

Herbert Marcuse, Subjectivity and how Eco-Narrative can Provide New Pathways of Education

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### Abstract:

My project examines how Herbert Marcuse's notion of subjectivity can create a space in narrative fiction to read the relationship between humanity and the environment with an ecocritical lens. I then advocate for a reimagining of narrative fiction's role in environmental education, and discuss how these understandings can be turned into praxis. The two texts I explore are Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o *A Grain of Wheat* and *The Lamp at Noon* by Sinclair Ross. These texts present two different yet related narrative stories in which people collide with the natural world, and in this relationship there are significant opportunities to expand our own understanding of environmental subjectivity. I delve into the space where humanity and nature meet, and what it means to consider nature as the *other*, independently of humanity's wants and desires. Marcuse provides a theoretical yet active perspective of radical subjectivity, and this allows these narratives to inform on how to build a more equitable relationship with the environment.

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## Backgrounding My Project

Humans have been telling and sharing stories of the natural world for as long as we have existed. Today, as the world rapidly approaches climate Armageddon, it is more important than ever that our stories and narratives positively and purposefully shape our interactions with the world. Rebecca Solnit writes that “we pretend that life like art has plots and we know how the story ends... and we often err not on the side of caution but on the side of conventionality: the future will look like the present” (*n.pag*). She is referencing many of the classic stories we already know, especially those fairy tales in which a happy outcome is pre-ordained from the beginning. Solnit argues those who are content with the present lack foresight into our future, arguing that “the present only looks that way to those who ignore the past... reminders of how often destiny hangs by a thread and turns on a dime” (*n.pag*). Solnit is pushing forward the idea that we need to disrupt the cultural obsession with uninterrupted growth, and instead refocus on a world more concerned with the future than a hedonistic present. In a climate crisis what stories do we need and not need? Many of these stories have already been written, and it is necessary and appropriate that we look to writers and craftsmen to tell the truth about who we are and where we can go. Important thinkers and writers have created the tools through which society can understand where we are, but they must be understood and utilized effectively if we are to partake in a radical re-imagining of our relationship with the environment and the future. Arthur Frank writes, “stories animate human life; that is their work. Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work on people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoiding (3). It’s crucial here to see stories are never linear, but multidimensional and multifaceted. In animating the lives we lead they necessarily have differentiated and complex significance, but that is what makes them worth knowing and sharing. Stories are more than just passive lessons, they can be an animating force and powerful beyond measure. Thomas King tells us that “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2). It is human nature to craft narrative, and King is very aware that we learn about our past through the stories passed down through our ancestors. Technology has changed many of the ways we interact and understand these stories, but they still remain the sum of our worldly experience.

Thousands of pages and untold hours of media airtime have been spent explaining the ecological crisis humanity is in. There is no longer any significant or serious intellectual debate

on the cause, and while the pedantic commentators will always be able to nitpick through the details, the harsh reality of our situation is burning more brightly every day. We need to reckon with the knowledge that our current trajectory is neither sustainable nor equitable. As international climate accords fail to reign in polluters and IPCC reports predict ever more dire calamity, our window for fundamentally altering the trajectory of climate change is narrowing. It seems unlikely that national governments will turn off the carbon economy tomorrow, and the scale of the problem can be overwhelmingly daunting when considered from an individual perspective. What can one person, or even one country, do in the face of the litany of issues that must be addressed? It is so much that many of the most vocal environmental proponents concede that much has already been lost, and that imagining the future must include visions of the world that looks very different from the one we know now. We are currently experiencing a crisis of imagination, where we struggle to even visualize a path remarkably different from the one currently taken. The crisis is both one of optics and a lack of action, and overwhelming when considered through an isolated, individual lens.

To even consider the problem of climate change is an enormous one. Life has existed on Earth long before humans began to record history, and the magnitude of our current moment seems lost when considered against the massive ecosystems and ecological timelines humanity's actions have disrupted. A sense of eco-nihilism can begin to form as we consider not just the actions we need to take, but the disruption that has already occurred to millions of years of life on the planet. Dipesh Chakrabarty helps to define this problem in his work *The Climate of History: Four Theses*. He writes about the work of considering deep history, and its importance to the task of truly understanding our climate crisis. He argues "The task of placing, historically, the crisis of climate change thus requires us to bring together intellectual formations that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital" (213). This is a seemingly impossible challenge, and on its face is one in which the parameters to solve it can seem ridiculously out of reach. However, in outlining the scope of the problem Chakrabarty does provide an important pathway. These narratives of the past can be a way of understanding our future, of building a sense of hope and optimism into our climate narrative. If humanity can find the crux of the tension between our now and the past, we can then start to think about what it means to move towards something

new. Katie Ritson describes Ghosh's plea as "an appeal to the human imagination to grapple with the scale and the vocabulary of geological time" (461). Ritson sees in Ghosh's challenge a solution – the human imagination and ability to weave together different epochs to craft a coherent narrative that can be understood across generations. Past histories and criticism of our modern world can come together through these imaginative worlds, stories that humans construct and maintain to better understand and tackle the environmental problems we face.

It is important to recognize that the climate crisis does not unfold in a linear way. In a sense it moves slowly and unevenly, where it can seem like nothing changes until everything changes all at once. Consider the significant increase in the severity and danger of forest fires in California, or the hurricanes strengthened by the warming of ocean waters. It is not that these things did not exist before global heating, but that their power, severity and human toll are all increased by the unconstrained burning of fossil fuels. Rob Nixon describes humanity's actions as perpetuating a type of violence, one not defined by its immediacy but by its longevity and consistency. In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, he defines slow violence as "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Essentially, slow violence functions in a way that is not immediately visible, yet still maintains many of the characteristics of the immediate violence witnessed in our everyday lives. As such, it is much easier to ignore, and Nixon's concept suggests that this type of violence is not being communicated effectively, which allows it to continue unchecked. He is correct in noting that "casualties from slow violence are, moreover, out of sync not only with our narrative and media expectations but also with the swift seasons of electoral change" (9). There are a couple important points to extrapolate from the situation Nixon describes. Firstly, that our understanding of environmental degradation is severely limited when viewed through the familiar media landscape and political lens. The 24 hour news cycle and immediacy of the political problems we face prevent a full reckoning with our rapidly approaching future. Secondly, Nixon makes clear that something else is needed, that a new way of observing and understanding the world around us is necessary in order to fully and completely confront the problems of which we are now faced.

Referring to Nixon's concept of slow violence, Natalia Cecire notes that "Nixon links temporality to one of the central tropes of environmental discourse, that of innocence and

responsibility” (166). This insight helps situate Nixon’s concept of slow violence as a material and active part of environmental discourse and provides insight into how environmental literature manages the intermingling of temporality and responsibility. A neoliberal society focused on the immediate success of the individual is necessarily blind to the slow violence of environmental degradation. An individual innocence can be plausibly claimed when we consider ourselves as independent actors, removed from the processes that lead to a polluted and warming world. When decisions made in the present are separated from future consequences the violence our society exerts on the future becomes blurred or ignored, with devastating consequences. Nixon’s framing of this issue as slow violence gives us an opportunity to consider our actions in relation to other humans, and the environment that we live in.

What Nixon refers to as “slow violence” is related to the "environmental generational amnesia" (2017) that Professor Peter Khan identifies. Khan's term is used to be specific about the understanding each generation has of their environment, and the psychological conditions necessary to understand the world in which they live. Khan argues that each generation "can recognize only the ecological changes its members witness during their lifetimes" (2017). He is arguing that as a people we can only remember what we have seen, and that our understanding of the world is first shaped by our own experience of it. Things such as pollution are only understood to exist through one's own reference points, and so as generations pass on those reference points can be lost with them. Another reference point is needed to properly assess the ongoing damage to the environment, one that can transcend generations and create communal touchpoints that reach back into history and bring it to the present. This is especially true for young people, who both lack the historical experience but also upon which a significant onus has been placed to be the catalyst for change. In considering our fate upon this planet, T.S. Eliot warns us that “this is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but with a whimper” (1925). He is writing of men who are unable to see their sins and errors until it is too late, people who can only consider the consequences of their actions once those consequences are fully upon them. Understanding how to bring knowledge through generations is crucial to avoiding this fate, especially so if humanity desires even the option to “rage against the dying of the light” (1951).

Nixon’s work again can be illuminating, because he believes that in order to properly understand the climate crisis we must coalesce those seemingly random and inexhaustible



images or evidence to better understand our position in the world. Nixon argues that “To confront slow violence requires, then, that we plot and give shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time” (10). This can be done through stories and narrative, both new and old. There is certainly potential to craft new stories and elevate new voices, but my project focuses on re-imagining and better understanding stories already written, ones that deal with the environment but in which a more clear theoretical lens can “give shape to the formless threats” humanity faces. Nixon continues that “In this cultural milieu, the intergenerational aftermath becomes a harder sell. So to render slow violence visible requires, among other things, redefining speed” (11). Stories can do this by removing the reader from the linear nature of an ongoing life and transport them to another world, making visible the totality of the environment and our impact on it. To impact the speed and lens at which we see this world requires an outside force, something beyond scientific facts and science and associated apocalyptic narratives that seek to pummel us into submission. It is one thing to acknowledge the climate truth, and another to understand its real, lived impact and how we can still arrest and reverse the significant changes we are having on the planet. Stories can be this tool by redefining what the speed and time of the planet mean in a way that can break through those generational barriers and give readers the tools to render the violence we inflict on the environment visible. Nixon also touches on another important point here, that through this understanding we can use stories to avoid a homogenizing lens, one that imposes a categorial sense of our world. To escape and resist a slow violence also means to acknowledge the lived reality of different ways of life, as well as acknowledging climate change will affect us all differently. Understanding these formless threats means we can also work to understand their impacts, and approach solutions in an equitable way.

Why narrative? In considering avenues through which people can assess their relationship with the environment and a larger cultural attitude, narrative fiction, I believe, is a crucial and important tool. Sciences provide important information and are not to be discarded, nor is the world of non-fiction texts and the increasingly growing canon of immersive reporting and political thoughts. However, narrative has the power to immerse us in worlds, viewed through the lens of a person or culture different from what is taken for granted. Facts and figures can be read and understood, and powerful arguments crafted through the political book or essay. But narrative has the power to transform, to immerse the reader in their world viewed through a

different lens, with the power to compel emotion and feeling that can become a call to action. We live in an overwhelming consumer culture, with a daily emphasis on consumption and a hedonistic view of the self. Knowing the damage wrought by our actions is not enough – one must be exposed to alternative ways of knowing, of approaches and attitudes to the environment that offer authentic and immersive alternatives to the one world we live in. Narrative text can do this, can show us characters, peoples and worlds that more equitable and sustainable live as well as clearly demonstrating the consequences of Western culture’s current way of life.

As is probably clear by now, this paper is being framed from my own Western, male perspective. In referencing the “we” who have contributed so much to our global crisis and current ecopolitical stake, it should be clear who is and who is not responsible. Our dominant political ideology has shaped the discourse I am entering into even as I try to make suggestions for new ways of considering the ecological world. I hope to be explicit that the pathways I want to contribute to are neither culturally nor pedagogically mine and approach the work with an intended spirit of humility and deference to those who have written previously and have the lived experience I do not. This includes those whose personal stories are reflected in the texts I have chosen, and whose lives have been damaged by the privileges those of us in the West have enjoyed.

Often the stories we share begin through the lens of the individual, and environmental narratives can be no different. The post-apocalyptic narrative produced today usually showcases the consequences of environmental degradation as viewed through an individual’s experience, missing the wider lessons of humanity’s interactions with the planet. David Wallace-Wells, in paraphrasing Amitav Ghosh, argues that “the dilemmas and dramas of climate change are simply incompatible with the kinds of stories we tell about ourselves, especially in conventional novels, which tend to end with uplift and hope and to emphasize the journey of an individual conscience, rather than the miasma of social fate” (146-147). Wallace-Wells highlights two important points here: that much of our narrative lives involve the examination of how one person feels or does; and, that stories that enter the cultural space generally manage to find their way to a positive end, one that can often undercut or disrupt the importance of the message contained within.

The centering of the individual conscience within contemporary environmental fiction is a popular choice, especially in an era that rightly places significant import on celebrating the

individuality and nuance of cultures and peoples previously ignored or marginalized. However, an additional frame is needed, one that searches out answers to the “miasma of social fate” (147) that Wallace-Wells points out is so pivotal. Better critical tools are needed to begin this exploration, especially a theoretical underpinning that encourages a view that looks beyond the individual to the collective nature of the world. What these tools look like is still being decided, but it is clear that the current approach is not working. I want to posit that narrative story can play an important role in influencing our climate struggle, both to shine new light on seemingly intractable problems, but also to provide real and tangible emotion to the conversation.

