is, in their presence-at-hand.<sup>41</sup> The readiness-to-hand of the "work-world" on the other hand, seems to bear a subtly privileged relationship to the mystery of this withdrawing of Being. If the things themselves withdraw from theoretical sight, and thus also from language and assertion, as a result of their being ready-to-hand, then a deeper and truer connection with the "referential totality" may nonetheless be available--a subtly but wholly different experience of place that "moves and flows through and penetrates daily existence," as Heidegger says of his life in the Black Forest (2006, 16). The self-concealing mysteriousness of the earth, nature, or Being suggests that any experience of place has its lacunae, uncertainties, and indeterminacies. But it also lends itself as an additional bulwark protecting the primacy and authenticity of a certain mode of engaging with materiality. The notion of a singularly privileged relationship to place can find, on the far side of this mysterious withdrawnness, a refuge from the contestations of other

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<sup>41</sup> See Sheehan (2001).

modes of apprehension--theoretical sight, scientific discovery, language, and politics--as well as from competing modes of physical involvement: the corporeal aloofness of the mere “observer” of the landscape, “the guest or summer vacationer,” or the “forced aesthetic immersion” of the wilderness walker.

At the same time though, the figure of the earth serves as a centrifugal force in Heidegger’s thinking, pulling away from the human center in which authentic dwelling is rooted. The relationship of this concept to “*phusis*,” the Greek precursor to the Latinate “nature,” suggests such an eccentric impetus. Reading Heidegger’s explication of *phusis*, in *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1961), alongside the fourfold essays, leaves little doubt about the influence of the Greek meaning on Heidegger’s understanding of “earth.” Heidegger’s sustained meditations on *phusis* seem to lend a kind of vital agency to the earth, which is moreover consonant with Nietzsche’s influence on his thought. Jane Bennett provides an apt summary of the vitalist valence of the Greek concept: “*Phusis* comes from the verb *phuo* [an Indo-European stem] which probably meant to puff, blow or swell up, conveying the sense of germination or sprouting up, bringing forth, opening out, or hatching. *Phusis* speaks of a process of morphing, of formation and deformation, that is to say, of the becoming otherwise of things in motion as they enter into strange conjunctions with one another.” (Bennett 2010, 118) *Phusis*, it would appear, begins as a biocentric concept.<sup>42</sup> The kind of creative becoming it highlights is perhaps most easily recognized in the growth processes of living things. But both Heidegger and Bennett

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<sup>42</sup> See Naddaf 2005, 11-13.

indicate that it is telling that the Greeks extended this particular term to encompass the non-human universe in general, as well as certain aspects of the human.

Heidegger's emphasis on the *phusi-cal* earth as the self-concealing/revealing of non-human beings in his later work thus is a clear gesture toward a non-anthropocentric ontology. But his model of dwelling holds sway, and the "becoming otherwise" of the earth as such tends to be overcoded by the "care" that is proper to human subsistence and reinscribed as the familiar "work-world"--the peaceful world of the self-sufficient peasant who dwells, who "remains," who "stays in place," who in truly dwelling truly *is*.

In the totalizing environment of the self achieved through Heideggerian dwelling, human existence/experience as being-towards-death functions as a centering, gathering, or bounding element. If we want to bear out the potential of Heidegger's later attempts to think beyond the human, perhaps we should think of Heidegger's being towards death as what Deleuze and Guattari have called a "stratum." And crucially, as *a* stratum, not *the* Stratum. "Strata," they explain,

are Layers, Belts. They consist of giving form to matters, of imprisoning intensities or locking singularities into systems of resonance and redundancy, of producing upon the body of the earth molecules large and small and organizing them into molar aggregates. Strata are acts of capture, they are like "black holes" or occlusions striving to seize whatever comes within their reach. They operate by coding and territorialization upon the earth; they proceed simultaneously by code and by territoriality. (1987, 40)



The strata concept is developed within Deleuze and Guattari's own philosophical rendering of "earth" as what they call "a body without organs." Their rendering shares with Heidegger and Bennett the fundamental attribution of creativity and generativity to non-human stuff. However, Deleuze and Guattari see the process of "destratification" or "deterritorialization" as fundamental to the creative becoming of the earth--what Heidegger calls "the blossoming fruiting, spreading out in rock and water." The earth, say Deleuze and Guattari, "constantly eludes [the strata], flees and becomes destratified, decoded, deterritorialized" (1987, 40). A (de)stratifying earth would seem to go beyond self-revealing/concealing toward a more active, creative, and destructive mode of becoming. In this view, destratifications, or radical becomings-otherwise, are as real or more real than any stratum. Movements of stratification and destratification, for which Deleuze and Guattari elsewhere use the terms "territorialization" and "deterritorialization," pervade and constitute both humans and earth, and everything else besides, in a heterogenous and decentered cosmos that they also call the "plane of immanence." (De)stratifications/(de)territorializations, by this way of thinking, are immanent to human experience without in any sense being dependent upon human bodies or even consciousness.

A Deleuzo-Guattarian earth would challenge Heidegger's rendering of the "environment" on two levels at once. It questions the language that would orient the environment around a human experiential center, while at the same time challenging the centering of the "human" experience itself in a specific temporality of human finitude,

i.e. Heidegger's "care" as Being-towards-death. This double challenge illuminates a tension that we have seen is already at work within Heidegger's later work. Even as the practices of dwelling remain a prominent stratum that tends to reterritorialize place onto a specific modality of human being, Heidegger himself comes to resist the over-coding gravitational pull of human being-towards-death. As we have seen, *Dasein* and time drop out of the picture as Heidegger's thought matures, while the metaphysical questions of place, earth, and "the thing" are taken up as extra-human sites of Being's own play of revealing and withdrawal. In fact, even in *Being and Time* we find that human being-in-the-world has its own "ec-static" movements in which meetings of human and nonhuman are not beholden to a hermeneutic of human temporality. The "mere staring" that takes things as present-at-hand seems to be an example of this. Another is "curiosity."

One thing we hear little about from Heidegger is play, but in his treatment of curiosity we get a glimpse of it. "Curiosity," for Heidegger, suggests a close proximity between a kind of playful perceptual encounter and presence-at-hand. The first step towards curiosity, in any case, is to *stop working*, to take a rest. "In rest," Heidegger writes, "concern does not disappear; circumspection, however, becomes free and is no longer bound to the world of work. When we take a rest, care subsides into *circumspection which has been set free*. Care becomes concern with the possibilities of seeing the "world" merely as it \*looks\* while one tarries and takes a rest" (1972, 217). Something of the attitude of the Thoreauian ascetic walker is clearly recognizable in the

language Heidegger uses to characterize curiosity.<sup>43</sup> “When curiosity has become free, however, it concerns itself with seeing... *just* in order to see. It seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty. In this kind of seeing, that which is an issue for care does not lie in grasping something and being knowingly in the truth; it lies rather in its possibilities of abandoning itself to the world” (1972, 217; some italics added.) And yet, for Heidegger, any such escape from work-bound circumspection is a first step toward the “falling” of *Dasein* away from itself and into the “they”-world, a kind of inauthentic, human-centered, shallow pop-consciousness (1972, 210-24). “Curiosity” in *Being and Time* seems to be the provenance of window shoppers, vacationers, and tourists--those modernized crowds who are placeless in the sense that they do not work, and who do not truly *work* because they are fundamentally placeless. “Curiosity is everywhere and nowhere. This mode of Being-in-the-world reveals a new kind of Being of everyday *Dasein*--a kind in which *Dasein* is constantly uprooting

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<sup>43</sup> The full quote from *Being and Time* reads as follows: “In rest, concern does not disappear; circumspection, however, becomes free and is no longer bound to the world of work. When we take a rest, care subsides into *circumspection which has been set free*. In the world of work, circumspective discovering has de-severing as the character of its Being. When circumspection has been set free, there is no longer anything ready-to-hand which we must concern ourselves with bringing close. But, as essentially de-severant, this circumspection provides itself with new possibilities of de-severing. This means that it tends away from what is most closely ready-to-hand, and into a far and alien world. Care becomes concern with the possibilities of seeing the 'world' merely as it \*looks\* while one tarries and takes a rest. *Dasein* seeks what is far away simply in order to bring it close to itself in the way it looks. *Dasein* lets itself be carried along [*mitnehmen*] solely by the looks of the world; in this kind of Being, it concerns itself with becoming rid of itself as Being-in-the-world and rid of its Being alongside that which, in the closest everyday manner, is ready-to-hand.

When curiosity has become free, however, it concerns itself with seeing, not in order to understand what is seen (that is to come into a being towards it) but *just* in order to see. It seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty. In this kind of seeing, that which is an issue for care does not lie in grasping something and being knowingly in the truth; it lies rather in its possibilities of abandoning itself to the world. Therefore curiosity is characterized by a specific way of not tarrying alongside what is closest. Consequently it does not seek the leisure of tarrying observantly, but rather seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters....Curiosity is everywhere and nowhere. This mode of Being-in-the-world reveals a new kind of Being of everyday *Dasein*--a kind in which *Dasein* is constantly uprooting itself” (1972 217; some italics added).

itself” (1972, 217). This freed, or destratified mode of perception is not even accorded the dignity of a traditionally philosophical desire for true seeing: “Curiosity has nothing to do with observing entities and marveling at them--[*Thaumazein*]. To be amazed to the point of not understanding is something in which it has no interest” (1972, 217).

The contrast with Thoreau is striking. For Thoreau, as we have seen, the freeing of perception from our most human concerns leads, if not, finally, to “true sight,” at least to new and surprising encounters with nature. And moreover, the Thoreauian perspective suggests that practice itself is not all on the side of Heideggerian circumspection.

Walking served Thoreau as a technique for freeing perception from the all-too-human cares of dwelling, and from the even more alarming clamor of “politics,” even if only by reterritorializing corporeal encounters onto the much quicker temporality of the motile body, merely moving through the details of the landscape.

