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## **Solving Our Bread Problem: Gnostic Trends in Environmentalist Thought and Janisse Ray as Solution**

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One would be hard pressed to find a book more significant to the modern American environmentalist movement than John Muir's seminal *My First Summer in the Sierra*. It gathered support for Muir's fledgling Sierra Club and raised Muir's national profile as he influenced Teddy Roosevelt on the creation of the National Park Service, thus serving a key role in perhaps the two most influential environmental organizations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Muir's work is interesting, though, for another reason, as well: the way that Muir deals with the reality of his own physical body. Muir's body is almost completely absent from the rhetoric of *My First Summer in the Sierra*, and when it does make an appearance, it does so only long enough for Muir to make a brief complaint about the necessity of feeding it. Moreover, the absence of Muir's body is in stark contrast to the remarkable presence of the shepherd Billy's body. This dichotomy, I think, is indicative of a broader gnostic trend in Muir's work, in which he casts the pure, the divine, the natural, as a spiritual presence, and the impure, the profane, the human, as a purely physical presence.

As Lance Newman writes in his *Our Common Dwelling*, western culture has a tendency to create an "imaginary geography in which a degraded and oppressive society is opposed to a pure and free wilderness" (xiv). This trend is present to a remarkable degree

in Muir's work—everything that Muir wants to exclude from nature (laborers, domestic animals, Native Americans) is consistently described as dirty. Given Muir's strict Campbellite upbringing, we cannot read this as only a physical description. Moreover, the physical descriptions that Muir provides are beyond belief. He writes that Billy's grease-besotted pants are so dirty that they have “no small geological significance,” and refers to geological formations being created upon them (71). This is hyperbolic, presumably obviously so to all of Muir's readers (one hopes), but he continues along these lines in all his descriptions of these things he wants to keep out of his vision of nature. Billy is defined by his body, by his filth. Moreover, every Native American that Muir encounters in *My First Summer* is likewise described as filthy. And, delightfully for the sake of this project, Muir goes out of his way to explain to his readers that Native Americans are in no way more natural, and indeed, possibly less so, than any other human (124).

By way of contrast, Muir and everything that he defines as natural exists on a purely spiritual level. Muir peppers his writing with references to the cleanliness of wild animals (10, 26, 33, 43, 78, 81, for a small sample). Why this point is so endlessly fascinating to him is baffling until one realizes that, as with his concern with filth, this is not merely a physical commentary. This is about spiritual cleanliness. Notably, Muir, despite enduring the same physical conditions as Billy, never seems to get dirty. Moreover, Muir himself was known for a lack of concern for his own physical safety. In at least two points in *My First Summer*, we see Muir take absolutely unreasonable risks to his own physical wellbeing—crawling out along a 3” wide ledge to better experience falls and running at a grizzly bear in hopes of seeing it break into a run (it does not) (64-66,

74). Compared to Billy and the other shepherds' tendency to be perpetually armed, and Billy's flight from the grizzly that begins to frequent the sheep camp, Muir constructs himself as a spiritual being, but he imagines Billy and the other laborers as strictly physical.

Finally, and perhaps most convincingly, Muir repeatedly uses ecclesiastical language when he refers to the landscape and phenomena that he observes. A grasshopper preaches a sermon to him (77). Yosemite is a temple, or a cathedral (105). And, (and perhaps we should keep this from Muir's father) Muir, speaking of a particularly fine day in Yosemite, remarks that it is "the first time [he has been] to church in California" (139).

This construction of nature as a predominantly spiritual entity is not unique to Muir, however. To the contrary, Muir draws on a much larger literary tradition. Emerson's work is certainly a part of this, and to a lesser degree, Thoreau's. Emerson's famous "transparent eyeball" passage is clear evidence of this. In it Emerson completely dissolves his own physical personhood, leaving only his intellect. Or, perhaps more convincingly, his series of thoughts at the beginning of his chapter "Language," from *Nature*, in which he writes that nature is to the spirit as language is to nature—a series of signs to signify a greater reality. The levels of value that Emerson thus establishes are clear—the best that physical nature can hope to be is a means of communicating knowledge about the spiritual world.

Thoreau, of course, does labor in the course of his writing. But consider Thoreau's insistence that his labor is entirely distinct from the labor of those around him—while he may sell some of his beans at market, his experience is allegedly markedly

different from the experience of Flint, who likewise sells his produce at market.

Moreover, Thoreau never considers the sources of the food that he buys—does he not almost definitely support farmers like Flint, or rather, do farmers like Flint permit Thoreau to spend his time contemplating nature by selling him the fruits of their labor?