However, the stories on their own are only part of the puzzle. The lesson and mores of these narratives must be understood through a theoretical practice grounded in disrupting dominant discourses in order to discover and deepen our understanding. Narrative fiction is a crucial tool in this search, because through storytelling common ideas and passions can be developed cross-culturally and, when taught with an equitable lens, reach far beyond the fact-finding discourses of the science. Ranciere’s discussion of the “distribution of the sensible” (12) is helpful here, as he positions narrative as an active tool that can redistribute an understanding of what the possibilities for our future are and make more equitable the possibilities that can be acted upon in the future. Ranciere argues that “the question of fiction is first a question regarding the distribution of places” (13), and he continues that the aesthetics of narrative can “disturb the clear partition of identities, activities and spaces” (13). This is an important and crucial task for eco-narrative, that they work towards disturbing the partitions and barriers that have been erected to separate and homogenize the lived experiences of human beings. Without ignoring the complicity of the many who participate in enforcing these barriers (whether actively or passively), we can use Ranciere’s understanding of fiction as a way to reframe our world. Critical theory can provide a pathway into understanding the novel and does so in a way that both offers clear critiques but also potential solutions and pathways forward. Herbert Marcuse has put forth considerable effort into developing modes of critical inquiry into the structures that uphold our social lives, and Ranciere’s support of narrative as a way forward connects closely to Marcuse’s critical understanding of the structures that encompass the world. Marcuse provides the framework we need, and Ranciere offers hope that narrative can be a way to reimagine and redistribute the ethos of our modern life.

In my first chapter I will examine the history of ecological narrative and establish a working definition of the ecohumanities. My goal is to ground myself in this burgeoning field and provide the context for how my paper contributes to this field. I will examine the ways in which the earth has been written about in the past, and specifically focus on how a literature and writing that touches on environmental relationships has been taught and understood. In order to properly position my own project I'll specifically delve into other texts and the ways in which they have been understood and show the space in which I believe my own analysis of my two texts can help deepen understanding and cast new light on previously underserved texts.

My second chapter will use Herbert Marcuse's notion of subjectivity to establish the tools and areas of focus for my textual analysis. Marcuse's canon is diverse and multi-layered, and I will look to pull out specific threads of his philosophy that deal with education and how we can understand ecological narratives and texts that consider humanity's relationship with the environment.

My two subsequent chapters will examine Ngugi Wa Thaingo's *A Grain of Wheat*, and Sinclair Ross's short story *The Lamp at Noon*. *AGOW* is a rich text with multiple areas of exploration, but my paper will focus specifically on the ecological piece, using his story to highlight a Western, settler relationship to the land and, crucially, what this imposition means for those who already inhabit and live in these communities. Ngugi's characters navigate their relationship with their land both during and after British colonialism, and the story offers an important lens into how a relationship with the earth is built, maintained, endangered and recovered. Ross's scope is much smaller than Ngugi's, and a close reading of this text provides an introspective look into a small family trying futilely to tame their land and impose their will upon it. While Ross considers only a single family at a moment in time, it allows for a closer look at the hubris of those who seek to conquer instead of coexist and showcases what happens when the earth will no longer cede to the will of humanity.

In the forthcoming chapters I will explore the questions: What is the role of narrative fiction in bridging the gaps in understanding between humans and the world in which we inhabit? How can critical theory, and specifically a Marcusean understanding of subjectivity, allow us to bridge these gaps? How can these understandings be treated in education as a motivating force for action?

## Chapter 1: Outlining Narrative Literature in the Ecohumanities

My project takes place in a growing but relatively new space, one in which the arts and science intersect, or rather collide, with several inherent contradictions at play. This space is exciting but can be limited by a fictional narrative and scientific focus, one in which the two sides find themselves clearly delineated and unwilling to break down boundaries to see what may be produced. Speaking in 1959, C.P. Snow outlines the problem as such: “Non-scientists have a rooted impression that the scientists are shallowly optimistic, unaware of man’s condition. On the other hand, the scientists believe the literary intellectuals are totally lacking in foresight, peculiarly unconcerned with their brother men, in a deep sense anti-intellectual, anxious to restrict both art and thought to the existential movement” (5-6). The distance described here seems great, even overwhelmingly so. Snow speaks of what he knows, and as both a writer and physical chemist he was particularly attuned to the gulf between the two sides.

Narrative studies have been a bit slow on the uptake of responding to the environmental crisis. Often there is a disconnect between our earthly reality and the hallowed halls of the university English departments. Faculties have been accused, with some justification, of sacrificing engagement and criticism of narrative environmental fiction by continuing to separate the prose from a lived reality. Cheryl Glotfelty argued in 1996 that “until very recently there has been no sign that the institution of literary studies has even been aware of the environmental crisis” (xvi). She explains that there have been no academic jobs or faculty positions available in the field, no conferences or journals, and not even a coherent set of terms through which a budding environmental criticism student could orient themselves. Things have progressed since then, but environmental humanities and ecocriticism are still a budding field with plenty of opportunity for strong contributions.

### **Where Has Ecological Writing Come From?**

In looking to the past, we can understand the pathways that have led to our current cultural state, and specifically the narrative tone that has exemplified our larger attitude towards relationships between humanity and nature. Much of the written work that has entered the English canon presents nature as a feminine, matriarchal figure, the prototypical “Mother Nature” that graciously and generously provides for the enterprising colonial project. Annette

Kolodny writes of the American<sup>1</sup> fantasy of nature as “a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine... the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification – enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose and painless and integral satisfaction” (171). Kolodny has effectively identified a crucial tenet of Western attitude towards nature, that it has appropriated femininity to position the dearth as an entity from which it can take and take, with the understanding that this is both expected and rewarding for both parties. Lorriane Code supports Kolodny’s reading as she writes that “Epistemologically, the instituted social imaginary of the early-twenty-first-century affluent white western world holds in place a view of the appropriate human relation to the natural world as one of a spectator consciousness standing outside and apart from the world” (19). Code is helpful here in two ways: she correctly positions a spectral view as a privileged white gaze, and that this viewpoint of “Mother Nature” places humans as fully conscious but standing outside and removed from our planet. This motherly gaze is not one of mutual respect and love, but in which the matronly figure gives and provides without reciprocity, in total subservience to those who take. Code is clear that a white, Eurocentric gaze deliberately positions itself to avoid any shame or guilt from taking and even desecrating the land, for there is no entity to be angry, only an emotionless mother ready to give more. In her footnotes Kolodny notes the important influence of Herbert Marcuse’s work with Freudian analysis in *Eros and Civilization* to develop this idea that a patriarchal Western culture views its relationship with nature through a partly psychoanalytical lens. As much as Marcuse has taken Freud’s work to address important aspects of Marxian thought, Kolodny is demonstrating here how an understanding of Freudian commentary on Western culture can explain the feminine ideology represented in narrative ecological works. It is the principle of ownership that Kolodny identifies that is very prevalent throughout early ecological writing back to the Bible, that the earth exists in order to feed and nurture humans above all else.

Kolodny traces this feminine sense of ecological imagination through the colonizing of North America and argues for its centrality in understanding the colonial project. She writes that “[c]olonization brought with it an inevitable paradox: the success of settlement depended on the

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<sup>1</sup> This is specific to an American audience, but I feel can translate easily to be understood as a Canadian cultural norm as well.

ability to master the land, transform the virgin territories into something else” (174). She is highlighting here the paradox that while the colonial project viewed the earth as a feminine and selflessly generous land, the colonizers framed and achieved success through their ability to bring the land to heel, to extract and make use of the many riches found on the heretofore untouched wilderness. Kolodny continues that the paradox of this instinctual drive is “embedded in the fantasy, which had first impelled men to emigrate, now impelled them both to continue pursuing the fantasy in daily life, and, when that failed, to codify it as part of the culture’s shared dream life, through art” (174). Through this analysis we have a base from which to understand how narrative has often informed and illuminated the Western cultural relationship with nature. It is one embedded in a paradox of patriarchy and domination, where an extractive sense of ownership overtakes and inevitably displaces a flawed feminine ideal. As this living experiment is carried out on the continent it is reflected more perfectly in artistic expression, where the messy reality cannot intervene. It is from this sense of knowing that ecocriticism is both necessary and important, to lift up those texts which challenge this naturalised narrative and provide different ways of talking, thinking, storying and living with the world.

Colonizers who emigrated from their land to bring to heel a new place often did so with an understanding that they had legal ability and moral obligation to do so. They were not ignorant to the peoples who inhabited the lands they desired but considered their goals of a higher order and much greater import than the local ways of living they encountered. This “fantasy” that Kolodny illuminates often centered around the concept of *terra nullius*, meaning the land they encountered was free and unclaimed, theirs to do with what they wished. This sense of unclaimed land existed even with clear knowledge of Indigenous peoples already living there – as philosopher John Locke makes clear: “left to nature, without any improvement, tillage or husbandry, a thousand acres yield the needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniences of life as ten acres of equally fertile land in Devonshire” (Chp V, 2<sup>nd</sup> Treatise). Locke posits that ownership and husbandry of land confer an ownership over it, and this ownership is necessarily good for the increased value which the land can produce. Locke’s second error is the assumption that land existing without obvious manipulation or extraction is “left to nature.” This error is a grievous one, for it assumes that the land must have remained untouched, and thus ignores and erases the significant interconnected relationships between humans and land that have existed for centuries outside a colonizing, extractive mindset. Hale Hendlin points out that even today,

“[C]onservationists who mistakenly ascribe to the mutually exclusive human-nature dualism and attempt to conserve land free of human intervention actually uphold a romantic notion of a moment in ecological time” (155). Conservationists and colonists alike continue to mistakenly assume that land is either pristine terra nullius or owned and manipulated, when there are other ways of living that interact and support a positive human-nature relationship without desecration or destruction. To escape a paradox of patriarchy or domination we must do away with our sense of ownership over the land, no matter whether for conservation or extraction. Harmony should be our new goal, one that has been modeled by human societies for centuries and thus well within our power should we choose to move towards it.

As the danger and damages of climate change become more and more real, there has been a stronger push for fictional, story-telling narrative to take its place as a driving force for change. There can no longer be a separation from stories about nature and stories about humans, as the immediacy of the problems erases the lines between two once separate entities. Glen A. Love addresses “our tendency to postpone or relegate to lesser priority ecological considerations” (229), and that this failure represents a “narrowly anthropomorphic view of what is consequential in life” (229). What is needed is a literary discourse that acknowledges the primacy of ecological considerations in literature, where the relationality of people and nature is addressed equally with human relationships. It is not as if the narratives do not exist – Love makes the obvious comparison that Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, which has little to no ecological considerations, is taught routinely in high school and higher education, while his Pulitzer Prize winner *The Old Man and the Sea*, which has strong eco-narrative pathways, is rarely taught. As will become clear with my project, a significant hurdle is not that the literature does not exist, but that it is not being considered in a way that allows for a more robust consideration and reflection of ecological understandings. Love is optimistic about the potential for our still budding field, suggesting that “the potential significance of such an awareness for the reinterpretation and reformation of the literary canon could be far greater than any critical movement which we have seen thus far” (235-236). Love’s enthusiasm here can be shared and emulated, even if the more cynical among us see some hyperbole in his metaphorical call to arms.

Whatever one’s view of Love’s choice of language, it should be acknowledged he raises an important point. The literary canon has already been written, but we must do the work of



reinterpretation and reformation in order to properly contextualize the ecological works that have been written. What is now crucial is the “how,” namely how we read these stories and with what purpose and intention. This is not to say that there is no new space, on the contrary, as our ecological crisis deepens it will be even more important for new voices and ways of understanding to come forth and be recognized. But it is also true that much has been written already, and that we need to more seriously consider the lens through which we view these works and what they can tell us about our relationship with the world. It is this path that Love argues for the “necessity for a new ethic and aesthetic embracing the human and the natural – these may provide us with our best hope of recovering the lost social role of literary criticism” (237-238). By helping readers better access and understand the symbiosis between humans and the natural world, literature and literary criticism can become a space of discovery and provide political motivation towards a healthier future.

Significant amounts of ink have been used in the production of written work concerning humanity’s place in nature, and these past projects are important consider in situating where the environmental humanities are going. Henry David Thoreau was a pioneer in creating written work about his own experiences in nature, and his writing offers an opportunity to consider some important steps taken to situate humans as participants in nature instead of ruling over it. In his famous essay “Walking,” he writes of his desire “to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society” (*n.pag*). This is an important notion for its time, and still very relevant today. Thoreau, by suggesting that humans exists only as another creature on the planet instead of a ruling being, explicitly rejects the Judeo-Christian norm that humanity was placed on the earth by God to steward the earth for all. Not only does Thoreau position humanity as a “part and parcel” of nature, but he privileges that position over humanity’s place in society, suggesting that human existence and their social relationships do not hold any special privilege over other living things. This line of reasoning would have been especially important in relation to the prominent enlightenment thinkers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, many of whom argued that humanity’s reasoning and moral rectitude placed them at the top of the hierarchical order of living things.