*critiquing philosophies of practice and practicing critical philosophy*

This juxtaposition may seem to invite the question of which techniques of the ecological self are more authentically edifying, or which mode of environmental practice more surely reveals and enacts environmental truth. There may be some merit in such questions, and perhaps it is at some level impossible for environmental thought to avoid asking them. But before we do so, or as we do so, we should allow this analysis to call into question the essentialism to which ecocritical practices in general seem to be drawn.

Such practices respond to a pressing suspicion of the techno-ecological age. We suspect ourselves or others--ourselves and *thus* others--of a certain blindness to the environment; a blindness for which we are at fault, a blindness that is at once a disability and also a moral failing. Environmentalism is troubled by a failure of sense, of sensation and sensibility, a failure that demands corrective action, practice. Surely there are things we shall do, and things we shall not do: bodily comportments and modes of material life that are right, for reasons that are more than instrumental; practices that not only accomplish something worthwhile, or achieve some good end, but are also and at once enactments and revelations of a higher truth, of nature. And yet, whenever we dig deeply enough we find that such active and creative responses reproduce or replace all too faithfully the naive scientific naturalism that persists in the belief that we can eventually, or at least could in an ideal world, make nature speak in incontestable terms, and thus settle environmentalism's debates once and for all (Latour 2004, 10). Perhaps digging deeply is precisely where we go wrong, though, not only in critical thought and discourse, but also in philosophical practice.

One way to think of alethurgic practices of the ecological self would be as practical analogues of the "metaphysics of presence," rising above which, was, as we have pointed out above, Derrida's primary aim. And for Derrida, rising above in this sense meant rising to the surface, the periphery--avoiding the allure of depth, and the call of a secure center, a ground, or a "transcendental signified." And yet for Derrida this surface was primarily the surface of the text, as the site of the infinite play of

signification and *differance*. “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*,” Derrida infamously asserted.

The “strong” reading of this statement, as a denial of the real, refutes itself. What Derrida means is that what characterizes the text as a site of the infinite play of differences, deferrals, and mediations also characterizes the world, experience, and practice. Thus, while there is plenty in the universe besides text, there is no *deus ex machina* that can resolve the fundamental indeterminacy of language. But it becomes important here to note that just as the text has no regulating outside, it also, as Wittgenstein made so apparent, has no pure inside. Language is always mixed up with embodiment, materiality, and practice. If we cannot escape from language, neither can we retreat within it.

Let us, then, try the experiment of turning to critical practice rather than doctrine. But will we not, in doing so, be engaged in our own recursion and reiteration of the oldest philosophical trick--trying to escape from philosophy’s difficulties onto the solid ground of matter, action, and practice? We can only hedge against this kind of futility by keeping in view the status of experience itself as a surface effect, a site of the play of differences and meaningful deferrals of meanings, and seeking a *mode of praxis* that suggest the limitations of its own alethurgic potentials. We would seek in this way to take the Derridean project beyond the activities of speaking, reading, and writing; that is, to look for practices--a genus of practice, or a mode of practice, which would also be an *approach* to ecocritical practices in general--that would be faithful to the hope of eschewing the temptation to profundity and the gravitational pull of center and ground.

We would be looking for an “alethurgic” mode of practice that would acknowledge, perform, or even celebrate the fugitive multiplicity of truth--from which experience itself never quite achieves the gravity or the escape velocity it would need to pull away and purify itself. In the following chapter I suggest tinkering as such a mode of practice.

## Chapter Four

### Tinkering, Science, and Ecological Ethics

*“To the ecological field-worker, the equal right to live and blossom is an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom.” - Arne Naess*

*“Done with fish.” - John Laroche*

One of Berry’s fellow Southern nature writers, Janisse Ray, offers a glimpse of how tinkering may become an ecocritical practice, and in her work we can recognize an alternative, in particular, to the dwelling perspective: an alternative vision, that is, of the nexus between “work” and the ethics and aesthetics of environment. In *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999), Ray chronicles her own love affair with a place in an autobiographical style--though the topos of Ray’s childhood was not a family farm but a junkyard in the pine barrens of central south Georgia. “My homeland,” she writes,



is about as ugly as a place gets. There's nothing in south Georgia, people will tell you, except straight, lonely roads, one-horse towns, sprawling farms, and tracts of planted pines. It's flat, monotonous, used-up...No mountains, no canyons, no rocky streams, no waterfalls. The rivers are muddy, wide and flat, like somebody's feet. (1999, 13)

Ray describes her upbringing in a rigorously religious family dominated by the presence of her loving but fiercely strict and mentally ill father. Rather than the timeless traditional practices of dwelling harmoniously in the land, Ray's "cracker childhood" was lived in rural isolation and poverty, contemplating sin and salvation, and playing in her father's expansive junkyard. Ray's feeling of place-attachment oscillates between the junkyard playscape she learned to appreciate in retrospect and the nearly extinct longleaf pine ecosystem she came to know only as a trained naturalist. Nonetheless, Ray attests a strong environmental ethic forged from these unlikely materials. She credits her scientific training in part, as well as her firsthand experience of a landscape ravaged by a few short centuries of violent extractive abuse at the hands of Scottish and Irish settlers. But she also credits her father's intensely sentimental attachment to creatures, machines, and other "created" things--a sentiment which resembled fascination as much as at-oneness, belonging, or empathy. "It was," she writes,

a curiosity that sprung from his desire to fix things. To repair the things of the world and make them fly and hop and operate again....He would with equal fury rethread a stripped bolt, solder a heat split frying pan, or patch a bicycle tire or reset a dog's broken leg or pull a tooth. I have seen him blue guns....build stocks, fashion new parts for them, chamber them, clean rust out of their

barrels. I have seen him operate on pigs. He can rebuild carburetors and fix cracked motor heads. He helped the ewes with their lambing...

[He] surrounded himself with particulars useful to mechanical ingenuity, fragments and fractions of this and that, of everything, because any one piece might be necessary to link seventeen others together, to restore function to a broken machine. He would have agreed with ecologist Aldo Leopold, if you are going to tinker with the earth, at least keep all of the pieces. (1999, 139)

Ray would immediately recognize Thoreau's love of wilderness and sensitive attunement to extra-human meanings. She would also embrace Heidegger's appreciation of the care that can be involved in living deeply in place. And she would certainly affirm Berry's call to make agriculture an attentive, careful, and sustainable art rather than an extractive industry. But at the same time, Ray's story of coming to ecological consciousness seems to belie the supposed centrality of either walking in the pristine wilderness or agrarian dwelling in place. The setting of Ray's childhood is a world already dismembered and dis-integrated. It is a Heideggerian dystopia--an environment of side-by-side stuff. Metal, wood, and earth--red clay, pine plantations, dirt roads, organisms, and machines--obtruding and accumulating in various states of semi-functional disrepair. Not a standing reserve ready for exploitation exactly, but a world of fragments and fractions left over from a century of exploitation and resilience. And through the character of her father, Ray shows a different mode of eco-philosophical practice: tinkering, which is oriented not toward restoring and merging with a natural whole, but toward making things work--making things "hop and fly and operate again."

In this context, it is notable that Ray's own poetic expressions of topophilia are not rendered in terms of de-subjectifying absorption and immersion. Rather than rendering a dream of merging with the essence of a place or being rooted in the earth, Ray consciously toys with the pathetic fallacy, and embraces elements of abstraction and mediation.

Not long ago I dreamed of actually cradling a place, as if something so amorphous and vague as a region, existing mostly in imagination and idea, suddenly took form. I held its shrunken relief in my arms, a baby smelted from a plastic topography map, and when I gazed down into its face, as my father had gazed into mine, I saw the pine flatwoods of my homeland. (1999, 15)

Passages like this one contrast with the Heideggerian notion of a singular modality of authentic environmental perception--grounded within a centered, spherical lifeworld. And yet we can also recognize certain similarities between the ecology of Ray's childhood and the environmental hermeneutics of Heidegger's peasants. Ray suggests an environmental ethic based in a curiosity about things and cultivated through the practice of tinkering--a mode of work that can be both passionate and playful, and which takes its cues from curiosity as much as necessity. As such, tinkering carves out a middle ground between an absorbing Heideggerian lifeworld and the "mere presence" of an environment of objects or a mere stockpile of resources.

It is worth pointing out, moreover, that Heidegger himself was a tinkerer of sorts, at least on the surface of things. He kept a small workshop, for example, and he was

described by one acquaintance as having the demeanor of a handyman rather than a professor.<sup>44</sup> In his philosophy, Heidegger thematized a general mode of skilled physical intervention in the material world. But ultimately he does not theorize tinkering as such. As we have seen, Heideggerian handwork is given meaning through its links to mortality as the essence of human being. And just as he does with the art object itself, Heidegger presses “work” into philosophical service to draw together a coherent surrounding world and ground authentic “circumspective” perception. Where Heideggerian handwork always works toward authentic belonging within the whole, the handwork of a tinkerer proceeds more often from a fascination with parts and their relational capacities, and from a curiosity about novel possibilities of functionality and emergent properties.

Heidegger is not the only environmental thinker with a penchant for handwork. Indeed, environmental philosophy has a general *ad hominem* affinity for skilled handicraft, mechanical ingenuity, and tinkering. Muir may be the most conspicuous example. He financed his university education through his “inventions,” constructing several intricate mechanical contraptions, including a bed that stood him up at sunrise and a clock-controlled desk that opened and closed a series of textbooks at appointed times. Thoreau is perhaps second only to Muir among nature writers with a penchant for the mechanical arts. He operated a small pencil-making factory that perfected and rationalized the process, eventually overtaking the German company Faber and Castell as the leader of the nascent industry. But Thoreau gave up pencil making after he felt he

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<sup>44</sup> In the 2007 BBC documentary, *Human, All Too Human*, Part 2, “Heidegger: Thinking the Unthinkable,” directed by Jeff Morgan.

had elevated it to the state of the art. It would seem he was more interested in the process than the profits.