So what of this dichotomy? So what if Muir, as Thoreau and Emerson before him, imagines nature as a spiritual experience? My contention is this: Muir creates an unrealistic vision of humanity's relationship with nature. In doing so, he suggests that humanity, and human activities, are fundamentally disconnected from the world of nature. His vision leaves no room to discuss how our (always physical) lives impact nature—he simply casts them out of his preserved world. And thus, the work that Muir does is less about the world that we actually live in, and more about the recreational space that Muir wishes we could be in. Nevertheless, few figures in the 20<sup>th</sup> century shaped the environmentalist movement more than Muir did, and we live with his legacy.

How, then, should we bridge the gap between an environmentalism that is so focused on the spiritual that it neglects to consider that our “bread problem”<sup>1</sup> might also be an environmental concern? A handful of environmental thinkers have tried their hands at just this problem—Wendell Berry chief among them. Berry's work is truly inspirational. He is a modern day prophet, calling out the sins our society inflicts upon the poor and the soil. That said, Berry's work is not without shortcomings. Primarily, one could argue that because Berry accepts only very particular kinds of human labor (i.e.; labor that has nostalgic value, not just labor that is environmentally careful), he reinvents the problems expressed above—creating a new dichotomy that still does not effectively imagine human labor as a part of the natural process. Beyond that, Berry's agrarianism

fails to adequately deal with the issues raised by deep ecology—how is Berry’s vision not anthropocentric?

Further, Berry’s ideas are not economically functional. His suggestions suppose that the laborer is economically independent. Richard Hofstadter, despite preceding Berry by a few years, wrote probably the best critique of the practicality of what he deems the agrarian myth throughout his work, most notably in his *Age of Reform*, and his work is the basis of my criticism of this portion of Berry’s work. There is room for a counterargument here: that Berry’s system could work under the right conditions—after all, it did during the pre-industrial era. And this may well be true, but Berry never comes close to referencing the level of societal change that this would require. This would mean a wholesale societal revolution, in which 95% of Americans once again worked in agriculture, and national exports of food were stopped. Without these changes (which Berry never completely endorses) his ideas are almost comically out of touch with economic reality.

The best way to make use of Berry’s work, then, is to read him not as an economist, but again, as a prophet. That is, Berry’s practical suggestions seldom make much sense, but the spirit behind them is one that everyone would be well advised to adopt. Berry can still be useful to the goals of this project—he does provide a way a thinking about human labor in nature that takes into account both the quality of life of the laborer and the effects of the labor on the landscape—but these shortcomings still mean that Berry ultimately cannot be a final guide.

Perhaps an alternative to Berry can be found in the south Georgia writer Janisse Ray. In her first and strongest work, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Ray provides a strong

theoretical backing to her practical argument that human labor in nature is something that environmentalists must learn to deal with. While she deals with the reality of the irreversible damage that humans have dealt her home region, at the same time she repeatedly structures humanity and nature as parts of the same whole—offering a series of human/natural dichotomies that she systematically deconstructs. In so doing, she creates a theoretical space in which human labor can be a functional part of the environment—something neither the destructive, industrial-scale labor that has decimated the region or the Muir-inspired preservationist approach does. Ray offers something that relatively few environmental discourses on human labor do: a perspective born of labor and conservation. She is both an environmentalist, and the daughter of a junkman—she understands the necessity of labor, as well as its consequences. As she writes in *Drifting into Darien*,

Before I upset anybody, I will explain. Humans need trees. In the industrial age they have become particularly useful. We are reliant on the paper that comes from the boughs, for one thing, and on the wood ripped from the boles. I am not opposed to their cutting.

I am opposed to industrial tree cutting that is unregulated and that is happening on a scale so titanic that the damage is irreversible. I'm opposed to taking everything. I'm opposed to clear-cuts because they are the products of capitalism at its worst and greed at its best. Small minds think clear-cuts (70-71).

Or, again, about the nuclear power plant she paddles past,

I have never made one dime off the nuclear plant. Oh, it has benefited me.... I am plugged in. And I live nearby.... This is a source of great personal conflict for me. Being connected to the grid while opposing the grid is like being nice to a person who has robbed you and, if he catches you alone and vulnerable, will rob you again. I want more than anything to kick in the teeth of this monster.... I'll tell you what else it means. It means I cut off my water heater until I need it.... The air conditioner stays off. I unplug everything, always.... Should I go on? (179).