As is clear from the title, Thoreau’s work finds its focal point in considering and extrapolating from the walks he takes around New England in the decades preceding the

American Civil War. He terms himself and other walkers as “faint hearted crusaders” (*n.pag*), because he and his kindred spirits engage in a type of adventure in which half their steps lead them back to where they have come from. Nevertheless, even in its faint heartedness Thoreau argues that to be in nature is to be a crusader, removed from society and existing as a kind of “fourth estate,” connecting only to the land. It is this sense of storytelling where we can see the seeds of environmental literature take root, as the human stories of the crusades are retold as men venturing forth into nature not to tame or control it, but to experience it.

### **Environmental Humanities Today**

A growing awareness of the anthropogenic age has infused narrative literature with a new purpose. While humans have been shaping the natural landscape and exerting power over the forces of nature for as long as we have been able, only recently have we come to understand the impact of our actions on the land and climate. I am looking to fit my project within the growing field of ecohumanities, in that I am concerned primarily with a pedagogical project that looks forward to the future of planet Earth and wants to add to a growing discourse of how humanity and humanities must reimagine and reorient our way of living. To borrow a definition of ecohumanities straight from the *Environmental Humanities* journal, the field “is grounded in an important tension between, on the one hand, the common critical focus of the humanities in ‘unsettling’ dominant narratives, and, on the other, the dire need for thoughtful and constructive practice in these dark times” (*n.pag*). My project addresses this tension by working to investigate how those dominant narratives are represented in literature and storytelling, and uses a critical lens, drawn from critical theory, to provide the tools for a constructive practice towards a more equitable future. If ecohumanities is the discourse into which this project attempts to enter, then ecocriticism can serve as a more precise definition of exactly what it examines. Glotfelty provides a clear explanation here, that “ecocriticism is the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). This simple definition belies the complexity of the relationship here, and the depth of an ecocritical potential to examine and understand what the narratives we create say about ourselves and the world. Glotfelty continues to provide some nuance to our understanding, noting that if we accept the reality of an interconnected world, “we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter and *ideas* interact” (xix). This

“aesthetic ether” is an important concept because my project is actively working against a sense that literature exists in a realm beyond the real. Books and stories provide an understanding of our culture and history, no matter their plot or setting. While some may be more explicitly political than others, ecocriticism as a practice exists in order to question and critique these narratives as they relate to the environment and the complex global system Glotfelty identifies.

Studying environmental narratives during the COVID-19 global pandemic can feel like an inefficient use of time. When the news brings new dread every day and the future appears to be moving further and further away, concerning oneself with ecological relationships can seem like a fanciful endeavour. However, answering the questions about what our future looks like is more important than ever, as out of this crisis emerges new opportunity. If there can be an honest reckoning of how humanity treats the environment, we can carve a future that will bring stability and prosperity the world over. Narrative fiction and its depictions of these relationships can be a key to this, as readers can explore and understand new ways of relating to the earth, and access tools to see the world as a subjective, independent entity. This understanding can serve as a catalyst for a reformation of human endeavours, from an attitude that sees dominance as good to an approach based in equity and understanding.

## Chapter 2: Herbert Marcuse & Subjectivity

Aldo Leopold, writing the *Sand County Almanac* in 1949, crafted the famous line that “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” (224). Writing even before Rachel Carson and *Silent Spring*, Leopold was on the forefront of a movement to consider nature as a subject, as a thing to be considered through its own lens, not the view of what financial value it can hold. This is the ecological position in which Marcuse enters the conversation, in consideration of subjects within the biotic community; a community comprised of all living things. We will see Marcuse’s consideration of what this means and provide some intellectual heft and important connections to the ideals of Leopold and his biotic community.

The works of Marcuse that I will focus on in this paper was written during the Vietnam war, first during his time teaching at Brandeis and then at UC San Diego (1954-1970). While he was influenced and even motivated by the protest and civil actions of the anti-war movement, his son Peter tells us that “his contribution was not particularly to marshal the arguments against the war, but rather to put it in a broader framework of developments in the economy of capitalism, in bourgeois democracy, and in the possible forms of resistance” (ii). Thus, we know that Marcuse intended to make his writings not for a particular moment in time, but to sustain a revolutionary politic beyond this moment. His was a contribution to an anti-capitalist framework, with an understanding the anti-war movement was only a small but significant piece in a larger puzzle. While Marcuse was a product of his time, we know that he wrote and taught with an eye towards the future, intending his work to surpass the boundaries of his generation.

Another important point when considering Marcuse in the world is how he interpreted his political work through the lens of education. Richard Kahn writes that Marcuse saw these anti-war protests as “an educational catalysts in the transformation of society” (80). Marcuse believed that the anti-war movement and larger civil rights struggle embodied many of the characteristics he believed were necessary for true societal change, and this impacted his views about where and through what cultural objects revolution could spark. Patrick O’Brien also supports this position, suggesting that “The various movements of the Sixties ... coupled with the worsening economic performance of the 1970s prompted Marcuse to alter his analysis of possible social transformation. He eventually perceived a greatly expanded base for possible revolutionary

agency that was to be found within the advanced industrial system” (157). O’Brien has taken Kahn’s argument one step further, noting that Marcuse adjusted his theoretical positions to account for revolutionary ideas that came from within dominant culture. His politics at this time began to ascribe more personal agency to individuals within a dominant capitalist culture, and he became less reliant on the intervention of outside forces to catalyze change. It is through this position that my work will argue for the place of narrative, with a Marcusean belief that political and societal change can occur from within the contradictions of bourgeois institutions.

In his later works Marcuse seemed to take a more pessimistic turn, lamenting the losses that have already occurred and qualifying some of his earlier absolutism. “There isn’t much wilderness left to preserve. But still we will try, nonetheless” (1979, 29). This statement would not have been out of place in any decade since Marcuse uttered it, and it highlights both the determination of the thinkers of the environmental movement and the large and powerful interests they are aligned against. Marcuse is also arguing for the moral correctness of his position, noting that the cause is just and worth fighting for, regardless of the losses sustained. The “try” is good and noble in and of itself, because of what it means for the world. To attempt to build a better world, even against challenging odds, is noble not just for the goal but for what it means. Living an ethic of environmental equity is to see the world as larger than oneself, to attempt to live for others by using one’s own resources to craft a world we can all live in. Marcuse is supporting that notion here, and it is a sense that is infused throughout his work.

An important distinction between Marcuse and an ideological predecessor of his, Karl Marx, is where they felt the influence needed for change would come from. Patrick O’Brien writes that “Marcuse was positing that this need for revolution is to be found in human consciousness, injecting a subjective element into Marxist revolutionary theory” (33). While Marcuse and Marx would both agree that the proletariat would greatly benefit from a dramatic reformation of the social order, Marcuse did not feel a working class revolt was inevitable, and the motivation for any movement would be based within human consciousness. Instead of an inevitable end of history in which the workers overthrow the factory owners, Marcuse recognized the importance of the subjective individual, who would need to make a conscious and active choice to begin a revolutionary movement. Especially in his early years as a theorist, “the early Marcuse is rejecting the dominant Marxist ideologies that posited the revolutionary subject

as an inevitable creation of capitalist economics and is attempting to draw attention to the need for a substantive change in consciousness needed within the individual” (O’Brien 34). Marcuse began his exploration of subjectivity with the understanding that revolution is not inevitable, and that a change must actively take place in the subject first. By understanding this he places value on the individual while at the same time an enormous amount of personal responsibility. It is from this base that he later considers the ecological implication of humanity’s subjective nature, and the need for active, conscious consideration of the world and political environment we live in.

### **Marcuse and Subjectivity**

Douglas Kellner outlines in the introduction of Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* Marcuse’s position about the characteristics of the one-dimensional man. Broadly, the one-dimensional man is the prototypical human representing the average adult participating in society. He writes that when Marcuse uses the phrasing “one-dimensional” he “describes practices that conform to pre-existing structures, norms and behaviour, in contrast to multi-dimensional discourse, which focuses on possibilities that transcend the established state of affairs” (xxvii). This is a crucial distinction, as we learn that for Marcuse, his view of the individual is a person who does not look beyond what they already know, what is already confirmed for them in their current reality. The person who accepts the status quo, who does not look beyond the boundaries of his life has only one dimension and is forever held by the boundaries in which they currently live. What Marcuse is hoping to push towards is a individual who operates in multiple dimensions, who can see the world not only for what it is, but what it could be.

Marcuse argues that in order to begin the process of liberation and actively engage with the subjectivity of others, we must first consider our own consciousness. He writes “Breaking through the administered consciousness is a precondition of liberation. Thought in contradiction must be capable of comprehending and expressing the new potentialities of a qualitatively different existence” (xxvii). He is arguing here that thought must be placed in contradiction to preconceived norms, and that an examination of one’s beliefs must include a consideration of what values we hold and what those values look like when considering the potential of a way of living. He prescribes that this “thought in contradiction must become more negative and more

utopian in opposition to the status quo” (xxiv). Interestingly Marcuse is arguing for a polarization of thought, one that both seeks out every ill in the current situation but every possibility for a world different than the one we know. This can be the basis for considering the subjectivity of others, as these ideas of utopia permit one to consider others, both human and non-human, outside of their commercial or extractive use.

Richard Kahn contextualizes Marcuse’s line of thinking, by connecting his beliefs around the exploration of thought with his larger project. He argues for Marcuse’s place within the discussion of “the relationship between advanced capitalist society and the manifestation of ecological crisis” (80-81), and his relevance was critical because of his and his Frankfurt School contemporaries work in “the search for new life sensibilities that would overcome the nature/culture dichotomy” (81). When Marcuse is searching for these “utopic ideals in opposition,” he is doing so in order to promote sensibilities that can lead to a more just and equal world. Marcuse is positioning himself against the dichotomy of culture dominating nature and questioning the roots of this dichotomy and our place in it can lead to new and important ways of motivating political and ecological action.

### **The One-Dimensional Man – Subjectivity, Objectivity and Nature**

An important aspect of Marcuse’s work for my project is his consideration of culture and technology, as technological advances have considerable influence over the way in which we lead our lives both physically and spiritually. As people we are physically distancing ourselves from the world in which we live, and the technological ability we have to control the environment necessarily separates us from having to consider land and other living things as anything other than extractive resources to be taken. Marcuse writes “long before technological man and technological nature emerged as the objects of rational control and calculation, the mind was made susceptible to abstract generalization (142 – One-Dimensional Man). Marcuse is arguing that our current relationships to technology and power are only recent developments in our culture, ones developed as technology and growth have been more privileged and centralized in our modes of living. He continues that previously, “Distinction was made between the universal, calculable ‘objective’ and the particular, incalculable subjective dimension of thought” (142 – One-Dimensional Man). Marcuse is laying out the pathway in which the one-dimensional human is formed, how a person ends up existing in a world where they cannot see beyond the

boundaries of where they currently are. He believes that the thought processes came first, even before the objects and materials of the world were considered. He follows an Aristotelian logic, that distinctions in thought created two separate spaces, where objective and subjective thought were considered independently. Thoughts and ideas that could not be immediately quantified, that were ‘incalculable,’ were differentiated from a universal, objective truth through which the world was understood. Marcuse believes it is this line of reasoning that led to the objectification of ‘technological man and technological nature,’ in that our own thought processes created an intellectual atmosphere in which our natural world had to be quantified through a scientific and rational language.

Marcuse identifies how humanity has come to understand nature in scientific terms and details the consequences of this definition. “The quantification of nature, which led to its explication in terms of mathematical structures, separated reality from all inherent ends” (150). Marcuse identifies that nature is understood through a logical chain of reasoning, in line with his earlier point that reasoning has led to an objectification of nature, which he termed as ‘technological nature.’ He continues that this line of reasoning “separated the true from the good, science from ethics” (151). This is especially important in its relationship to my work here, in that a separation of ethics and morality from a development of our scientific understanding and progress has led to the climate crisis we face today. Marcuse’s words ring as true today as they did when he wrote them, in that scientific progress for its own sake, divorced from ethics and a search for the good, has alienated and divorced people from the opportunity to live in true harmony with nature and the natural world.

Marcuse deals directly with humanity’s relationship with nature, and states in clear terms the current view of how humanity relates to the world. He writes “The science of nature develops under the *technological a priori* which projects nature as potential instrumentality, stuff of control and organization” (157). Marcuse is saying that viewing nature as simply an instrument or tool for humans to use is a necessary logical conclusion from the technological and scientific view of the world humanity has created. The sense of control and organization is borne out of a mindset that allows for no other way of viewing things, no alternative presentation that could exist. Viewing the natural world through a scientific lens means that humans cannot see the



subjectivity of this world and can only view these ecosystems through an objective set of scientific calculations.