Could Wendell Berry too be counted among the ranks of tinkering ecocritics? In fact he can, insofar as his way of farming can be seen as a kind of tinkering. When Berry talks about his experiences trying to restore an abused piece of farmland, the work takes the form of a series of practical experiments beset by regular failures. He advises “thinking little” not “big.” And his model successes as a farmer are like those of a tinkerer. “At home,” he writes, “the great delight is to see the clover and grass now growing on places that were bare when we came. These small healings of the ground are my model accomplishment—everything else I do must aspire to that” (1970, 45). Berry, however, often speaks of these little successes in terms of restoring wholeness. He writes, “We seem to have been living for a long time on the assumption that we can safely deal with parts, leaving the whole to take care of itself. But now the news from everywhere is that we have to begin gathering up the scattered pieces, figuring out where they belong, and putting them back together. For the parts can be reconciled to one another only within the pattern of the whole thing to which they belong” (2005, 100-1).

For Berry, the language of wholism and reconciliation provides a counterpoint to the naive hubris of the mechanistically reductive vision of the industrial age. However, I think the language of restoring functions and enriching relations provides a better way of conceiving the ecocritical potential of Berry’s agrarian praxis than the language of “making whole.” The ecologically oriented “new agrarianism” that Berry has helped

found is really less about restoring wholes than it is about restoring the capacities of plural and partial assemblages of diverse elements. It is certainly not an attempt to restore a post-industrial landscape to a wilderness state, for example. Nor is it about faithfully reproducing supposedly wholistic preindustrial farms. It is better characterized as gathering pieces and restoring functions. It is oriented towards making things work, while also recognizing and appreciating the non-obvious but often crucial workings of self-organizing natural processes, collectives, and systems. In other words, it is about building careful but novel agrarian assemblages.

Ecological agrarianism should be a practical involvement in the earth that respects “the environment,” we could say. But as Berry himself points out, “The real names of the environment are the names of rivers and river valleys; creeks, ridges, and mountains; towns and cities; lakes, woodlands, lanes, roads, creatures, and people....And the real name of our connection to this everywhere different and differently named earth is ‘work’” (1992, 35). Berry’s own farm, as he describes it, is just such an environment-of-parts. It is composed of woodlands, creeks, and ridges, but also of Eurasian clovers, grasses, sheep, earthworms, and honeybees. It incorporates the maize-squash-beans inter-crop built by American farmers more than two millennia ago, while also making considered use of electric fencing, photovoltaic panels, and other industrially produced technologies. All of this alongside terracing and plowing techniques inspired by farmers in the Peruvian Andes, and building techniques developed by Anglo-American settlers.

*tinkering, the body, and assemblage theory*

What if environmentalism celebrated, thematized, and theorized its affinity with tinkering as much as its affinities with walking and farming? How would the ideology of environmentalism be adjusted if we understood tinkering as a way of expressing sympathies and cultivating connections with the non-human world? What if ecocritics pinned their hopes for authentic, ethical vision of the “natural” world on the perception of the tinkerer, who sees things for the potentials they have of forging connections among other things, and who is always on the lookout for the active and creative capacities of things, even when those capacities do not serve instrumental goals? What if environmentalism asked not what things truly are or how they appear to an authentic subject, but rather, what connections can they forge? What myriad metaphors can they uphold? What can they *do* with us, and *without* us?

To suggest tinkering as an alternative ecocritical practice is not to invent something new. Rather it implies an expansion of what counts as “getting in touch with nature.” Or if you like, tinkering is how you get in touch with “post-nature.” Making tinkering an environmental technique of the self means looking for ecologically promising ethical and affective moments in the work of junkyard mechanics, scrappers, squatters, steampunks, inventors, or even hoarders, just as environmentalism has traditionally looked for such moments in the steps of the wilderness walker or the labors of the subsistence farmer. Expanding the scope of ecological praxis in this way would

not water down environmentalism; it would rather be shot in the arm. It would entail altering both existing practices and existing environmental discourse. It is an invitation to let ecological considerations and environmental ethics inflect a broader range of practices, but it is also an attempt to bring another mode of practice and experience--and the particular metaphors, imageries, affects, and logics that are enfolded in it--to bear upon existing ecological discourse and aesthetics.

There is an important sense in which tinkering is not just another mode of interaction with materiality, but differs fundamentally from traditional eco-philosophical practices. To the extent that tinkering entails an environmental hermeneutics, it is one that operates on shifting ground. Environmentalism's traditional practices are alethurgic forms that tend to mobilize *the body* as a firm basis and universal rubric for the perception of the environment: the motile body, the metabolic body, even the mortal body, or in the case of Cynicism, sometimes what we could call the "desiring body." As we can see, the body is itself already multiple and shifting in an important sense. Nevertheless it becomes the immanent thing that stands in for the sought-after transcendent principle that would ensure authentic apprehension or true vision. Tinkering does not imply an abnegation of the body, but it entails, not a hermeneutics perhaps, but a sensitivity to the relational capacities of a variety of bodies. Tinkering is consonant with the capacity of perception to exceed the interiority of the self and to transmit affects that are not overcoded by a subjective center. It does not operate as an alethurgic practice in



the same sense because its ends are plural, and are always ready to become means to yet other ends.

Deleuze and Guattari provide a theory of human and non-human bodies suitable for a tinkerer's ethics. In "Becoming Intense, Becoming Animal" (1987, 232-310) they draw upon Spinoza for a dual account of bodies, which distinguishes what might be thought of as a relatively "diachronic" from a relatively "synchronic" dimension. The diachronic dimension, which they call "longitude," consists in speeds and slownesses. All those things we call bodies--not only our own human bodies, but also the bodies of animals, trees, mountains, planets, *perimecia*--are in this account less "beings" than *becomings*, composed of several distinct rates of change. This is perhaps most obvious in biotic bodies like our own. Neurons fire at light speed, while the movement of hormones through the bloodstream and across cellular membranes proceeds at a much slower rate. Cells on the intestinal wall are born and die in a matter of hours, while a single nerve cell can outlive the organism that houses it. We recognize a human lifespan of several decades, but our bodies also are vectors in the life of a species, and of a population of genes, and these sagas are subject to dynamics that play out on much longer time-scales. Bodies, then, are these becomings of different speeds, and complex bodies are immanent to a vast array of differentials of becoming replete with intricate cascading sequences of accelerations, decelerations, tipping points, and so forth--the "longitude" of a body.<sup>45</sup>

Body-assemblages may cohere and persist in a certain manner through time, but Deleuze and Guattari never posit essences. And they never do this not only because

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<sup>45</sup> For an in-depth explication of these aspects of Deleuzian ontology, see De Landa 2002.

bodies are ultimately in flux, longitudinally, but also because they have their “actuality,” for lack of a better word, in the couplings in which they are engaged in at any given moment, and the affects or “intensities” that are relayed as a result of these couplings. “Latitude,” refers in the Deleuzian lexicon to the capacities of such a given assemblage of becomings to enter into creative relations with other bodies. “We know nothing about a body” Deleuze and Guattari write, “until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body” (1987, 257).

Deleuzo-Guattarian assemblage theory provides a way of thinking about bodies that expands the usual sense of the term. This framework is applicable also to social entities such as institutions, groups, rituals, practices and so forth, including what I have been calling ecocritical practices. Animal bodies, and the human body in particular, are especially complex, and have an extraordinarily broad range of capacities to affect and be affected. By all accounts, neural networks introduce a new order of magnitude in this regard, which we denote with terms like “consciousness,” and “perception,” opening possibilities for affective relays of great range and complexity. The material assemblages that we enter into to actualize our existence--the “machines that we make,” so to speak--may include elements that are ideational, material, or processual. Ethics, for Deleuze,

consists in a more or less conscious and intensive involvement in such assemblages, an account that is consonant, on my reading, with Foucault's techniques of the self.

This, then, is how ecocritical practices and/as environmental techniques of the self should be understood: as participations in assemblages, which variably produce and facilitate flows of affects. Agrarian environmentalism centers upon the farmstead assemblage, usually dovetailed with the nuclear family, and always emplaced in the biotic landscape, with all its material accouterments, its outlying lands, its seasonal practices, its daily labors and rituals. The peripatetic ascetic on the other hand makes a simple, kinetic body-earth machine by walking. What can these assemblages do? What affects can they create or transmit? The thinkers we have examined have indicated what some of their tendencies have been, as well as some of the ways they can outrun or overcome themselves. Thoreau's ostensibly simplifying body-earth machine, in particular, was continually breaking down and unraveling into perceptual ambivalence, sensual complexity, and metaphorical extravagance. Telegraph wires and dinner bells become music. Villagers are like prairie dogs. Poets are facts. A marshy meadow dissolves into a riot of color and light. Ultimately everything goes to pieces before a "true gaze." So ask not what a thing really is, but what it is like, and what it can do and what can be done with it. The railroad, say: "it fills a few hollows, makes banks for the swallows, sets the sands a blowing, and the blackberries a growing." And I can step across it like a cart path in the woods.

If practices are participations in assemblages, we should never think the possibilities are exhausted, precisely because they are assemblages, which can be reconfigured. To paraphrase Deleuze, we do not yet know what ecological praxis can do. New participants can be introduced--new ideas, new ideals, new technologies, populations, bodies, terrains, et cetera--which can mean new affects, new aesthetics, new ethics, and new politics. Turning to tinkering as an alternative eco-philosophical practice, therefore, does not necessarily mean dispensing with the traditional alethurgic practices of environmentalism. It just means putting such practices in their place, so to speak, which really means *dis-placing* them or uprooting them, or “deterritorializing” them, to return to Deleuzian terminology. This would mean, in the first place, that we should embrace the *variety* of alethurgic practices. Experiment with ancient forms, such as Cynic homelessness, and modern variations such as parkour, or the Situationist’s *dérive*. Apply the tinkering approach at a meta-level: tinker with your own ecological subjectivity. Walk, till the earth, dwell, build, meditate, write, study, tinker. Crawl over the rocks until your knees bleed, submerge yourself in a swamp. Enlist a thousand hermeneutical registers. Make your practices of the self multiple--a *bricolage* of the self--because nature and the self and the body are already multiple and multiplying.

*science, bricolage, and the concept of nature*

What environmentalism must come to grips with is not that there is no truth, or no “nature,” but rather that there is far too much truth, *too many* truths. Nature is not devoid of meaning, but overfull with it. Nature thus understood, and thus engaged with, differs from the wilderness of the peripatetic ascetic and from the pastoral *Umwelt* of Heideggerian environmentalism. However, it also differs importantly from the “nature” that modern science, including the science of ecology, has inherited from classical Western philosophy.

Claude Levi-Strauss provides perhaps the best elucidation of the distinction we need at this point. Levi-Strauss believed the contrast between the tinkerer and the scientist ran to the deepest layers of experience. Science, he argued, is born of the never-quite-achieved ideal of starting from whole cloth, raw materials, and master plans--ordering our experiences from the ground up, so to speak. Philosophy, from its earliest beginnings, turned away from the reiteration of mythical creation stories to concern itself with divining the primary principle or substance that underlies all else: water, fire, earth, atoms, numbers... Levi-Strauss contrasted this cosmological approach with a widespread “pre-scientific,” or non-scientific, “undomesticated” mode of thought--sometimes called “totemism”--which nonetheless shares much with scientific thought. The crucial difference, according to Levi-Strauss, is that this “undomesticated thought” (*pensée*

*sauvage*) always picks up in the middle, and proceeds from existing concepts, categories, and metaphors that are “laying around.”<sup>46</sup>

Environmental philosophy has often criticized modern techno-science for forcing the natural flux and flow of nature into the numerical sameness of laws and statistics, or reducing the experience of the whole to a narrow view of its parts. But Levi-Strauss’s analysis of extra-scientific regimes of experience and knowledge suggests that thinking outside of the modern techno-scientific box would not mean re-inhabiting the environment as a seamless background of flux and flow. Nor, as Heidegger well understood, would it mean finding a natural or “naive” truth within appearances--seeing the percept purely, precisely as it strikes the eye, or even the body, without the imposition of theories, meanings, and significations. Thinking beyond what Heidegger called the scientific “world picture” would rather mean embracing the ongoing project, without beginning or end, without foundation or *telos*, of orienting and reorienting ourselves within in an evolving world of indeterminate relations through the continual transformation of contingent schema that are at once cultural, conceptual, and practical.

This is, in fact, is a fairly good description of science as it is actually practiced, even if it is not the way science sometimes presents itself and is popularly understood. Science has long prided itself on the notion that it discovers primary properties and transcendent laws--the fundamental truths of things in themselves. Ironically, perhaps,

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<sup>46</sup> To the extent that this distinction may characterize a historical “moment,” it would be one that predates even the advent of Greek philosophy in the West. The monotheisms of early Near Eastern states share more with modern science than they do with Levi-Strauss’s “*pensée sauvage*”--not, perhaps, in content, but in form.

this ideal has led us to a suite of scientific practices that actually amount to a particular kind of tinkering, one that is highly instrumentally effective. The animating ideal was needed, perhaps, to realize modern scientific achievements. However, as Levi Strauss suggests, the scientist as an intellectual “engineer” seems to never quite achieve the ideal of starting with perfectly suited tools and raw materials (1962, 19). As sociologists of science inspired by Latour and others have noted, the many truths science has discovered, as amazing and useful as they are, remain, like all truths, metaphorical in spite of any pretensions to the contrary. Contemporary scientific practice, moreover, mostly serves the purpose of research and development for industries and states, and cares far more about *whether* A statistically does B to C than it does about *why* this is the case.

And yet, the ideal of science as the pursuit of the primary properties of entities and the transcendent order of nature remains as seductive as it is elusive. We continue to chase it to the far corners of science, where even now it threatens to dissipate into the ether. We can see this drama playing out most clearly at two far-flung points in contemporary science: in the fields of particle physics and ecology. At the Large Hadron Collider under the Swiss Alps our ablest technicians are still in hot pursuit of the most fundamental truth of nature-as-substance. However, post-Newtonian physics has been famously uncooperative with the idea of nature as a realm of substance with fundamental properties, and the most recent advances in the field show no sign of easing the anxieties of Einsteinian realists. Instead of beings-in-themselves physicists have shown us a

universe of relational capacities and “beings-for.”<sup>47</sup> If physics has been the site of the pursuit of nature as a foundational ur-substance, what is of more primary interest to us here is the field of ecology, which has been a primary site of the modern pursuit of nature in its other scientific guise: as a wholistic transcendental order. It will be helpful therefore to take a final detour to examine scientific ecology both as a site of contestation of the idea of a natural order, and as a set of embodied practices that in their own right constitute a suite of ecocritical practices or environmental techniques of the self. Ecology has long been understood as an ethically transformative science, perhaps *the* ethically transformative science, but what I will suggest in the following sections is that we can find two distinct accounts of the ethical “moment” of ecology: a problematic one of conversion whereby the scientist comes to see the truth of the whole system, and a more promising one of the multiplication of piecemeal affective ties to the parts and pieces of the biosphere.

### *wholism and the ethics of ecology*

The idea that nature forms a coherent total system or manifests a transcendental principle has been very important to environmental ethics. Environmentalism inherits this wholism as a double-dominant meme from both of its principal intellectual-historical progenitors: transcendentalism and scientific ecology. Perhaps transcendentalism is in a

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<sup>47</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the philosophical implications of contemporary quantum theory see Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007).



sense the most apparent source of ecocriticism's wholistic vision. In an age of universal grand narratives and world-spirits, the transcendentalism of the early nineteenth century looked to a capitalized "Nature" and cleaved to a spirituality not far removed from Christian monotheism. No less important to contemporary environmental thought, however, is scientific ecology, which developed the concept of the "climax community" along with the more colloquial ideas of the balance of nature, and the more esoteric but still surprisingly resonant notion of "Gaia." Donald Worster's expansive study of the history of ecology chronicles the emergence of the idea of the "pristine ecosystem," which becomes a scientific homologue of a transcendental or teleological nature. In its early development, ecology sought to explain the inter-relationships among organisms--specifically plants--according to some overarching pattern, principle, or law. Early attempts pegged certain aspects of observed plant communities in various regions to intersecting axes of temperature, altitude, and rainfall.<sup>48</sup> Eventually, many ecologists settled upon the idea that for any given place, with its macro-patterns of rainfall and temperature, there corresponded a discoverable ideal biotic formation--the climax community. The old-growth hardwood forest of the great eastern North American woodlands, the mature tall-grass prairie of the southern plains grazed by bison, or the relatively homogeneous stands of redwoods or Douglas fir on the well-watered temperate regions of the Pacific coast--these ecosystems represented the pure will of a place, before or beyond the machinations of "man." If disturbed by a natural disaster or human

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<sup>48</sup> The fact that plants were the first objects of study for ecology may suggest a certain sense in which plants have been seen as more "natural," i.e. predictable, than animals.

meddling, the biota would progress, the theory goes, through various stages of “succession” towards this particular configuration of species as its final equilibrium, or climax community.

The notion of the climax community was political from the very beginning, since it posits an order that includes and thus potentially *implicates* humans. Ecology’s chief scientific finding is that we just are, demonstrably, part of a community of life. Hence, what we do affects the larger web of life, and what befalls the web befalls us. The more systematic and orderly this *oecos* is, the more it is incumbent upon humans to care for it. Moreover, the environment is not only a complex system that we depend upon, but also a system made up of living things, similar to us, which can suffer, perish, and go extinct. So the normative dimension of ecology always teeters between the “anthropocentric” conservation of resources for human use and the “ecocentric” preservation of natural otherness. Either way, ecology lends itself to a normative discourse--if not one that directly addresses itself to moral consideration of non-humans, then at least one connecting ecological health with “public” (i.e. human) health. In either case, it falls upon ecology to locate the *logos* of the *oecos*--the laws or logics that biotic processes obey, the proper unit or level of ecological analysis, or the “subject,” so to speak, of ecological health. If forests, meadows, and marshes are not merely the disastrous messy result of the blind strivings of innumerable weeds and varmints, then what are they? Ecologists never settled the matter of where an ecosystem start and stops: limited symbiotic associations? whole watersheds? regional biomes? the planet itself? Most

ecologists, in fact, would happily admit that an ecosystem is not a *thing*, per se, so we need not charge ecosystem science with a fallacy of reification. Nonetheless, the notion of the climax community became a guiding concept and thus decisively pegged the *oecologos* to the notion of a community of organisms, and in principle suggested a whole and proportionally optimal arrangement, where each organism has its *proper* place.

Aldo Leopold's famous essay "Thinking like a Mountain," which remains one of the most influential statements in environmental ethics, can be read as an allegory of this ecosystem concept, and as such it illustrates well the political and ethical stakes inherent in the science of ecology. In this essay Leopold recounts what can best be described as an ecological conversion experience, wherein he first comes to recognize the value of a varmint, and thus the value of nature writ large:

We were eating lunch on a high rimrock, at the foot of which a turbulent river elbowed its way. We saw what we thought was a doe fording the torrent, her breast awash in white water. When she climbed the bank toward us and shook out her tail, we realized our error: it was a wolf. A half-dozen others, evidently grown pups, sprang from the willows and all joined in a welcoming melee of wagging tails and playful maulings....In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack....We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes - something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view. (1949, 138-9)

From this profound experience, Leopold learns a secret “known only to the wolf and the mountain.” Essentially, the secret is a scientific insight: that wolves are a “keystone species” in the climax community of this particular ecosystem. Without them the balance is broken, deer multiply unchecked, and the land suffers. But Leopold’s essay lends a moral force to this insight. If the reader first identifies with the naive, trigger-happy young Leopold, we soon come to share in the moral outrage reflected back at us in the fierce green eyes of the murdered wolf. But ultimately Leopold grounds the righteous indignation he calls forth in his readers in a realization that it is not merely against this mortal wolf that we have sinned. It is against a more venerable, older, more incontestably objective personage: the Mountain--that is, the ecosystem, the “land organism,” and by extension Nature itself. Set against the partial perspectives of the deer, the pine, the coyote, the cowman, or the hunter, it is the *mountain*, in Leopold’s telling, that offers the one true perspective: “Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of the wolf” (1949, 137).