As Marcuse continues this argument, he connects the objectification of nature to its consequences for humanity. When humans only view nature through means which can be accurately quantified, there are significant implications for humanity's place in the world. Marcuse writes that "while science freed nature from inherent ends and stripped matter of all but quantifiable qualities, society freed men from the 'natural' hierarchy of personal dependence and related them to each other in accordance with quantifiable qualities – namely, as units of abstract labour power, calculable in units of time" (160-161). Marcuse is explicitly following a Marxian argument here – that man, stripped of his opportunity to operate as a free agent in the world, now relates to fellow humans through the labour and capital that they can provide. In the same way that science categorized and quantified nature through things that could be measured, human society has taken the same approach to human relationships. Marcuse believes that this is not an accident, but a direct consequences of the thought processes involved in reaching these conclusions.

Marcuse felt that conflict and injustice were in inevitable feature of his current world, and that the systems in place flourished not despite these factors but because of them. He argued that "Peace as a form of life presupposes a *radical transformation* of the system of felt needs that has become a decisive factor in the stabilization, cohesion and reproduction of the aggressive society. This then really means a radical transformation of *human nature*" (168). In valuing peace but not transforming human nature, people inevitably reproduce the systems in which they suffer. He continues that we must consider "how one treats oneself, others and things on the basis of this primordial experience – as materials for domination having exchange value, or as a subjects, part and parcel of a pacified world" (168). This is the actionable ideal of holding thoughts in contradiction, in understanding the absolute negativity of the consequences of our actions now, while also being able to view the world for what it can be. Marcuse sees all of this as being governed by the arrangement of a certain human nature, and this radical transformation will happen only when a true consideration of our current dichotomy takes place.

### **Marcuse Theory and Environmentalism – Implications and Pathway into Texts**

Marcuse was a pre-eminent thinker of the Frankfurt School, and his contribution to the field of critical theory deserves a thorough examination as it pertains to the world we live in today. Marcuse and his Frankfurt contemporaries promoted a vision of the world that examined its very structure, and Marcuse pushed for a reimagining of the world we live in. His theory is especially pertinent for me for a couple of reasons. Firstly, he spoke directly about humanity's relationship to nature, and why the extractive practices and attitude of domination and control harm the planet and our opportunities for fulfilling lives. He wrote that "the organization of nature ... offers great capacity for control, but 'deprives man from finding himself in nature, beyond and this side of alienation'" (244). Marcuse's notion is important for my project here, because it provides a setting in which we can understand that through humanity's attempts to control nature, we have built a dynamic in which people are alienated from the world they live in. It is not just that the organization and alienation of nature are connected, but that it is the very act of attempting to organize and control that creates alienation.

David Macauley highlights that Marcuse is building and revising the works of Marx and Freud here, as Marcuse is building a position "where external nature is treated as a subject and inner nature freed from psychic repression" (14). The nature Macauley speaks of is everything that exists beyond the self, which includes all life that exists beyond the self. For Marcuse it was crucial to understand that external nature must be treated as a subject with its own agency. This is similar to his position that one's own agency must be developed from within, not built through relationships with current cultural trends. Living things and the ecosystems in which they exist can be treated as subject in order to more fully understand the individual self. That freedom from psychological repression comes when considering the world not in relation to oneself, but for what it is and the multitudes it contains.

People cannot find themselves in nature because they are in a position of dominance over it, and this positionality must be discarded if we are to commune and engage with nature in a non-hierarchical relationship. Marcuse continues that this alienation "also prevents him from recognizing nature as a *subject* in its own right, a subject with which to live in the common universe" (244). This sense of seeing nature not as an object to be used by a subject with which we can relate is crucial, as it asks for a reimagining of the way in which we currently relate to the world. If humanity can see nature as having value and worth in and of itself, then the alienation

currently experienced can be replaced by a more communal understanding of our relationship with the world.

Charles Reitz supports this position, and clarifies Marcuse's position on the connection between the liberation of nature and the liberation of man. He writes that for Marcuse, "the restoration of nature depends upon human liberation; both are blocked within the established framework" (166 – Ecology and Revolution). It is not possible to liberate one without the other, and that it is humans that will lead the way forward. The framework or structure that imposes its will must be removed, both for humanity's sake as well as the liberation of nature. Reitz supports that idea that Marcuse saw these actions as intrinsically linked, and that it was impossible to do one without the other. David Macauley supports this summary as well, stating that Marcuse's final position on this subject would be that "the liberation of human and nonhuman nature are inextricably bound and that the nonhuman nature is a subject in its own right which must be honoured" (195). Humanity must liberate nature not just because it is a by-product of our own revolution, but because Marcuse considers nature to be a subject in and of itself, which we can honour and dignify through inclusion in a struggle against capitalist structures.

Marcuse's work is particularly important because he examined specifically the connections between the domination of capitalist ideology and the domination of nature. He wrote that "the pollution of air and water, the noise, the encroachment of industry and commerce on open natural space have the physical weight of enslavement; imprisonment" (61). Here he connects the domination of our natural world with the sense that it envelops all of us, by seeking to position ourselves in charge of the world humanity has only created a self-imposed prison from which we cannot escape. This is a prison constructed by our culture, and a desire to impose commerce and industrialization on a subject we currently view as an object. He continues that "the struggle against them [enslavement; imprisonment] is a political struggle, it is obvious to what extent the violation of nature is inseparable from the economy of capitalism" (61). Marcuse assumes that this connection between political struggle and the violation of nature can be understood and uses this basis to move forward in an examination of why social theory must focus on this particular intersection. For Marcuse we are struggling against an enslavement brought about by culture and societal structure, and crucially for my project, one that includes domination of nature as well.

Marcuse continues by arguing that while nature cannot have intention for itself, nature can be a tool in which humanity achieves its own liberation. He states that “there are forces in nature which have been distorted and suppressed – forces which could support and enhance the liberation of man” (66). Humans have taken nature and used it as a tool for commerce and capitalism, instead of viewing the natural world as a place to support and enhance our own liberation. There is an important distinction here that Marcuse places humanity’s liberation as the goal, with the understanding that we must no longer attempt to subjugate and control nature if we are to achieve our own liberation. Thus, we are not seeking to reshape our relationship with nature for its own sake, but in order to support a more perfect world where there is harmony among people and the natural world in which they live.

Even beyond a sense of revolting against economic capitalism, Marcuse holds that humanity’s liberation must be tied to a sense of freedom for nature as well. Liberation cannot be achieved simply through a reformation of the transactional relationships between people but must include the natural world in its liberation. He writes that “no free society is imaginable which does not, under its ‘regulative idea of reason’ make the concerted effort to reduce consistently the suffering which man imposes on the animal world” (68). Here again is the notion that humans must consider nature and other species who share this planet as subjects, not as objects which can be used or tools in which we can promote ourselves. Marcuse extends the work of Marx here, imagine the worker’s rights and responsibilities as extending beyond their economic output to suggest a new way of relating to the world. His appeal to reason is important as well, as this theme is expressed consistently throughout his work. Importantly, he does not immediately call for a complete cessation of meat eating or an immediate end to actions that make use of the environment, only that the continuation of these activities be based on a new platform that reduces harm and considers nature for its own sake.

Marcuse rejects a teleology of nature and advocates for a historical concept, one which “conceive[s] of nature as subject-object: as a *cosmos* with its own potentialities, necessities and chances” and that this has the potential to act as “bearers of *objective values*” (69). Nature is independent of humanity’s desire for it, and thus should be considered as a subject to consider. Marcuse is also arguing for the understanding that nature can contain its own values, which are crucially different than humanity imposing objective values on it. Reading meaning into the

behaviour of nature would be an imposition of values, and instead we must consider nature for what it is, not what we want it to be. He continues that the violation of nature offends “certain objective *qualities* of nature” (69), and that it is through “such objective grounds that the liberation for man to his own humane faculties is linked to the liberation of nature – that ‘truth’ is attributable to nature ... in an existential sense” (69). Marcuse is suggesting that we can find a truth about nature, and thus a truth about ourselves, in understanding the real existence of nature, of knowing nature for what it is, not as something for humanity to master. He believes we must understand its qualities as objects unto themselves, and thus we can pave the way for our own liberation.

I argue that a thread can be woven between Marcuse’s view about the relationship between humanity and nature and his understanding of subjectivity, and that this subjectivity can be used as a framework from which to learn a radical, oppositional politic through literary narratives. Douglas Keller writes that the position of Marcuse was “to call for a reconstructive concept of subjectivity and agency in the face of theoretical critique and practical fragmentation and dissipation” (93). Marcuse was aware of the dangers of denying agency to a concept of subjectivity, as well as fragmenting a subject into unknown pieces. He instead “always attempted to ground his conception of radical subjectivity in existing struggles, movements, and tendencies. He was aware that oppositional subjectivity, and the movements and revolts in which it was grounded, were fragile, subject to dispersion and defeat, or absorption and cooptation” (94). This oppositional subjectivity is formed through an understanding of one’s place in the world, and Marcuse wanted this subject placed in opposition to the totalizing tendencies of the capitalist world. This included understanding how consumption based approaches to the environment impacted these structures, and the importance of building a subjectivity to acknowledge and actively engage with these environmental concerns.

### **On Education**

Charles Reitz writes that for Marcuse, “art and philosophy can, by virtue of their admittedly elitist critical distance, oppose an oppressive status quo and *telos* by which to guide personal growth and emancipatory social practice” (230). The critical distance of art is very important for Marcuse because space is required from which to view an object or artwork through a critical lens. In literature this space is in the characters and narrative that are created,

through worlds created that share significant similarities with our own but are never exactly the same. It is in this space that they can inform and teach against the oppressive status quo Marcuse was acutely aware of.

Reitz is a supporter of a Marcusean approach to education, arguing that "the crisis of educational theory today requires a transformation of the frayed academic credo of liberation through the arts into a more philosophically and sociologically advanced form of critical theory of the sort constructed by Marcuse" (241). Reitz is outlining the position that simply reading through the canonical works and exposing oneself to the humanities is not enough. A philosophy and theory are needed, one that can provide the tools to view these works in a new way. Liberation does not happen through exposure, but through the effort put in when using the proper tools. Reitz continues that "educational philosophy must be set free from any tendency to reduce it to an ahistorical enterprise. Both art and society must be understood historically" (241). We cannot separate art and literature from place they take in history, and must put an active, concerted effort in to view these things within their historical contexts. To read a book as a tool of liberation and revolution the reader needs to understand the context of these stories and be able to use the critical theory that Marcuse and his contemporaries have developed to move beyond a rote and simplified understanding of the stories and narratives these books can tell.

### Chapter 3: *A Grain of Wheat* through an Ecopolitical Lens

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* is one of his seminal works, widely considered a classic of African Literature. Thiong'o shares the story of the Gĩkũyũ people and their struggle for freedom under British rule, focusing on the choices and challenges made during the revolution. Ngugi's novel jumps back and forth between the present and the recent past, exploring actions taken by the Kenyan people to free themselves from colonial rule, and how individual actions impact and transform different members of the Gĩkũyũ people. Ngugi wrote the text in 1967 while completing his postdoctoral work at Leeds University in England and updated *A Grain of Wheat* in early 1980's – it is this version of the text that I will be using here. Ngugi was heavily influenced by his recent study of Marx and Franz Fanon and wove this background theory together with his understanding of Gikuyu culture and history (Dhar 174). Thus, his characters often encounter each other and their political situation through a Marxian lens, informed by Fanon's important contributions and with influence of specific Gikuyu cultural mores. Ngugi writes with a sense of history, “which becomes the very fabric in which lives are woven in a complex intermingling” (Dhar 175). Dhar helps contextualize Ngugi's text as a product of a complex culture, one that has both existed for millennia and is active and vibrant beyond the timeline of the book. The lives lived on the page are not static, but representative of a lived experience of Gikuyu culture.

This novel is about many things, but the relationship between the Gikuyu people and their land is central to understanding their struggle against British rule and the importance of home and place. Revolution and self-government are addressed as issues of owning and stewarding their land, the land that Gikuyu people have held for millennia. Continually, characters draw strength from specific places and important environmental relationships, and Ngugi also provides a vivid picture of the consequences of land alienation. As much as the text provides clear examples of how colonial projects can sever the relationships between land and people, it also provides support for the idea that these severed relationships are not permanently extinct. As the novel progresses there is a push and pull explored through Ngugi's narrative voice, as the story continually shifts between the present day and the recent history of the Gikuyu's suffering under British rule. This allows the reader to contrast actions of healing and

disruption throughout the novel and explore how the relationship between individuals and society with their land is built and forged, but also dismantled and disrupted.