The essay deserves its remarkable reputation, if only because it accomplishes so much in so little space. By making the story of his encounter with a wolf ultimately a story about a mountain, Leopold subordinates an ethical quandary about wolves, men, horses, and guns to the scientific concept of the ecosystem, while co-opting the affective force of a death to transpose the ecosystem concept into a moral law, and placing himself,

through the simultaneous depth and breadth of his rimrock conversion experience, in a position to articulate the environmental ethical truth.

*science as a technique of the self*

As an ecological allegory, “Thinking Like a Mountain” exemplifies an often overlooked aspect of the politics of the natural sciences, concerning what Foucault called “the relationship between the subject and truth” (2011, 3). Foucault suggests two distinct ways of situating the analysis of scientific or philosophical discourses of truth. The first would be an epistemological analysis: analysis of “the specific structures or forms by which we can recognize a discourse is true.” While acknowledging the importance of such an analysis, Foucault wished to set this usual mode of philosophical analysis to one side, focusing instead on the how social subjectivity is negotiated through one’s relationship to the truth. “Rather than analyzing the forms by which a discourse is recognized as true, this would involve analyzing the form in which, in his [sic] act of telling the truth, the individual constitutes himself and is constituted by others as a subject of a discourse of truth [as opposed to the *object* of a discourse of truth, as in the case of a madman in a clinic for example], the form in which he presents himself to himself and to others as someone who tells the truth” (2011, 3).

In this sense, scientific practices themselves may be analyzed alongside other ecocritical practices with respect to their function as ways of conjuring up, understanding,

presenting, and composing one's self within a field of human and non-human relations. While Leopold's conversion experience is not explicitly related to his scientific practice, we infer that the episode took place while he was employed as a field biologist for the U.S. Forest Service. We suspect, moreover, that Leopold very likely would not have gleaned this profound lesson from the wolf and the mountain that day without the benefit of his scientific training.<sup>49</sup> Arne Naess, in his famous lecture inaugurating the "deep ecology" movement, confirmed this connection between the work of the natural scientist and a certain kind of bio-ethical enlightenment. "The ecological field-worker" he attested, "acquires a deep-seated respect, or even veneration, for ways and forms of life. He reaches an understanding from within, a kind of understanding that others reserve for fellow men and for a narrow section of ways and forms of life. To the ecological field-worker, the equal right to live and blossom is an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom" (Naess 1970, lecture). By speaking in terms of an "axiom" susceptible to "understanding," Naess suggests an aesthetic and an ethic with a special relationship to an objective truth. Specifically, Naess's kind of ecocentric egalitarianism finds support in the truth of the ecosystem as a wholistic order. The higher order of the ecosystem suggests the isonomia of the innumerable parts. Every species, if not every individual, has its place, its niche, and thus a natural and discernible basis for value.

It was precisely this aptitude for seeing the whole system, "the great pattern of life and environment," that was cited by Paul Sears in 1964 when he proclaimed the

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<sup>49</sup> Without addressing Leopold's epiphany, Daniel Botkin reports that Leopold's understanding of predator-prey populations dynamics on the Kaibab Plateau in Arizona came from a paper written by wildlife biologist D. I. Rasmussen. (Botkin, 1991)

exceptional status of ecology as a uniquely “subversive science.” Ecology, in this understanding, is subversive because it calls into question all our discrete and particular acts by showing their eventual relation to a larger order. Ecology tells us “you can’t [any longer] do just one thing.” “When you try to pick out anything by itself,” as Muir had already said a half century earlier, “you find it hitched to everything else in the universe” (1998, 110). The deep ecology tradition of Leopold and Naess gives us a wholistic version of this insight. It is what Timothy Morton has called “the ecological thought”: the one great fugitive ecological truth that we imagine could lead to the consciousness shift from which all things green and good and sustainable would flow, if we could only finally grasp it by its right handle and think it truly and deeply enough (Morton, 2010).

But ecological thoughts, as this dissertation has tried to make clear, are not thoughts alone. They are also practices. Or, if you like, they are bound up very closely with practices, and with events and material circumstances, as well as with the bodies of practitioners. It is not incidental that Naess specifically linked his transformative ecological thought to the field and fieldwork. Indeed “the field” is what first delineated ecology from biology, botany, and zoology. Few *field* biologists would deny that they are in some wise ecologists. Digital modeling, lab experiments, and statistical analysis remain important techniques for ecologists, but the historical impetus of ecology runs the other direction. Ecological science has its roots in the Euro-American naturalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They were taxonomists largely, who ventured into

the wilderness to collect specimens.<sup>50</sup> However, ecology proper begins when naturalists such as Gilbert White, Thoreau, and Darwin brought their scientific methods out into the meadows, lakes, and woods to discover the higher order of the field itself. Ecology is a science, but it is the science that took the pressed and pinned specimens out of the desiccated collections of the Enlightenment naturalists, back out into the field, into the “environment,” returning them to their context and reanimating them within the grand biotic symphonies of which they were properly a part.

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche provides a portrait of the traditional ideal type of the scientist: a kind of modern ascetic, turning away from the body, the passions, and the will, in the sole service of truth, suppressing any animal affects and aversions that might impede clear vision and pure reason. There is, near the heart of modern science, a grave and stoical kind of heroism that ultimately gestures towards an ideal of disembodiment. Nietzsche found this ideal of disembodiment reflected, ironically, in the very physiognomy of the scientist. “Physiologically,” Nietzsche writes “science rests on the same foundation as the ascetic ideal: a certain *impoverishment of life* is a presupposition of both of them--the affects grown cool, the tempo of life slowed down, dialectics in place of instinct, seriousness imprinted on faces and gestures” (1967, 154). Even an ideal of chaste reason and disembodied observation needs to be enacted, performed--and like any performance, this one needs its specific accouterments, and

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<sup>50</sup> Although walking in nature became something much more than a naturalist’s jaunt for Thoreau, he nonetheless was fully ensconced in this tradition. He outfitted his top-hat with interior shelving for bringing home specimens.



material circumstances: starched white lab coats; controlled, walled, aseptic spaces; standardized equipment, hard surfaces, inert materials, et cetera.

If this ascetic ideal is the dominant image of the modern scientist, ecology nonetheless posits a distinctly different figuration of the scientist and of scientific practice, one entailing a distinctive version of what Foucault termed the “relationship between the subject and truth.” A rather more Aristotelian ideal, perhaps, than the Platonic version critiqued by Nietzsche. Take, for example, the account of philosopher of science Robert Frodeman, who contrasts ecological “field science” with physics, chemistry, and astronomy, the usual paragons of scientism which proceed by laboratory work: instrumentation, computation, experimentation. Nominally, Frodeman’s focus is actually on geology as the *sin qua non* of field science, but it is telling that in his expansive redefinition, “geology” turns out to be ecology *par excellence*: “Taken at its word,” he writes, “[geology] would provide a complete *logos* of the planet the Greeks called Gaia: synthesizing geoscientific research with poetry and nature writing, and combining these with geopolitical considerations of issues such as resource depletion, pollution, and climate change” (150-1). Ecology’s totalizing object of study is reflected in the wholistic experience of the fieldworker, which in Frodeman’s account bears resemblance to both wilderness walking and Heideggerian circumspection. “Science in the field proceeds at a different rhythm. Outside, in the open air, the scientist is exposed to the elements. Rather than working in the controlled experience of the lab, the field scientist is immersed in a constantly changing sensorium that promotes and sustains the

wonder and serendipity of experience. The walls--conceptual and physical--that isolated the lab scientist are now gone, as the field scientist passes through a shifting frameless flow of events” (154). What guarantees subjective proximity to truth here is not the suppression of bodily affects but the total exposure of the body to the panoramic sensorium of the field. Like a slow-footed parkourist armed with a penetrating scientific gaze, the field ecologist overcomes the artifice of walls and the falsity of boundaries and partialities to imbibe through every pore the whole truth of the lived and living world.

The ecologist’s movement, actual and metaphorical, from the abstractions and partialities of books and laboratories to the wholistic immediacy of the field seems to resonate with the idea of a transcendent order. It was the idea of a transcendent classificatory schema that first ignited Muir’s passion for “the field”--a passion that was at once scientific, aesthetic, and ethical. A botanist friend had showed Muir the “hidden” resemblances between a locust tree and a pea plant, evidence of their close phylogenetic connection in spite of their greatly divergent forms. As the botanist explains: “Man has nothing to do with their classification. Nature has attended to all that, giving essential unity with boundless variety, so that the botanist has only to examine plants to learn the harmony of their relations.” Muir describes the conceptual-aesthetic gestalt shift that followed: “This fine lesson charmed me and sent me flying to the woods and meadows in wild enthusiasm....Now my eyes were opened to their inner beauty, all alike revealing the glorious traces of the thoughts of God, and leading on and on into the infinite

cosmos....my eyes were never closed on the plant glory I had seen” (Muir 1997, 139).

Ecology is “deep” in part because the production of a body of ecological knowledge is concomitant with the production of ecological subjectivities. In one sense, the production of “the ecological subject” entails en-meshing the individual within a discourse with direct bearing on the social/political world--I have such and such carbon footprint, or I am ecologically at risk due to where I live, my income level, my consumption habits, et cetera. Political theorists inspired by Foucault’s studies of “governmentality” have illuminated these connections between “bio-power” and “ecoknowledge.”<sup>51</sup> What has been less explored--at least in the realm of environmental politics--is the imbrication of ecological power/knowledge with desires and affects. However, if ecology as a science is never wholly separable from ethics and politics, this is not only because ecological discourse discloses the radical interconnectedness of human actions, but also because the production and reproduction of such discourses generates affects, which may energize different compartments towards the non-human world. In his studies of Victorian sexuality, Foucault found that the production and communication of knowledge entailed not only social relations of power, but also the production and shaping of pleasures and desires.<sup>52</sup> Ecology doesn’t take human pleasures

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<sup>51</sup> See especially the work of Timothy Luke and Arun Agrawal.

<sup>52</sup> Plato’s *Phaedrus* is an early indication of the general affinity that persists between *Sophia* and *Eros*. But see specifically Foucault’s *History of Sexuality Volume I*, 36-49. The figure of the scientist-ascetic described by Nietzsche might seem to belie any such connection, but affections are at work here as well. As Nietzsche well knew, there exists, prevalent in his time and surviving into ours, a zeal for cold rationality and methodical rule-following that is a passion in the fullest sense.

as a primary object of study as did the Victorian *scientia sexualis*; nonetheless, the accounts of environmental scientists similarly suggest that the making of knowledge always entails the expression, cultivation, and production of affects. Scientific procedure may give rise to a cold indifference towards its objects, as is sometimes alleged. It may tend to reveal natural entities as mere resources, as a numerical standing reserve, as Heidegger feared. It may even generate aversions and abhorrences in some cases. But scientific practices and the discourses they propound also forge attractions, affiliations, and fascinations. The study of complex biotic interconnections proves particularly fertile in this regard. Eco-tourists and amateur naturalists suggest that you don't have to be a professional scientist to have the ecological experience of the field. Nor do the affects generated through scientific fieldwork necessarily require the first-hand experience. Notice how the work of ecologists over the last century has led to a global fascination with certain biomes--coral reefs, antarctic glaciers, and of course "the rainforest." In revealing the Amazon as the "lungs of the world" ecologists have simultaneously created the ecological planet's foremost erogenous zone.

Ecology, in other words, is not only an alethurgic form--not only a set of procedures that expound a body of knowledge and a discourse of truth about the environment--but also and at the same time an ecocritical practice with a normative bent, similar to walking and farming. Life scientists who shirk their fieldwork are thus doubly suspect characters. Note the language used by Lynn Margoulis, discoverer of endosymbiosis and proponent of the Gaia hypothesis, in dismissing one of one of her

detractors: “He seldom deals with live organisms. He computes and he reads. I suspect that it’s very hard for him to have insight into any group of organisms when he does not deal with them directly. Biologists, especially, need direct sensory communication with the live beings they study and about which they write” (Margoulis 1995, 131). The main takeaway is that this lab scientist’s conclusions are not to be trusted, but the subtext is that he also lacks a certain sympathy and solidarity with the *bios* itself. He doesn’t love slime molds enough to get down and dirty in the field. And he doesn’t go to the field enough to truly get a *feel* for Life.

*the ethos of an oecos without a logos; non-wholistic ecology and its affects*

If we understand science not only as a discursive regime of truth, but also as a technique through which identities and subjectivities are produced and bodies shaped and contoured, it seems far from coincidental that the “biophilia hypothesis”--the assertion that humans are naturally attracted to and care about living things--was formulated not by a psychologist or psychiatrist, but by E. O. Wilson, a Harvard biologist at the top of his field and the world authority on ants. This is not to cast doubt on the sincerity of Wilson’s biophilia. Quite to the contrary, Wilson’s own biophilia would seem to be overdetermined in its sincerity. *Life*, in the first place, has been particularly good to Wilson. But more to the point, it seems we love what we *know*--we love our pursuits--as innately as we love the marvelous complexity of carbon-based life forms. An instructive

difference is discernible, though, subtle as it may be, between the ecological affects attested to by Leopold, Naess, and Muir--with their affinity for harmony, coherence, and wholes--and Wilson's biophilia, which rather amounts to a generalized and somewhat inchoate affinity for the stuff of life. This difference is important because in it we can begin to see another way of understanding how ecology as a science may be ethically generative.

If it is in some sense real, the biophilia phenomenon suggests a kind of magnetic attraction to the organic that is not predicated on coherence and synthesis. Perhaps a life spent in the field exploring the inter-connected complexities of life *can* be profoundly transformative, but it does not always lead to the same aesthetic and ethical insights. Not everyone is called to think like a Mountain. And, as Margoulis writes of Wilson's hypothesis, "there is no simple biophilia, no unconditional love for members of other species. Some men love racing cars and, indeed, may be attracted to the curvaceous bikini clad women advertisers portray with such cars. We are attracted to bright colors, as well, an attraction whose application to painted automobiles comes along after the evolutionary crucial biophilia of primates to trees with brightly colored fruits. So not only is our love for life impure, not only do we have mixed feelings towards other life-forms, but our affection is also changeable, plastic." (Margoulis 1993, 347) Indeed, if we all in some sense share a general affinity for life, it often gets expressed in rather more monomaniacal ways, often bleeding over into the inorganic and the technological as well. Some of the most ardent environmentalists are in love with specific field sites, certain

species, even individual plants or animals. Julia Butterfly adopted a single redwood tree. Janisse Ray wanted to cradle the pine flatwoods of middle Georgia in her arms. Timothy Treadwell, Herzog's *Grizzly Man*, loved bears enough to live with them until death did them part. Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* chronicles the intense fascinations of orchid hunters, some of whom went to their dismal deaths in search of specific varieties. The main subject of Orlean's book, John Laroche, was obsessed by turns with fish and mirrors before becoming an orchid fanatic.

Perhaps it isn't biophilia that is universal, but philial connectivities in general. And the proliferation of stray affinities with the parts and pieces of our increasingly artifact-ridden biosphere may, in fact, be a better affective basis for environmental politics, activism, and ethics than identification with a transcendental principle or a totalizing entity. This would be a tinkerer's way of caring for the environment. Thinking like a mountain suggests either a principle of inaction and non-involvement--"let nature take its course"--or leads to attempts to maintain or re-create an idealized wilderness in a state of supposed pre-historic perfection. Over the past few decades many conservation and restoration ecologists have called both approaches into question. Daniel Botkin's *Discordant Harmonies* (1990) was the first coherent articulation of this change in ecological thinking. Botkin detailed how the practical challenges faced by scientists engaged in biodiversity conservation efforts have actually been running counter to received wisdom (and received science) about the balance and order of nature for some time--particularly challenging the notion of the climax ecosystem. Botkin surveys

several case studies to show how even untrammelled ecosystems are characterized less by balance and stability than by unstable configurations undergoing non-linear change that often defy prediction. With the natural background itself behaving so unnaturally, it becomes very difficult in some cases to sort out the ecological effects of humans from those of non-human agents of environmental change. Not only is it too late in most places to really “leave things be,” but even without us things are more apt to become otherwise than to *be* as they are, even at the ecosystem level.

Perhaps the most compelling depiction of the “unnaturalness” of the natural world is provided by the famed “nature writer” Barry Lopez. In *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez depicts the fascinating strangeness of what we may be tempted to regard as the last great untouched wilderness. By global standards, arctic ecosystems are non-diverse, composed of a relatively small number of species. Populations within these species are given to wild fluctuations from year to year and decade to decade. The arctic is a place of great swarms, vast migrations, population explosions, and epic die-offs. Partly, these peculiarities are a result of extreme conditions. The trophic structure of arctic ecosystems are top-heavy. Plants’ lives here are fleeting and their bodies are small. This is an animal’s world, and the animal life here is precariously rigged atop a small and unreliable photosynthetic base of support. The arctic is also set apart by its ecological age. Lopez points out that “the ecosystem itself is only 10,000 years old, the time since the retreat of the Wisconsin ice. The fact that it is the youngest ecosystem on earth gives it a certain freshness and urgency” (Lopez 1986, 37). Humans were part of the story from the



beginning, following the retreating glaciers northward with an advance guard of intrepid ice age mammals. In short, the arctic ecosystem, if we can call it that, is probably best understood as post-apocalyptic biotic assemblage composed entirely of invasive exotic species. Disturbance and abnormality is the norm here.

Ecologists have suspected that bio-diversity is closely correlated to the metastability of an ecosystem. And both seem to be correlated to ideal temperature and moisture conditions. Therefore tropical rainforests are extremely diverse, and thus, as the theory goes, stable. This theory helps explain arctic ecology. However, as Botkin has pointed out, recent studies have found far more instability than had been expected even in extremely diverse tropical ecosystems.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, even if virgin rainforest were uniquely stable, the majority of the world's ecosystems today would have more in common with the arctic--they are heavily altered and replete with exotic species, invasive and otherwise. It is therefore worth considering what an ecological ethic fit for the arctic would look like. Thinking like a tundra doesn't work as well as thinking like a mountain. And an ice shelf, it seems, wouldn't know what to think even if it could.

I think this is what makes Lopez such a compelling and distinctive voice in the nature writing genre; his prose tends to center on celebrations of individual species and meditations on specific encounters, rather than thematizing an immersion in a surrounding world, or a timeless wilderness experience, or looking for a transcendent principle or a totalizing order. *Arctic Dreams* is a series of chapter-sketches about caribou, musk oxen, narwhals, and polar bears. Lopez's approach suggests a re-reading

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<sup>53</sup> See Botkin 1990, 62-6.

of Leopold's allegory, which would dwell on the question of the wolf without supposing that the mountain's objective viewpoint will guide us out of the ethical dilemma. Lopez, in fact devoted a whole book to wolves, *Of Wolves and Men*, which treats the Leopoldian land ethic as one moment in a long and fraught love-hate relationship between *Canis lupus* and *Homo sapiens*.<sup>54</sup> Lopez communicates his deep admiration for wolves, but he does not provide or apply a systematic wildlife ethic. Nor is his admiration for wolves based on any predetermined function or place within a larger order. It seems to be based rather more on wolves' capacities and their individuality--their tendency to do things that remain mysterious and unpredictable to biologists, ecologists, and perhaps mountains alike. "Wolves," he is at pains to tell us, "are extraordinary animals."