To understand the context of the book, I turn to former President of Kenya Jomo Kenyatta, himself a member of the Gikuyu tribe. He writes that,

“The Gikuyu people depend entirely on land. It supplies them with the material needs of life, through which spiritual and mental contentment is achieved. Communion with the ancestral spirits is perpetuated through contact with the soil in which the ancestors of the tribe lay buried. The Gikuyu consider the earth as the ‘mother’ of the tribe... but it is the soil that feeds the children through lifetime; and again after death it is the soil that nurses the spirits for eternity. Thus the earth is the most sacred thing above all that dwell in or on it. Among the Gikuyu the soil is especially honoured, and an everlasting oath is to swear by the earth (*koirugo*)” (21).

Kenyatta has beautifully touched on a number of important points here. The land does supply material needs, but also the spiritual and mental contentment of the people. It is more than just an extractive resource, but a place through which all the needs of life are sustained, including those needs to access ancestors who have left the physical world. The soil does not just grow food but sustains generations and is needed even before birth and after death. It is eternal, the “everlasting oath” sworn by the people is to live in harmony and protect the land out of respect, honour and mutual understanding. It is in this sense in which Ngugi writes *AGOW*, and these themes will be well represented within Ngugi’s text.

### **Analyzing the Text**

*A Grain of Wheat* begins with an introduction to Mugo, a young man alone in his hut and considering his memories of the past. The reader meets him *in medias res*, as “he felt hollow. There were no crops on the land and what with the dried-up weeds, gakaraku, mivege, mikengeria, bangi – and the sun, the country appeared sick and dull” (6). Immediately Mugo’s feeling of hollowness connects him to his land, and thus the feeling of his entire country. The reader can sense the emotion flow through Mugo, into the land and end up reflecting the mood of Kenya as it enters a new era. This symbiosis with the land is important because it provides insight into how the reader can understand Mugo, gain insight into his character and learn to understand his subjectivities and their impacts on the land around him.



Mugo continues to play with dirt in his hut, running it through his hands and playing with it as he considers his plans for the early morning. He is preparing himself for the day by becoming acquainted with the environment around him, and he pauses to ask himself: “where was the fascination he used to find in the soil before the emergency” (6)? The emergency Mugo is referencing is the Mau Mau Uprising, fought between the Mau Mau (also known as the KFLA, the Kenya Land and Freedom Army<sup>2</sup>) and the British colonial army. The war for freedom from colonial rule has disturbed Mugo’s relationship with his environment. The political rule forced upon him, and his countrymen has disturbed the Gikuyu cultures, and in this space is an opportunity for understanding how a reorientation to less extractive relationships can be recovered, rebuilt and expanded. The disconnect between humans and the environment is portrayed through Mugo in the same way that Marcuse suggests. Mugo and his community maintain a healthy, symbiotic relationship, and have done so for generations. When a new, authoritarian order is imposed by a colonizing power, this relationship is degraded in real and meaningful ways.

Connections to the land and understanding its subjectivity and place in a political struggle is crucial to the story. Byron Caminero-Santangelo writes that for Ngũgĩ’s characters, their bond with the soil is based on “familial love and identification, rather than on private ownership” (159). By integrating their land and forest as part of a familial understanding, the Gikuyu tribe in the story is able to actively assemble colonial uprising. Caminero-Santangelo continues that “a revitalized and healthy new nation requires a model of development based less on technological and economic growth and on mastery, and more on an ethics of care and responsibility rooted in re-established bonds within communities and between people and the land” (159). What is crucial about this approach to development ethics is that it is centered around community and land. Caminero-Santangelo wants the reader to know that this new model of nation building is not just between people with the land and environment in the background, but one in which those relationships between people and place are brought to the forefront. A new model of development is needed, and through reading and understanding the subjectivity of these characters and their relationship with the environment a politic and new ethic can be understood.

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<sup>2</sup> Note the direct reference to Land in the revolutionary army’s name. An important distinction that they fought for the right to rule their own land as well as to govern themselves.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, there are clear differences between way that local Kenyans perceive their relationships to the land and the way in which British colonizers do. There is the obvious truth that the British conquered Kenya and other African lands to expand their empire and build wealth, but the way in which they do so is important as well. Describing a history of colonization at the beginning of the narrative, Ngugi writes that “the missionary centres hatched new leaders; they refused to eat the good things of Pharaoh: instead, they chose to cut grass and make bricks with the other children” (12). These missionary centres are implanting a new way of relating to the earth, cutting the grass to change the composition of the fields, and making bricks for new, permanent buildings not seen in the lands before colonizers arrived. The British colonial project is inextricably linked to colonizing the land itself, demonstrating the distortion and suppression of nature Marcuse discusses. Marcuse argues that “there are forces in nature which have been distorted and suppressed – forces which could support and enhance the liberation of man” (66). Ngugi’s narrator reflects that truth here, demonstrating how the British missionaries distort the natural ebb and flow of Kenyan life to insert and impose their own understanding and belief systems. This imposition creates an unnatural hierarchy that marginalizes the Kenyan people and their way of life.

As the British continue to impose their will on the Kenyan people, a leader of the initial resistance, Waiyaki, is executed by the British, buried alive “with his head facing the centre of the earth” (12). The British have used the earth for a sense of their own symbolism, facing Waiyaki towards a Christian hell because he would not be a willing, obedient subject. However, even in this crime there are signs of a continued resistance. As the narrator considers this symbolism, they note that at the time “nobody noticed it; but looking back we can see that Waiyaki’s blood contained within it a seed, a grain, which gave birth to a movement whose main strength thereafter sprang from a bond with the soil” (12). Here is a clear example of the environmental, natural forces which can enhance the liberation of the Kenyan people. Waiyaki’s blood contains the grain necessary for revolution and resistance, something that cannot be removed no matter what horrors the British subject him to. The seed, his intimate connection to his Kenyan homeland, will not be taken from him, and even in death will continue to support the liberation of his people.

Kihikia, a leader of the resistance movement and husband of Mumbi, is renowned among his people for his bravery and sacrifice in the name of freedom. He is described as having many gifts, and the people from his village look to him for leadership and advice. He leads the Movement from the jungle and is described as the leader who could “compel thunder from heaven” and “the man who compelled trees and mountains to move” (16). The people see powerful relationship with the land and the environment, not in his domination of it but his ability to compel it to his will. His bravery and leadership are described through his relationship with earth, his ability to convince the land to side with him and the Kenyan people in the fight against the colonial power. Again, Marcuse’s argument that that forces of nature can support liberation is directly tied to Kihikia’s leadership. His leadership is intertwined with nature, Kihikia can compel both humans and nature and lead them in opposition to an oppressive force.

Ngugi’s work also allows for an opportunity to understand the relationship between the Gikuyu tribespeople and the individuals representing the British state in Africa. John Thompson is a British administrator, outwardly civil but clearly see himself as playing an important role in pacifying and civilizing the tribes of Africa. Within the text are glimpses of his personal papers, in which he writes impressions of the land: “*Nyeri is full of mountains, hills and deep valleys covered with impenetrable forests. These primordial trees have always awed primitive minds. The darkness and mystery of the forest, have led him (the primitive man) to magic and ritual*” (54). The British impression of Kenya is exactly as Marcuse suggests, when he believes we must consider “how one treats oneself, others and things on the basis of this primordial experience – as materials for domination having exchange value, or as a subjects, part and parcel of a pacified world” (1968). Marcuse asks us to consider our relationship to the land, but Thompson dismisses the potential relationship between Kenyans and their environment. Thompson sees the connection to the land that the locals have but dismisses it as “primitive,” something to be overcome. Thompson parrots the language of Marcuse in framing the trees as “primordial,” which Marcuse explains leads to a viewpoint of assessing the landscape for its value, not its subjectivity. People who are awed by the beauty and depth of the forest are considered primitive by the British representative, engaging in magic and ritual that he dismisses without further consideration. Thompson is judging the Kenyan people as “primitive” because the way they relate to the land differs from his own and believes that an Enlightenment sensibility and appeal

to reason are to be privileged over an understanding of the subjectivity of nature. Thompson believes the local population to be mystified and led by the land, fundamentally misunderstanding the relationship. He does not see the commune between those who live the land and those the land itself, in fact he sees the Kenyans failure to dominate their land as an example of their primitiveness, not for what it is – a more equitable and sustainable way of living. The hubris of believing humanity's relationship with nature is a hierarchical one is exposed through the character Thompson, and thus the folly and failure soon to come in the text illustrate the consequences of this mistake.

The British authorities also take significant interest in the scientific opportunities available to them in a new land. Their attitudes make it clear they consider Africa to be ripe for discovery, discounting the local knowledge of the world with an eagerness to apply the scientific method to lands foreign to them. Mr. Rogers is one of the first British men to arrive to the area, eager to set up the Forestry Research station, for “Githima and the thick forest, like an evil spirit, possessed him” (33). The language of possession speaks to the British relationship with the land, to either possess it or to be possessed. There is a clear duality of good and evil, Mr. Rogers feeling possessed by an evil spirit that imposes on him through the same relationality he wishes to impose science on the land. He is later killed by a train, though his Forestry station is set up as part of a new colonial development plan (33). This station exists to impose order and development on the land, to remove the evil spirit that British ideology imposes upon the trees. Later, as John Thompson worries about his lab at the station being abandoned as the British are leaving the area, he imagines the encroachment of nature back onto his work stations. He imagines “test-tubes and beakers would be broken or lie unwashed on the cement, the hot-houses and seed-beds strewn with wild plants and the other bush which had been carefully hemmed, would gradually creep into a litter-filled compound” (41). Thompson's nightmare is a scene of the scientific process disrupted by the imposition of nature, with beakers meant to divine secrets left dirty and broken. It is especially ironic that he fears for his seed beds and growing space. He imagines they will continue to allow for plant growth, but not the type of growth he feels is desirable or worthwhile – a disorganized, *natural* growth from which a person can discern no meaning, nor impose any order.

The colonizers see the earth as acting upon them, and that they are passive participants in the world in which they live. Margery, the wife of Thompson feels the effects of her environment, believing that she is a victim of the African weather. “No, maybe I’m growing old. They say the African heat does these things to women” (49). Margery feels the environment acting upon her and believes it to be a negative force. She places the impact as an objective value, acting upon women to age the prematurely. She is specific that it is the African heat, falling into a familiar territory for the colonizer characters that they are victimized by the country they seek to conquer.

In contrast to the attitudes of the colonizing British, the Kenyans see a permanency in their environment: Ngugi’s narration demonstrates the view of the environment through a clear lens: “Then, as now, Thabai Ridge sloped gently from the high ground on the west into a small plain on which Reng’ei Trading Centre stood” (69). The Thabai Ridge is unmoved through strife and conflict, standing in history and the present, “then, as now.” Ngugi shows that this ridge is an immovable object, existing before the British entered the land and continuing until they handed sovereignty back to its rightful inhabitants. Ngugi places the land as central to the experience of living in Kenya and trading at the Reng’ei Trading Centre, that one must follow the ridge and the land to lead to a community space. The land exists not to support commerce, but in connection to it, as a connected but separate place. Marcuse, like Ngugi’s narrator here, rejects a teleology of nature and advocates for a historical concept, one which “conceive[s] of nature as subject-object: as a *cosmos* with its own potentialities, necessities and chances” and that this has the potential to act as “bearers of *objective values*” (69). Ngugi’s narrator places the ridge within this permanent space, noting that the Thabai Ridge exists throughout time and is independent of the buildings constructed by humans. The ridge exists independently of humanity’s interventions and civilizations, a backdrop upon which infinite possibilities can unfold.

The recognition of the earth’s relationships is also present as we see the story of Gikonyo and Mumbi and their story of falling in love. As the two sit together and create music, “Thabai, earth, heaven felt their unity. Then suddenly her heart was whipped up, she now rode on strange waves: alone defying the desert and the rain; alone fighting hunger and thirst in the desert; alone, struggling with strange demons in the forest, bringing glad tidings to her people” (77). Gikonyo

and Mumbi are not acting on a passive environment, but it is a world, their world, that feels them. There is no metaphor here, only a truth that they interact with the environment on equal terms, a stark contrast to Margery and her feeling of victimization. A cosmos with its own potential can feel the love of those who share in it, and Gikonyo and Mumbi demonstrates that vividly. Mumbi does not simply feel like she is riding strange waves through the desert, she is *doing* it, acting with her environment in an equal relationship. This is the type of relationship Marcuse argues for, one which acknowledges the subjectivity of the earth, with opportunities to understand its fullest potential. Note the timeline through which this passage is written: first, earth and heaven feel the unity of this couple, and then Mumbi's heart is electrified, connected through the common land ancestry her and Gikonyo share. A Marcusean reading invites reflection on why this is important, that an important connection is built in communion with their environment, and only made possible through their relationships as part of the earth. Ngugi does not write to use the land as imagery or simile, but to demonstrate a direct connection. The space is built on the basis of a shared natural environment, one that responds to Mumbi and Gikonyo in the same way that they flourish through it.

Throughout the novel we see flashbacks to characters past lives. Kihika is giving a speech in which he argues for freedom from colonial rule and a return to collective ownership of Kenyan land. Bluntly talking about the reason for revolution, Kihika says "This soil belongs to Kenyan people. Nobody has the right to sell or buy it. It is our mother and we her children are all equal before her. She is our common inheritance" (96). Kihika sees a familial relationship between the Kenyan people and the land, especially the soil. He places the soil as the patriarch, birthing the Kenyan people into a state of equality. He is very clear that the sense of ownership is not the type of ownership in which one can buy or sell the land, but a stewardship that can be passed down from generation to generation. The soil does not belong to any one person, but to the children who are birthed from it. Marcuse would agree with this idea that land belongs to peoples, not individuals, and from it derive the motivation for Kihikia's leadership and rebellion against colonial forces. Kihika clearly spells out why he chooses to act, and for Marcuse this can demonstrate how human consciousness can connect and reconnect with the world. Kihikia expresses a sentiment related to Marcuse's view that rebellion against capitalism and colonialism

is intertwined with nature, and that the righteous will be infused with a sense of environmentalism and relationship with the land.

After his release from prison, Gikonyo sees that Mumbi has had a child with another man, and his communion and bond with her has been broken by his friend. Gikonyo is broken emotionally, and this is reflected as he looks to his natural surroundings for relief. However, as he goes to sleep, he hopes “daylight would show the way. But the sun did not bring relief” (114). This is a clear example of how a disconnection between these two displaces Gikonyo relationship with nature as well. Gikonyo was forced away from Mumbi through colonial practices, and the split in his relationship means that he can no longer relate to the sun as he was once able. He hopes that the sun can lead him as it has done in the past but finds no relief. Without the upheaval caused by the British he would not have left Mumbi and would have been able to have a child with Mumbi and take his place within the family. The disconnect between Gikonyo and nature happens in the same way that Marcuse writes of – when familial bonds break down our relationship with nature breaks down as well. Just as colonialism is an expression of capitalism, the family bonds it ruptures impact Gikonyo’s relationship with the earth. In breaking these bonds, we see the impact of Marcuse’s point, that we must focus on community building and equity in conjunction with a more positive relationship with the earth.

This disconnection extends to the African shops as well, broken by the economic and social upheaval. Gikonyo travels through the streets and sees in the Rung’ei trading centre “tall grass and wild bush clambered around the walls of the rusty buildings and covered the ground that was once the marketplace” (115). The trading centre no longer exists in communion with the land but is being overtaken by it. A previously vibrant centre of commerce has been abandoned, and nature has moved in. As Gikonyo moves around the ruins “whenever anything touched him, shrubs or grass, Gikonyo would start and shiver” (115). Gikonyo no longer feels at ease in his land, instead is scared and afraid of what would have previously been familiar. He appears to be exhibiting stress related to his imprisonment and betrayal by Mumbi, contributing to his alienation from plant life that was once welcome and familiar.

Later in the novel, the leadership in the village, led by General R., plot the unveiling of the traitor they believe is responsible for Kihika’s death. They believe it to be Karanja, who is

said to have exposed Kihika to the colonial police. Mumbi is aware of the plan to kill Karanja, however she has misgivings about it. She thinks “[s]urely enough blood has already been shed: why add more guilt to the land” (176). Her concern is not that they are about to accuse an innocent man, but that to do so will lead to his death and further damage the people’s relationship with the land. She is demonstrating her awareness of the relationship between their tribe’s actions and what the land must hold. She is clear that adding guilt to the individual parties also adds guilt to the land, and this connection makes her hesitant and concerned about what may come from this action.

As people sing at the ceremony where Mugo is to speak, in remembrance of Kihika, their voices lift up the suffering that has been imposed on them: “they recreated history, giving it life through the words and voices: land alienation... conscription of labour into the white-man’s land” (214). Ngugi injects a Marxian ethic into the sorrow of the people, demonstrating their awareness of the alienation between themselves and their land. Ngugi centralizes the land in their struggle against colonialism, that the land was taken away from them and created an alienating place. It is not just that people were forcibly moved off their land, but that the stewardship and guardianship of their farms and cities was taken from them and given to the British rulers. The voices singing here recognize the centrality of living in communion with the environment, and what it means to have connection with where you live. They do not want to be reconnected for economic reasons, but because the connection between the people and soil is what feeds the culture of the people. Ngugi gives a narrative voice to a Marcusean notion, that the Gĩkũyũ people are now alienated from relations with their land as they are supplanted by capitalist relationships of ownership on land they view through a familial and communal lens.

General R. is speaking to the crowd at the ceremony, and his words also support the people singing and expressing their sorrow. He explains to the crowd: “We get Uhuru today. But what’s the meaning of ‘Uhuru’? It is contained in the name of our Movement: Land and Freedom” (216-217). Land and the freedom to exist are paramount in the mind of the general, and interconnected. A person cannot have one without the other. He continues “Tomorrow we shall ask: where is the land? Where is the food” (217). Kihika explained earlier that the land and soil are the mother of the people, and the general is reminding the people that this relationship is



central to their freedom. They fought the British for the rights to their own country, and General R. is clear that thus freedom must continue to be acknowledged and valued.

The General and the other leaders call upon the traitor to reveal himself, but they and the crowd are shocked after Mugo announces himself to have betrayed Kihika. Mugo walks away and the crowd disperses in shock, stunned into a temporary submission. However, community violence begins later, as squabbles and arguments reveal themselves because true justice has not been served. It later begins to rain, “but when the rain later it fell, did not break the violence” (220). In times of pain or violence, the people disconnect from their environment and land, just as earlier when Gikonyo was not guided by the sunlight after his argument with Mumbi. Again, disruption in the community has broken a connection to nature, as the rain fails to mediate the violence taking place. This demonstrates that nature does not exist as an elixir to the pain and suffering of Kenyans and is only able support a community in harmony. The rains will come down regardless of the mood of the country, but that mood will impact the relationship and reciprocity with the people and their world.

### **Outside Considerations**

Dustin Crowley provides support for the notion that ideas of place and geographically centered texts can be an important sight of building and examining theories of ecocriticism. He writes that “geography provides common ground on which to more fully theorize postcolonial ecocriticism, especially through concepts of place and scale that are very much grounded in ecological particularity yet cognizant of sociopolitical forces that emanate at various scales in complex spatial arrangements, connecting and shaping those particular places” (164). The two texts I have chosen take place in very different ecologies but are aware of both their ecological particularity and the sociological forces that impact them. This can make both *The Lamp at Noon* and *A Grain of Wheat* important narratives to examine from an ecocritical perspective, because they demonstrate subjects acting on and interacting with nature while simultaneously engaging with the sociopolitical forces of their worlds.

Critics of Ngugi’s text often argue for nature as only taking on a symbolic meaning in the text, not as an actor in its own right. Kenneth Harrow writes that “The landscape and elements of weather continually appear in *A Grain of Wheat*, functioning as a backdrop to the main action”

(245-246). Aside from a contradiction that what appears continually would likely not be just a backdrop, this analysis simplifies the ways in which Ngugi's characters interact with the landscape and its elements. Harrow does not see the land as subjective, only that it acts upon the characters at opportune moments. He gives plenty of examples at this but misses opportunities for real reflection about why characters, especially native Kenyans, interpret the land in the way they do. Consider the description of the three men killed by British military forces during a protest. We learn that "Three men raised their arms in the air. It is said that as they fell down they clutched soil in their fists" (13). These men did not just imagine themselves to be close to the soil, nor does the soil act as some sort of metaphor for larger meaning. These revolutionaries were killed as they clutched the soil of their homeland, maintaining a connection to their land and place and carrying it to their death. Soil is a part of the fields these men fought for, and the stewardship and relationship between the protestors and colonizers is clear.

#### Chapter 4: *The Lamp At Noon* as a Mirror of our Times

Sinclair Ross's *The Lamp at Noon* is a classic Canadian short story, centered around two characters trying to build an agrarian life on the Canadian prairies during the dust bowl of the 1930's. Paul and his wife Ellen are suffering through another dust storm with their newborn child as the dust and dirt encroach on their home. Ellen pleads with Paul to leave the land and return to the city, while Paul argues that he can still turn their dry and desolate farm property into a functioning and prosperous farm. Paul continually argues for a colonial notion that he can bend their land to his will, while Ellen begs him to recognize the folly in his plan. This story is representative of a Canadian colonial attitude that nature can be made to heel through nothing more than sheer force of will, and Paul's hubris very quickly leads to tragic consequences for his family.

#### **Textual Analysis**

The story begins with the world moving while the humans are still. Ellen stares out the window as the wind whips up the dust, appearing frozen in time as the forces of nature continue to move against her will. Ellen feels frozen, and even as she moves around her farmhouse "[h]er eyes all the while were fixed and wide with a curious immobility" (9). The image of a woman who can move her body but not her eyes is a stark one, immediately drawing attention that the focus of this story will be, like Ellen's focus, on the environment itself. The reader needs to look where Ellen is looking, out the window, onto the farmland and with the knowledge that they are powerless to control the forces of nature increasingly moving in on Ellen and Paul's prairie home.

In the story the land acts not as a backdrop but directly in the foreground, and thus the reader is able to see the agency of the environment play against the trouble family life of this couple and their child. As Paul and Ellen are introduced, the pressure-cooker home environment in which they live becomes immediately apparent. Ellen is talking to Paul about the state of the land. "The little sob in her voice gave way to a sudden ring of exasperation. 'Will you never see? It's the land itself – the soil. You've plowed and harrowed it until there's not a root or fibre left to hold it down'" (11). Ellen is asking Paul to view the land they own through a Marcusian lens, to consider the land for what it is, not for the exchange value or commodities Paul wants to take from it. In her plea she is very specific, directing Paul's attention to "the land itself," and begging him to see that his actions over it have not had their intended effect, because the land is not an

object he can mold to his will. Ellen is taking the place of all those who plead with those who dominate the land to reconsider their positionality, to recognize the subjectivity of a place that cannot be brought to heel no matter how much effort or self-belief. Paul wants to view his land as a commodity and disregards the warning that Marcuse would give about the dangers of viewing nature as simply an object from which you can generate material wealth. Ellen sees and knows this, and pleads with her husband to recognize the subjectivity of his land, that no matter how strong his will their land will not be molded to his desires.

Ellen is stressed by the wind and dust that continue to encroach on their house and is exasperated that Paul will not recognize the reality of the family situation. Ellen talking about how she is stuck in the house they built in the dust bowl, surrounded by the dust seeping in through every crack. “I’m so caged – if only I could break away and run” (12-13). Ellen is feeling, in stark and emotional terms, the imprisonment that Marcuse predicts as a result of attempts to impose industry on land that cannot be willed to her husband’s desire. She wishes to break away and run, but the reader can see she cannot. As we will come to understand later in the story, she makes an ill-fated attempt to escape, and her child’s life is lost as a result. The economy of capitalism has created a societal environment in which Paul feels compelled to bring profit from his land, and in the process, he has trapped his wife and himself in a world that is unable to provide for their needs. Ellen is held not by physical structures or barriers, but a society which has built cultural and economic barriers to success. These barriers are intertwined with how her and Paul treat their land, resulting in her imprisonment. Marcuse’s interpretations of human actions are evident within the dynamic between Ellen and Paul, as well as their personal feelings of trepidation and fear as the dust storm rages unceasingly around their house. Marcuse argues that in our attempt to control land we only contribute to our own alienation, limiting our opportunity to strictly economic expressions. Ellen may not recognize that her struggle is a political one, but it is true that Paul’s violation of nature is directly connected to his capitalistic aims.

Marcuse has written directly about human treatment of the environment, and the spiritual and physical consequences of these actions. He writes that “the pollution of air and water, the noise, the encroachment of industry and commerce on open natural space have the physical weight of enslavement; imprisonment” (61). Here he connects the domination of the natural world with the sense that it envelops all of us, by seeking to position ourselves in charge of the

world humanity has only created a self-imposed prison from which we cannot escape. This is a prison constructed by our culture, and a desire to impose commerce and industrialization on a subject we currently view as an object. He continues that “the struggle against them [enslavement; imprisonment] is a political struggle, it is obvious to what extent the violation of nature is inseparable from the economy of capitalism” (61). Marcuse sees any action that treats nature as an entity to be dominated and manipulated for profit as a violation, and this violation harms humanity directly. This means all our actions towards the environment are political, regardless of how overt they may or may not be.