In the winter of 1976 an aerial hunter surprised ten gray wolves traveling on a ridge in the Alaska Range. There was nowhere for the animals to escape to and the gunner shot nine quickly. The tenth had broken for the tip of spur running off the ridge. The hunter knew the spur ended at an abrupt vertical drop of about three hundred feet and he followed, curious to see what the wolf would do. Without hesitation the wolf sailed off the spur, fell the three hundred feet into a snowbank, and came up running in an explosion of powder. (1978, 3)

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<sup>54</sup> In contrast, the wolf of Leopold's allegory is typical of a certain idealized and objectified notion of "wildlife." The category of wildlife tends to exclude pets and pests, as well as non-native, feral, and domesticated animals. Animals as "wildlife" behave according to instinct and laws of nature. Wildlife behavior that disturbs us is explained as aberrance from the natural and normal behavior of a wild animal filling its proper niche. When a pack of coyotes attacked and killed a person in Canada in 2008, a wildlife biologist was quoted in the papers explaining that the animals must have mistaken their victim for "a deer or some other prey animal." These kinds of preposterous statements offered by scientists, which accord animals so little agency and individuality and vastly under-estimate their intelligence and powers of perception, reflects a discourse that prefers to think of non-human life as "natural" in the sense of being law-bound, thus constructing "wildlife" as a ready object for scientific understanding. A post-natural wildlife ethic might begin by asking what it would take to love mice, roaches, feral pigs, lab-rats, and feedlot cattle. If people in post-industrial countries such as U.S. need to re-learn how to live with free-roaming wolves and bears and other large animals that have been brought back from the brink of extinction, trying to think and feel differently about "pests" may be the best first step.

Wolves vary their hunting techniques, share food with the old who do not hunt, and give gifts to each other. They can live for a week without food and travel twenty miles without breaking stride. They have three systems of communication--vocal, postural, and olfactory....they spend a good part of their time playing with their young and playing with each other. I once saw a wolf on the tundra winging a piece of caribou hide around like a Frisbee for an hour by himself.

(1978, 4)

They will travel together ten or twenty miles a day, through the country where they live, eating and sleeping, birthing, playing with sticks, chasing ravens, growing old, barking at bears, scent marking trails, killing moose, and staring at the way water in a creek breaks around their legs and flows on. (1978, 12)

An environmental politics based on plural affinities with certain animals, places, processes, or phenomena should not proceed at the expense of an appreciation for inter-relationships. But ecological interdependence itself does not suggest a solid basis for environmental ethics. Environmental ethical discourse actually manifests its own quasi-symbiotic ecology of conditional norms, none of which turns out to be ultimate and each of which supports the others. Sometimes biodiversity is the greater good that the stability of the system is supposed to serve. In other cases, conserving the stability and balance of nature is said to be the reason why we should value biodiversity. Sometimes it is the “ecosystem services” provided to humanity by a working biosphere that seem to be the ultimate goal of conservation. But just as often maintaining the *beauty* of the ecosystem is implied to be paramount. Even Leopold’s famous ecological-ethical axiom displays an

imprecise plurality of ends: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (1949, 262).

The Field, it seems, has no singular guiding logic, reason, or truth to impart to the ecological fieldworker. The environment, the *oecos*, we might say, has no proper *logos* after all. But sometimes when we attend closely to words we find, as Heidegger believed, that they are wiser than we are. Etymologically, “*ecology*,” like all words, is itself rooted in practical language games. The Greek root *logia/logos* originally comes from the proto-Indo-European root “*leg*,” which meant to pick out, or to collect, especially associated with collecting wood and bundling sticks. (“Lignin,” the scientific name for wood fibers, is related.) Later, the word apparently became associated with picking out words, and perhaps “collecting things,” in a sense, *with* words. “*Logos*” owes part of the semantic power it accrued to the fact that somewhere along the way it became a word for “word.” And as such it tells us something about words, ideas, and truths themselves: they are collectivities made of collectivities, and intrinsically connected to our moving, bending, walking bodies. This is the insight Derridean deconstruction performs. Ecology, as the *logos* of the environment, is not made up out of thin air, but neither will it ever build (or synthesize) a solid edifice from scratch, from bare facts, from incontestable laws and principles. Ecology, like all discourses, is ultimately an unrefereed game played within a shifting and intervening background. Ecologists are in the business of taking apart and recollecting words and things, and ecological knowledge can

always be reconfigured no matter how tightly it is bundled. Ecologists, in other words, are tinkerers.

As such, ecology is a subversive science, but not in the way it was first understood to be by figures like Muir, Leopold, and Naess. And in this regard, environmentalism's expectations of science need to be critically re-examined. Scientific ecology cannot provide the answers to environmentalism's ethical dilemmas in the way that Leopold's famous allegory suggests. But this does not mean that ethics and aesthetics can or should ever be separated from environmental practice and discourse. Michael Crichton famously criticized environmentalism for being a religion.<sup>55</sup> And indeed, the examination of ecocritical practices this dissertation has undertaken bears out Crichton's critique in a certain way. We have seen how different attempts to practically perfect our subjective relationship to the non-human world easily become practical analogues of a discourse of truth and falsity and reproduce a particular conception of capital "N" Nature that can readily anchor dogmatic notions of conversion, salvation, essentialism, righteousness, and heresy. But Crichton simply reproduces the dogmatism he attacks by suggesting instead that environmentalism "should be a science." In fact, environmentalism is and should remain intricately entangled both with scientific practice and discourse and with ethics, politics, art, and religion. Environmental science, even the subversive, relational science of ecology, is incapable of ultimately answering the normative questions out of which it partly arose and into which it ever further entangles

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<sup>55</sup> Michael Crichton made this statement during his "Remarks to the Commonwealth Club," San Francisco, September 15, 2003.

us. And yet scientific ecology is not merely an instrument of ethics; its ongoing practices of negotiating these corporeal and conceptual entanglements are also and at the same time productive of affects and attachments that can be crucial for environmental ethics.

Kantian philosophy has become representative of the idea that to be faithful to reason we must think ethics, science, and aesthetics in rigorous isolation from one another. From this perspective--which may or may not be truly faithful to Kant's own understanding of the matter--the ethical action happens wholly in the purity of the intellect, in the reasoned realization and dispassionate application of the moral law. Kantian ethics is a laboratory ethics--a purely mental precipitate--a clarified spirit of the highest proof distilled and isolated from the messy witch's brew of embodied experience. It is a kind of ethic that awaits the realization of the Right as a eureka! moment--a crystal bullet of morality between the eyes. But even in Kant's own time, philosophers such as Hume, Smith, Rousseau, and Schiller were suggesting that such conceptual separations were unproductive, even empirically unsupported. On this opposing view, good and bad acts issue from virtuous or ignoble dispositions, which entail good and bad affective states. Such dispositions and affects, moreover, are cultivated through prior action and experience.

The importance of critical praxis in the history of environmentalism that this dissertation has highlighted implies this same critique of the rarefied Kantian image of ethical action. The Foucaultian notion of care of the self on which this analysis has drawn suggests that finding better *styles* of action, thought, and practice may be more

important for environmental ethics than finding a principle or axiom to guide deliberate actions. If care of the self is an ethical pursuit, then the moment of ethical action is not primarily in an instant of realization, nor even the consistent application of a moral principle. Rather, ethics happens in the ongoing conscious transformation through embodied practices of layers of experience in ways that fashion and modulate the relations that compose one's life--generating deeper wellsprings of generosity, for example, or opening ourselves outward to new, more encompassing "fields" of ethical regard. Science itself has a role to play in environmental ethics so understood. Not by discovering or proving a sociobiological basis for ethical feelings toward nature, as E. O. Wilson would do, and not by revealing a transcendent order that demands to be upheld, as Leopold's allegory suggests, but simply by multiplying and intensifying affective connectivity. For this we need a certain style of science, a tinkerer's style of science.

*Conclusion; a tinkerer's environmentalism*

This exploration of the affective and ethical dimension of scientific practice helps us to discern a similarity between Leopoldian deep ecology and the modes of ecological praxis examined in the preceding chapters. In each case, a particular mode of practice and experience is figured as a means of accessing the truth of non-human nature--of bringing the subject and the object into a perfected correspondence. In other words, each is an ecocritical practice elevated to the status of an alethurgic form. Thoreau's peripatetic

asceticism attaches the ideal of immaculate perception to the particular experience of the walking body, whereas for Heidegger “work” was the essentially human mode of practice to which a philosophical ideal of authentic “seeing-as” was anchored. Leopoldian deep ecology goes straight for the source of truth, so to speak. It looks for a pure presence within the phenomenal world that would ground perception and ensure an ethically clarified vision. It requires a metaphysical physicality, a transcendental immanence. But rather than the body, it looks to the Mountain, and for good measure ties it to the absolute event of death--the death of a wolf. And rather than the slow work of an ongoing practice of the self, here is an instantaneous conversion experience. In Leopold’s allegory we have the ghostly outline--or better, the material approximation--of an abstract transcendental Kantian formula, imported into the immanent “field” of experience as an embodied conversion experience that reveals an axiomatic ethical truth.