Paul is considering his position and relationship with the land and comes to the conclusion that “It was ruthless wind, blackening the sky with his earth, but it was not his master. Out of his land it had made a wilderness. He now, out of the wilderness, would make a farm and home again” (15). Paul is unable to recognize that he does not have dominion over the land he claims to own, and that he cannot will it to produce the crops he desires. His alienation and disconnection to his environment prevents him from seeing the truth, that the earth will follow its path regardless of his desires or faith. Paul is staring out into a blackened sky, a ruthless wind and dust everywhere, but instead of seeing his failures he sees only the potential farm and wealth he still believes is possible. This disconnection is made clear through Marcuse’s theoretical lens, that Paul’s alienation from his own land is what prevents him from seeing the subjectivity of his farmland. He can only see the land as an object to manipulate, because he is trying to impose his will onto something which will never be subservient to him. Thus, Paul only sees his own subjectivity, viewing the environment as a static and objective entity in his world. This failure means that he cannot search for any real solutions to the downward cycle his family is on, and for him and his contemporaries he must alter this view in order to reimagine a world where he can live in harmony with his land.

Paul does not assume any agency to his environment, and still considers himself able to dominate and control his land to turn it back into a farm, reversing the damage done by the winds and dust. In doing so he is making a mistake Marcuse warns us not to, which is to see the world and the objects within it as things to be dominated. Marcuse warns of the consequences of this viewpoint, writing that “how one treats oneself, others and things on the basis of this primordial experience – as materials for domination having exchange value, or as a subjects, part and parcel of a pacified world” (1968). There are two crucial points to focus on here. First, Marcuse is clear

that in order to have a pacified, peaceful world, we need to recognize the subjectivity of all living things, and that this viewpoint must be a cultural touchstone accessible from the beginning of our history. Secondly, he sees no difference between how one treats “oneself, others and things,” suggesting that the attitude and approach one takes will remain consistent, regardless of what one is acting upon. For Paul this means that how he treats his land will be how he treats his family, something that we can see with his interactions with Ellen and the child. Paul may not be as visceral in his treatment of Ellen as his treatment of the farm, but the result is the same – a man who wants to bend things to his own will, and not recognize the subjectivity within them that will never allow him to exert the domination or control he desires.

Marcuse continues that this alienation is also a barrier, as it “also prevents him from recognizing nature as a *subject* in its own right, a subject with which to live in the common universe” (244). This is crucial to understanding how Paul functions within the story because his attitude and mindset make him *unable* to see the subjectivity of his land, to really see his farm for what it is. He does not see how he shares a common place with nature, because he does not even consider what it could be like to be in communion with nature, as opposing to dominating and control it. One cannot live harmoniously with anything whose subjectivity you are opposed to recognizing, and thus Paul will not have the opportunity to build a farm that can sustain himself and his family in an equitable and mutually beneficial way.

In writing the afterword for *The Lamp at Noon*, Margaret Laurence notes that for Paul and Sinclair’s other male characters, “they must maintain faith in the land’s ability to yield, and in their own ability to coax or force it, for in this encounter their essential manhood lies in the balance” (132). Laurence has hit upon a central point here, that for Paul his very identity as a provider and patriarch is wrapped up in the idea that he must produce wealth from his land, that he must oversee it and use it as a tool to generate material and social status. This is, as Laurence describes, “essential” for him, and demonstrates the larger societal forces that manipulate Paul into his positionality. Instead of being able to act in a way that leaves him open to new or equitable relationships with the environment, his ideal of manhood and how a father should act leaves him powerless to reconsider the way in which he treats his land and interacts with the environment. This idea that the essential nature of Paul’s masculine identity is tied to his commercial aspirations connects well with Marcuse’s argument that a society focused on domination of the land requires this type of fealty. Paul must dominate and control his land in

order to achieve a masculine identity he desires, but the reader sees the consequences of this belief structure. Marcuse posits that this will lead to alienation and destruction, clearly seen with the death of Paul's child in the roaring dust.

Dieter Meindl notes that for Paul, even though he is "assailed by misgivings about his course, he nonetheless clings to his latter-day pioneering perspective and nourishes a vision of material gain which dispels reality" (110). Meindl is pulling out an important point, that Paul's vision for his land and what he believes he can create from it distort his reality. Paul stares at his barren fields through a fog of dust and sees only what he believes he could create, and this is a failure by him to see the land for what it truly is. Meindl connects this to the pioneer perspective, the culture that Paul is engaged with and whose boundaries he cannot break free from. Dieter continues that Paul represents the wider metanarrative of literary realism, "a man, bent on rising in the world, tries to impose on it a dream that, whether resulting in success or failure, cannot but take a material form" (110). Paul's dream is only a material one, characterized in what he can build, where achievement is thought of in terms of wealth, power, and ultimately complete domination over his land. Paul does not see beyond this, paralyzed by a culture that places blinders on understanding the subjectivity of the world around them. Paul is not conceptualizing another way of interacting with his land, because for him achievement and success does not come through harmonious living, but through control.

Paul comes to a realization of what his desire for control over his land has brought, and he looks out upon his fields devastated by drought and mismanagement, "before the utter waste confronting him, he sickened and stood cold. Suddenly like the fields he was naked. Everything that had sheathed him a little from the realities of existence: vision and purpose, faith in the land, the future, in himself – it was all rent now, stripped away" (15-16). The truth is revealed to Paul, and as he faces reality his connection to the land is finally brought forth. Paul is as naked as his land, sharing the same destiny that he was connected to since the beginning, but only realizing it too late. He feels naked, expose to the elements and overlooking the devastation his own hand has wrought on his farm. He can see that he has no place in it, his ideological barriers have been removed by the visceral understanding that much has been sacrificed for no material gain. His faith in the land was not faith in building a harmonious, fruitful relationship, but that he could dominate his soil and overcome nature's boundaries through effort and belief. He is looking out on his fields and coming to the realization his desire has not and will not come to pass, and that

he no longer has a place in the environment he claims to own. Paul is acting out a Marcusean hypothesis, that he has now deprived himself of finding a true place on his land through his desire to dominate and control it. Paul feels naked and exposed, sickened as the realization of what he has done has now removed any semblance of connection to the land he greedily extracted from until there was nothing left.

Marcuse argues that it is the desire for control of the land that prevents people from finding themselves, and Paul comes to this realization. Paul has attempted to exert this control over his land and has now paid the price, as the boundaries between himself and reality are removed to showcase a desolate and barren landscape. His family is in danger, his farm is in ruin, and he is able to see how his action, hubris and desire for control have only alienated from the land and the reality of his world. He has actively deprived himself from finding who he is, who he can be, by trying to control his land instead of listening to Ellen, nurturing his family and his farm and building a prosperous relationship with both that recognizes their subjectivity and internal value.

### **Considering Other Voices**

Laurence Ricou sees in the story the connection between Paul struggling with his land the connection it has to the disconnect in his family. He writes that "the struggle of man with land results in lonely, isolated men and women. The neglect of human intercourse is a result not of conscious neglect, nor of boredom, but of seemingly of gradual necessity" (92). Ricou is arguing here that Paul's family trouble is directly connected to his relationship with the land, that his focus on attempting to grow crops where none can be grown necessarily means that he cannot grow his relationship with his family either. Ricou identifies in the story a theme connected to Marcuse's notion of alienation and provides support for the idea that human relationships are necessarily influenced by the world in which they live. For Paul and Ellen, their deteriorating marriage isn't just reflected by their inharmonious relationship with their land, but directly connected and influenced by it.

Shelley Mahoney argues that in *The Lamp at Noon* and Ross's similar works, "The agricultural space where Ross's characters play out their lives reveals the artistry that often fleshes out what would otherwise be a superficial bleakness. The ballet, that leads characters to and from house, barn, and field, is intricate and meaningful, each of these sites representing a range of states from exaltation to despair" (58). While it can be true that these sights provide



depth to the characters emotion, to describe them primarily as tools first misses an important point of the relationship between Paul, Ellen and their environment. It is not just that they are struggling and their environment reflects that, but that they are suffering *because* of their chosen interactions with the environment. The fields are fading because of how Paul has treated them, an avoidable mistake that his hubris blinded him to.

Other critics also treat the land in these stories as metaphor, instead considering the environment as the subject. Paul Comeau argues that “nature assumes the personality of an angry, vengeful presence bent on destruction” (176). Here, Comeau imposes a human emotion onto the wind and the dust, viewing them through the lens of the human imagination. They continue to frame Ellen and Paul’s relationship in this way, suggesting that their argument over their future “is fueled by a three-day dust storm that literally cages Ellen in the house with the baby and Paul in the shed with the livestock, an arid gulf of blowing and between them” (176). Comeau sees the wind and dust as metaphor, not as just a lived reality. While it is true that this dust is separating the work and home environment for Paul and Ellen, it is also clear that the environment is acting within its own subjectivity. The dust has been whipped up as a consequence of Paul’s actions, and the prairie land has seen heavy winds and difficult conditions long before settlers arrived on the land.

## Conclusion: Wrapping Up and Moving Forward

The window for humanity to act decisively and change our oncoming climate nightmare is rapidly closing. Literature can often seem as a frivolity when considering where our time should be spent as we engage with the environmental apocalypse the world faces. Many of us who study and write in the humanities will be among the last to really feel the impact of climate change, and there is an argument, not altogether incorrect, that time spent in criticism, not agitating or politicking, is a waste of time. Nature will not slow down or change course at humanity's whim, and so our effort must match the urgency of the moment.

Literature is so important because it can show us a pathway forward, even through what can seem like a hopeless endeavour. In particular, the two texts I have chosen demonstrate these pathways forward by illustrating clearly both the promise and pitfalls of humanity's interactions with the world. At our best we can build an equitable relationship with the land built on respect, at our worst we can destroy the very soil we depend on for sustenance and meaning. Considering these two texts in relationship to Marcuse's work demonstrates both ends of this spectrum, and can be read in a way in which the student considers the land and larger environment as an entity unto itself, not just another tool humans can manipulate to our own ends.

At the beginning of this paper, I posed a few questions to guide the way: What is the role of narrative fiction in bridging the gaps in understanding between humans and the world in which we inhabit? How can critical theory, and specifically a Marcusean understanding of subjectivity, allow us to bridge these gaps? How can these understandings be treated in education as a motivating force for action? In discussing my two texts I have attempted to be clear with how narrative fiction can contribute to a better understanding of the world, and why Marcuse is so important to building this knowledge. As I mentioned previously, narrative texts are layered with meaning well beyond the scope of my field, and Marcuse's subjectivity is important because it provides a pathway that is both meaningful and sustainable for teaching these texts as environmental literature. The beauty of Marcuse's theory is that it does not diminish the multitude of ways in which texts can be read but provides the space to see the relationship between humans and nature while allowing the stories to maintain their vibrancy. Reading narrative fiction concerning the earth is crucial not just to recognize the world for what it is, but

to provide the ideological tools to act, in ways both big and small, to ensure the planet we live on now remains liveable in the future.

The beauty of the environmental humanities is that the field is rooted within texts and other direct sources, allowing for immediate consideration between the reader and the application of artistic ideas. Explicitly drawing out the environmental aspect of literary texts allows for a singular focus that is necessary to apply a political lens in a way that can motivate change. This is not to say that the texts (and other sources) considered have no value out of their environmental aspects, only that the field is badly needed to motivate change within our larger climate change discourse. As UCLA professor Ursula Heise puts it, “In exploring such similarities and differences, the environmental humanities not only seeks to respond to the call for new institutional formations to correspond to innovative kinds of knowledge, but also to translate humanistic research more effectively into the public sphere” (2014). Heise rightly emphasizes the public sphere as an area of focus and impact for the environmental humanities, and it is the public sphere in which I want to position my work. Environmental humanities hopes to leave the windowless conference rooms of the graduate seminar class and actively impact the political structure in which we exist, and specifically those that move our ecological discourse. Doing so both promotes a Marcusean sense of translating theory to politics, and also fills the dire need for change in the morass of our current zeitgeist.

However, reading an impressive or moving text does not a radical activist make. As Alexa Weik von Mossner writes, suggests that “there is a certain consensus that emotionally powerful renderings of human-nature relationships. . . can have substantial repercussions in the real world,” though she believes that “much of the evidence [is] anecdotal and/or phenomenological” (9). This is a crucial point, that simply placing a book in front of the reader and then standing back and waiting for the radicalization is a fool’s errand. The political awakening and motivation needed for change is not that simple. This is why Marcuse’s theory is so critical, because it provides the necessary tools from which to read thoroughly and consider the next actionable steps.

In considering Marcuse’s work against these two texts, we are not directly removing carbon from the atmosphere, or preventing an oil pipeline, or really doing anything physically to fix these enormous problems. However, what is happening is the important and crucial work of

*understanding* our relationship with the world in terms that will allow us to win this fight against those who enable an unjust system that has brought humans to this point. To know our relationship with the earth through a Marcusean subjectivity is to be empowered with a precise understanding of our impact on the natural other. This understanding supports an ethic and ethos that can will positive action, and one that sustains throughout a well-lived life.

As Marcuse would encourage, it's important to think about how exactly these texts can function to change minds and redirect efforts towards radical climate activism. Both theory and text have their place as entertainment value, but their true value lies in whether these texts can be used to motivate and catalyze their readers into action. This is where Marcusean theory is so important, both for its framing and activist message. It is because these texts clearly identify and expose the realities of the subjectivity of the world that they are so valuable. The reader is not being taught how to think or what to assume about the characters but is given the chance to understand it for themselves.

Sinclair Ross's *The Lamp at Noon* watches a man realize his failure as it is happening, both as a patriarch and a steward of his land. These two losses are intertwined, and the attitude that leads to such failure is the same. Paul is concerned primarily with the economic output of his land, and demonstrates this motivation is not to achieve a better life for his family, but to achieve a Westernized individualist ideal that soon threatens his own family and livelihood. Reading this book through a subjectivist lens means that the reader can clearly see the alienation present between Paul and the land. Paul's farmland will not bend to his will, it will not cooperate or cede its own power no matter how much he tries to make it so. Paul is so ignorant of the impact of his actions that he denies their reality, even as the dust swirls around him. He argues to his wife that "I'm not to blame that we've been dried out five years" (12), ignoring both his own actions and how his desire for control has led to the failure of his crops and the rapid dissolution of his family life. To teach this book through this understanding gives the reader new ways of thinking about ecological relationships, and new ideological understandings which can then be reflected onto daily life. As discussed previously a Marcusean lens gives light to the story not as allegory or metaphor, but as a stark, realized example of the path humans continue to tread. Exposing the subjective will of nature demonstrates this truth and brings it into a modern ecocritical understanding. Crucially, *The Lamp at Noon* can be read in ways other than an allegory for

colonial aspirations, but a reality-infused narrative that must be taught for what it is: a clear example of an environment that has its own will and temperament, a subjectivity that cannot be forced into submission or molded into a simple tool for humanity.

Ngugi Wa Thaingo's *A Grain of Wheat* is clearly a very different text from *The Lamp at Noon*, in both prose and scope. However, both texts tell a story of people interacting with the land, and Ngugi demonstrates how an entire community ebbs and flows in tandem with the ecological world. Ngugi brings to the forefront a clash of cultures in many permeations, and his readers can see the impact of colonial disruption upon the African people. This view is important, because it demonstrates how a relationship with the land can be disrupted and even severed through human intervention. If the reader can learn through this text how human relationships with the environment are neither predestined nor guaranteed, it can serve as motivation and understanding to direct pro-environmental actions in a positive direction. In understanding how human-land relationships can be disrupted, we can also learn how they can be built and maintained. Ngugi's text allows readers to see the subjectivity of nature and the natural world, how it will continue without us and outside of our control; and this can be a catalyst to a change in human attitude and behaviour.

The short but powerful final chapter in *AGOW* provides two powerful images to consider Gikonyo's disconnection, followed by his revitalization. Gikonyo is lying in his hospital bed, recovering from his broken arm. First the reader hears of his time in the Wamumu detention camp spent working on "an irrigation scheme" that was "converting the dry-plains into rice growing fields" (240). As a prisoner Gikonyo is being compelled to modify the land of his people to suit the agricultural plans of a colonizing force. This scene is presented to provide context for Gikonyo's desire to carve a stool as a wedding present, an idea he first thought of as he dug irrigation ditches in his detention camp. This stool would be made of a "Muiri stem, a hardwood that grew around Kerinyaga<sup>3</sup>... on the seat he would bead a pattern, representing a river and a canal" (240). From Gikonyo's dissolution and forced labour on his own soil grows an idea of charity and promise. Instead of the straight and unnatural ditches he digs for the rice paddies of someone else, he is carving a stream and canal present in the land of his people, from the wood that grows in his ancestral home. Ngugi's final chapter demonstrates the damage that

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<sup>3</sup> Otherwise known as Mount Kenya, the highest peak in Kenya, and visible from Gikonyo's prison camp.

can be done when ignoring the human-ecological relationship, but more importantly, the beauty and love that can still be fostered even after tragedy has befallen a people.

Where do we go from here? It seems unlikely, despite my most fervent hopes, that there will be a sudden whirlwind of interest in these two texts and a reformation of nationwide curricula. Every high school and university academic department is besieged by suggestions for new and reframed material, many strands of which have enormous import. If the texts of the Environmental Humanities are to have their day in the sun (hopefully while the metaphor itself is still a physical possibility), then I believe it will be with the support of Marcuse and the critical school he has helped develop.

I do not expect *The One-Dimensional Man* to suddenly become required reading for every first year undergrad student. However, the influence of Marcuse and his contemporaries can serve to highlight important aspects of human relationships and our collective relationship with the world around us. Marcuse's notion of subjectivity and the way in which he uses it to guide a relationship with the world is critically important and developing an understanding that the environment and all living things within it exist unto themselves is an underdeveloped yet critical aspect of building a better world. Trevor Smith suggests that subjectivity can be mobilized politically is because universal, a "stripping away of particulars" (98) that places a person as completely equal to all others. Smith argues that "in order to become political subjects, individuals must transcend their supporting private identities so that they can access the universal and speak to it" (98). He specifically references 2013 protests in New Brunswick against new shale gas drilling, in which protestors from a variety of backgrounds and motivations campaigned against the project to great effect. A Marcusean notion of subjectivity gives people the tools to build and develop this perspective of universalism, which then motivates towards political action.

What, then, should be done with the texts themselves? Ngugi has taken his rightful place in the canon, and it is a not-so-secret hope of mine that the Nobel Prize for Literature will be his in the very near future.<sup>4</sup> His books are read the world over and analysed by smarter people than me. Nevertheless, as addressed in the previous chapters, I feel there is space for his work to take

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<sup>4</sup> Despite being a heavy betting favourite, he lost again in 2021, this time to Abdulrazak Gurnah, ironically the man who wrote the introduction to my copy of *AGOW*.

on new life and meaning, to be understood not just as a text representative of the past but one that holds many ecological lessons for the present. Ngugi is often read (and rightly so) in the discourse of colonialism and resistance, with connections to the land and ecological influences considered only in consequence to an overall understanding of colonialism. I posit that his work also carries considerable weight in the ecohumanities, where human-ecological relationships are the primary source of inquiry. His strong character development and tremendous insight into the individual experiencing disconnection from place are prescient in many ways, and I hope this text can be considered in this way moving forward.

*The Lamp at Noon* is smaller in scale and ambition than *A Grain of Wheat*, and its place in the classroom is different as well. However, like *AGOW*, it has previously been seen as more metaphorical in tone, and understood as an exploration of family dynamics, classic toxic paternalism and the role of settlers and stewardship of the prairies. I argue that *TLAN* is also valuable strictly in considering the relationship between humanity and the environment, and that the actions between land and people can be seen as a primary driver of the novel and hold lessons, just like *AGOW*, for how we understand the world now. The desecration of the land is presented in a stark, unflinching manner, and Sinclair affords us a clear opportunity to peer into the world we may inhabit if we are to continue to act as Paul does. Thus, this story can also be understood in a contemporary light, and become an important Canadian text in our fight for a better, more equitable future.

A worry of mine is that the easiest political action will be one that continues to perpetuate this harmful extractive relationship between human and planet. Technological solutions are already being purposed that purport to solve our gargantuan carbon problems with the flick of a switch. I will leave a discussion of their efficacy to others more versed in the science than me (although I have my doubts), but I want to assert that any action taken without a serious reclamation of attitudes of harmonious living is one that is doomed to fail. Even if humanity manages, through some miracle of science and sheer will, to kick the can down the road long enough to avoid immediate Armageddon, leaving our underlying relationship with the planet untouched means we will continue to fall into cycles of extraction and misuse. Elon Musk and the technocrats cannot fix our ideology, but an understanding of the subjective experiences illustrated in these texts, both of human and non-humans, can provide a path forward.

The texts I have chosen have considerable merit on their own terms, especially so with Ngugi and his work as a trailblazer of African literature. My project is not intended to pigeonhole these works into a solitary consideration, but to demonstrate how crucial it is that we take the opportunity these texts provide to consider what it means to have a critical, eco-relevant lens when we read. A guiding light of my project is that we do not necessarily need new texts or stories to better understand our relationship with the environmental world, but that the texts we do have can be read in new and interesting ways. It is true that the growing field of the environmental humanities will generate impressive and important scholarship, but as readers we do not want to leave texts behind. Only through a careful consideration of these stories from our literary past can we begin to explore a new and better future, which includes new considerations of stories we already know. As I wrote in previous chapters, the scholarly engagement with these works so far can sometimes leave out important aspects of their eco-narrative, and I have attempted to show where some of these gaps are and how Marcusian theory can help support a strong foundation from which a critical reflection of narrative texts, both new and old, can continue.

There are some important limitations that I want to note in my analysis, but in scope and function. I have chosen two works that I believe offer an excellent opportunity for analysis, but by its very definition a close examining of particular works means that the larger literary environment in which these exist will be left unexamined. I have not attempted to extrapolate cultural meaning beyond the context in which these books exist, but one can easily imagine different cultures and different worlds that interact with the land quite differently, and the millions of literary permutations that can branch off from those equally important cultural practices. In reaching beyond my own country's borders for a text I have left unexamined the Indigenous experience in Canada, whose texts provide crucial context and knowledge to the Canadian ecohumanities. I considered Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle* as a potential text to explore, and in leaving that out my paper does not attempt to find commonalities and differences in Indigenous relationship with the land. I have also deliberately chosen books written well before my own time, and while I think this decision was important in my work to reclaim these novels and place them in our modern ecological context, ignoring those texts written in the present leaves my paper without a modern text to consider where the environmental humanities currently reside. Richard Powers Pulitzer Prize winner *The Overstory*



would have worked in this context, and his specific consideration of the relationship of trees to generations of humans is an excellent novel worthy of critical consideration.

By necessity, a specific theoretical lens means excluding important ideas that may impact my argument. Marcuse was a particularly activist philosopher and critic, and his work was especially influenced by the American political situation in which he taught. Climate change is not war, and the climate crisis we now face was not sparkling with the immediacy we feel now back when he was writing and working. As much as I believe it to be possible to apply his work substantively to the texts I have chosen and remain relevant, the world has changed. As quoted earlier, in 1979 Marcuse felt “there isn’t much nature left to preserve” (cite), surely he would be horrified today by what humanity has wrought in the last 40 years.

I feel it important to also consider my own authorship of this piece, both as a reflection of my own academic and personal limitations as well as the likely limited reach of the work itself. I currently teach 6<sup>th</sup> grade and have spent a significant amount of time trying to get my students to understand fractions,<sup>5</sup> and at times I worry this is more of a vanity project than anything else. Teaching in the public school system necessitates a good understanding of compromise with one’s ideals, as a desire to teach social and climate justice can often conflict with the rote demands of the curriculum and the challenge of shepherding 26 children who all have their own dreams, desires and challenges. While I have not attempted to introduce Marcuse to these precocious 11 year-olds, (yet) I undertook this work partly to support my own learning of ecopolitics and the environmental humanities, and to share this discussion with others. The ends of this paper would be well served if even one or two other teachers saw in Marcuse’s theory a new and engaging way of presenting environmental texts. Marcuse’s subjectivity and the illumination of the space between humans and earth offers an opportunity for the student to view these two distinct objects, and even at a young age students can see how earth acts independently of human desires. This is especially important in metropolitan cities, where so much of nature has been shaped and crafted to suit our immediate needs. Students can learn that nature is not just a historical artifact but something that is alive and existing outside of the boundaries our

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<sup>5</sup> The numerator is the *top* one

consumptive, capitalistic society have set can more easily harness the necessary political will to critique and challenge this destructive system.

This is even more complicated by the reality of my own personal privilege – as a white male my path through academia and professional life has often been supported, in ways both small and large, by the omnipresent cultural forces designed to ensure my success. I have positioned this work within this world and recognize that in doing so it is impossible to avoid the conflict that comes with advocating for the reorganizing of a system that supports my own work. It is my (hopefully not naïve) wish that serious progress can be made from within academia, and, just like Marcuse and his work for government and in public life, progress can be made towards a new way of understanding human ecological relationships.

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