My critique of Leopold’s essay is aimed at illustrating these theoretical connections. It does so, however, at the risk of doing some injustice to Leopold’s broader thought. This one short essay does not exhaust the richness of Leopold’s thinking. (And in any case I would hasten to add that *Thinking Like a Mountain* has done more political good than harm.) For one thing, as we have seen, Leopold himself suggested tinkering as a model of ecological practice, writing elsewhere in *A Sand County Almanac*, “To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering” (1949, 190). In this brief precautionary statement, Leopold diverges from his injunction to think like a mountain. With a little bracketing of authorial intent, we could in this way read into



Leopold's seminal text two very different ways of approaching environmental ethics and practice.

But then, perhaps the difference between the imagery of tinkering and the imagery of the mountain in *A Sand County Almanac* is less a tension than a productive juxtaposition. Leopold's career rode the tail end of the "wilderness craze," which had gripped U.S. popular culture in the early twentieth century, during which time "preservationists" had distinguished themselves sharply from "conservationists." But Leopold marked an important shift away from this schism in the burgeoning environmental movement. He did not repeat the anthropocentric conservationism of his mentor Gifford Pichot. But neither did he follow in Muir's footsteps by seeking rapture in the loneliest wildernesses. Instead, Leopold bought a used-up Sand County farm and made a hobby of restoring its fertility and biodiversity. As William Cronon has pointed out, Leopold was the first prominent voice in the early American conservation movement to suggest that humans, through a careful kind of agricultural practice, could actually make the land healthier.

Cronon suggests that Leopold was showing that humans could, in a certain sense, make the land *more* wild (Cronon in Hott and Garey 1991). In this sense Leopold departed not only from conservationism but also from preservationism, and he is the predecessor of Wendell Berry as much as he is of deep ecology. It is in this pivotal capacity that we see Leopold the intelligent tinkerer. And Leopold the tinkerer, I claim, has more of value for contemporary environmental thought than Leopold the medium of

the omniscient mountain. Ecology since Leopold's time has increasingly suggested tinkering as a model of the evolutionary processes of species and ecosystems, and even of individual organisms. Nature itself, as the cellular biologist François Jacob famously observed, "is a tinkerer and not an inventor" (1977). In this sense the messy imperfections of the tinkerer's projects, the eternal confusion of ends and means, the lack of a total plan or a clear beginning or endpoint, would in fact be the apogee of biomimicry. Rather than thinking like a mountain we should tinker like a tundra.

An environmental ethics that embraced tinkering would challenge the nativism that persists in both popular environmentalism and scientific ecology. It would entail less hostility, for example, to the presence of exotic species such as the Burmese pythons currently "invading" the everglades after a recent hurricane liberated several pet specimens from their cages. Rather than seeing the pythons as pathogenic pests ruining an otherwise beautiful ecosystem, we might admire their adaptability and their remarkable predatory prowess. Instead of asking whether they "belong" here, we might ask: what remarkable things can they do here? And what interesting and valuable things can be done with them? How might we adjust our own practices to their presence? This would be the practical ecology of "invasivores."<sup>56</sup> Do they taste good? A python's skin is one of the wonders of nature: strong, elastic, and exquisitely beautiful. Perhaps Florida's Parks Department should be marketing python shoes and handbags.

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<sup>56</sup> Lisa Province, "Tastes Like Chicken: Landers Takes Bite Out of Invasive Species." *The Hook*, March 14, 2013 <http://www.readthehook.com/109235/eating-aliens-invasivore-landers-serves-em>

However, embracing tinkering as an ecocritical practice is not just about biomimicry. It is not simply a matter of more faithfully obeying the dictates of a now better-understood nature. It calls for more creativity than that. It entails not so much looking for new dictates from nature as cultivating different ideals and different passions, and thus a different ethics. If pythons need to be hunted to control their numbers for the sake of other species, they need not be pursued in a spirit of revulsion with the goal of eradication. Wildlife officials in any case already recognize eradication to be an impossible goal in this case. Hunters might pursue them instead in a spirit of admiration and respect--not only for their status as fellow sentient creatures, but also for their extraordinary capacities, functions, and abilities--for the creepy excellence with which they have infested the southern tip of Florida. Traffickers and keepers of pet pythons have been harshly criticized for their role in creating Florida's feral python population, but a tinkerer's ecological ethic would be more closely allied to the snake enthusiasts' fascination than to the official revulsion of many conservation ecologists.

A tinkerer's environmentalism suggests not just a different kind of environmental movement, but also a different way of thinking about what a "movement" is and can be. As I have tried to show, environmental movements, while they are not determined once and for all by a material substructure, are also more than just cultural discourses. Attending closely to the discourse of ecology, for example, we have found in this chapter that it is certainly not discourse all the way down. Instead we find assemblages composed of concepts like the climax community; feelings like biophilia or solidarity

with a mountain, a bioregion, or a species; and practices such as walking a rock outcrop or seeking a particular association between fungi and plants on an uninhabited coastline. When such diverse elements begin to fold in with one another and resonate together, sometimes we call it a “movement.” But we get a better handle on such “movements” with William Connolly’s term “resonance machines,” which is inspired by Deleuze’s “assemblage” concept. Connolly’s terminology highlights the dynamism and the heterogeneous components--ideational, affective, corporeal, material, et cetera--of which such movements are composed, but precisely does *not* entail the idea of mechanistic predictability. As Connolly writes, “diverse elements infiltrate into the others, metabolizing into a moving complex—Causation as resonance between elements that become fused together to a considerable degree. Here causality, as relations of dependence between separate factors, morphs into energized complexities of mutual imbrication and interinvolvement, in which heretofore unconnected or loosely associated elements fold, bend, blend, emulsify, and dissolve into each other, forging a qualitative assemblage resistant to classical models of explanation” (2005, 870). And yet, while such “movements” are unpredictable and resistant to control, “resonance machine” also signals a certain fragility, an openness to experimentation, a need for constant maintenance, for tinkering.<sup>57</sup> As Connolly tells us, we need resonance machines. And anyway they can no more be uprooted from politics

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<sup>57</sup> See Connolly 2008. Similarly, Deleuze, in his book on Foucault, calls attention to assemblages composed of discourses like medical criminology and “visibilities” such as prisons, clinics, bodies, incarceration practices, and so forth. In *Foucault*, he refers to these as “strata or historical formations.” Deleuze was purposefully inconsistent in his terminology. He wanted his concepts to drift, so to speak.

than pythons can be eradicated from the Everglades. But we don't want our resonance machines to become black boxes, or juggernauts. The usefulness of such terminology, and the point of the analysis this dissertation has pursued, lies in helping to keep these resonance machines "open source"--keeping movements like agrarian environmentalism or deep ecology open to creative manipulations and transformations.

Still, we might wonder whether in the particular case of environmental movements it is wise take inspiration from the practical aesthetics and affects of tinkering. Would such a movement cease to be "environmental" in an important sense? Would it amount to a celebration of artificial objects, places, and systems, which lack precisely the life-sustaining capacities of the natural systems of the Earth? In fact, we need an ethical and aesthetic orientation that embraces the machinic aspects of "nature" as well as the sense in which mystery and otherness persists in the artificial. But here it is important to distinguish the "machine" of tinkering from the clockwork, deterministic machinery on which Enlightenment philosophers modeled the cosmos. The tinkerer's machine is more accurately a "contraption." Contraptions are unduly complex, imperfect, and precarious. They operate at a far remove from optimal efficiency, incorporating frivolous, excessive, and eccentric elements. They are fragile to the point of being dangerous. The origins of the word "contraption" are appropriately obscure, but it seems to have incorporated "trap," which smuggles in a sense of deception, danger, and tipping points. And yet a contraption's workings are a wonder to behold--a functionality that seems to magically emerge, greater than the sum of its cobbled-together parts.

If we saw the things we have come to call “natural” such as watersheds, forests, mountains, and organisms as contraptions, we would see more, not less, of their beauty, complexity, mystery, and excellence. This perspective should lead us to value places, things, and systems that are wild or natural only to a limited or compromised extent, and yet are nonetheless ecologically valuable. And perhaps even more importantly, it should also lead us to value more greatly places like the tops of coal-bearing mountains, even if they render no discernible “ecosystem services,” or creatures like the endangered mission blue butterfly of California. Even if they prove in the end *not* to be somehow a crucial part of an integral “land organism” or “community of life.”

The challenge for environmental ethics in the contemporary world is to love nature even when it isn't natural in the ways we have been accustomed to presuming. Perhaps no one captures this dilemma more beautifully than Finnish photographer Ikka Halso in his “Museum of Nature” series, in which he negotiates the juxtaposition of natural and the artificial environments by imagining desperate attempts to remedy ecological damage with massive structures of steel, concrete, and glass. In one triptych a vast half-completed atrium stretches over a river in a picturesque northern wilderness. In another image a copse of trees stands alone in a dark barren tundra, housed within a steel skeleton complete with artificial lighting and some sort of attempted ventilation system.



fig. 1. “Kitka River Triptych” by Ikka Halso



fig 2. “Museum 1” by Ikka Halso

Halso's images seem to be a dark vision of the future. The half-built structures convey a sense of nature controlled, surveilled, and surrounded--a totally envired environment. And yet it is not clear in these images whether the human artifice is in the process of being constructed, signaling an impending regime of total control, or rather decaying, abandoned mid-way--an eleventh hour failure by an eco-cidal race. But whether you see in Halso's images the ultimate demise of nature or the demise of the human and the triumph of nature, either interpretation draws upon the poignancy of the inimical juxtaposition between the made and the natural that has been such a prominent feature of environmental ethics and aesthetics. To view these images with a tinkerer's eye, however, is to resolve some of the tension that gives them their aesthetic force. From this perspective there is a third story Halso's images might tell, not of the death of humanity and not of the death of nature, but rather of the end of both a hubristic technological optimism and an idealized natural state. Not a middle way, but a third path. Rather than being revolted by the desecration of nature, or elevated by the dark beauty of its post-human resurgence, the challenge for ecological ethics today is to find such techno-natural landscapes as inviting as any pastoral retreat and as sublime as any virgin wilderness. It is a challenge for tinkerers.

*the end*



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