Ray does go on, here and elsewhere. In her poem "Future-Seeking," from *House of Branches*, Ray gives a long list of machines that she owns, "for/keeping milk cool/hearing news/writing letters," and on and on, concluding with "I have taken more/than my fair share" (67). Ray implicates herself in the environmental disaster that is south Georgia. But at the same time, she makes it clear that she understands the ongoing need for resources. This is a level of nuance not often seen in environmental discourses.<sup>2</sup> By admitting that this is not a debate about saints and sinners, but rather about how we solve this rather difficult problem of managing our consumption, Ray opens up a space in which real discourse can occur. Ray offers a realistic look at our environmental quandary: she realizes that humans, as all creatures, will continue to consume natural resources, but pushes back against those who would consume without moderation. Ray avoids the extremes of this debate, and in doing so, comes up with one of the most functional visions of human labor in nature I have encountered.

The context of Ray's work heightens its impact. She writes not from a place of striking beauty—indeed, south Georgia is, as she writes, "about as ugly as a place gets"



(*Ecology* 13). “Unless you look close,” Ray writes, “there is little majesty” (13). Even the labor that Ray writes about is less beautiful than the labor of Berry’s yeoman farmers. As Ray writes, she “come[s] from scavengers,” linking her family’s labor in the junkyard to the work of vultures and blowflies (32). These aspects of Ray’s work make her claims sharper. She writes about love of place, when she comes from a place that is ugly— aesthetically (to those not paying close attention), racially, and socially. She writes about the necessity of human labor in nature, when the labor she is most acquainted with is some of the least beautiful work done in the developed world. And she makes these claims with the full knowledge of the potential danger of what she is suggesting.

Ray writes about two primary things in *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*: people and places. Accordingly, it is through these two topics that Ray illustrates her vision of how people and nature are completely interwoven, and so suggests a vision of the world in which human labor can be understood as a functional part of the natural world. Rather than take the gnostic twist that compels Muir to wholly ignore the reality of his own body, or take Berry’s sanitized vision of labor, Ray offers a tremendously rich alternative in her use of space and people.

Space is a critical component of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*. That is, this book is very much about place—about southern pines, about southern people, dialects, indigo snakes, and gopher tortoises, and how all of these things have a meaning. But within that, Ray uses specific spaces to shape that sense of place that she conveys so well. Each of these spaces adds something to the mixture. They are, at first, somewhat dichotomous: the two spaces depicted on the cover of the book are Ray’s father’s junkyard and a pine forest. Roderick Nash, in *Wilderness in the American Mind*, writes that we

should think of human and natural spaces as existing on a spectrum, in which neither opposing end actually exists. That is, there is no space that is completely human and completely unnatural, nor is there any space that is completely untouched by humanity. This point is fairly well established at this point in ecocriticism, but if there were any spaces that actually fit these dichotomous ends, Ray's father's junkyard and her pine forests might be them. They are chosen to represent extremes: one represents a space marked by the lowest of human labor (machines that represent labor, but are dysfunctional), one the most sacred of the natural. While Ray likely had little choice over the cover images, the two spaces (junkyard and pine forest) depicted there are the central images the book conveys. Just as Ray uses her alternating chapter structure to break down the dichotomy between the human and the natural, she also breaks down the purity of these spaces, showing them to be less contrasting than one might think.

The first space to discuss is Ray's father's junkyard. It is the opposite of everything that romantic nature should be. It is cluttered, "stuffed with junked, wrecked, rusted, burned, and outmoded automobiles and parts of automobiles....like sticking your head in a wide-angle trash can" (21). The place is so crowded and offensive that the first boyfriend that Ray brings home refuses to leave the bedroom, and breaks up with her as soon as they leave her parents' house (32). Ray's father is a scavenger on the bottom of the human economic food chain, living off the refuse of other's lives, and the junkyard is as corrupted by human labor as a place could possibly be. It is nearly permanently damaged. Ray writes,

Eighty to 95 percent of the metals of vehicles of that era are recyclable, but what do you do with the gas tanks? What about the heavy metal

accumulations in the soil, lead contamination, battery acid leaks, the veins of spilled oil and gasoline? The topsoil would have to be scraped away: where would it go? What about the rubber, plastic, and broken glass? Would we haul it all to the county dump? It might take a lifetime, one spent undoing. (268)

There is nothing remotely sublime here. But Ray, oddly enough, writes about it as a place of wilderness, as well. She writes of the birds she sees there: “cardinals, brown thrashers, red-winged blackbirds, crows” (267). She notes that this is far from the list that would have historically appeared in the region. Nonetheless, there are birds there, birds that eat “the ripe elderberries and mosquitoes that arise from the environs of foundered vehicles” (267). She goes on: wrens that make their nests in the backs of old cars, field mice that raise their young under seat cushions, blackberries she ate as a child. The pitcher plants (a somewhat rare, native carnivorous plant in the region) that grow at the back of the junkyard show up repeatedly throughout the narrative. The inclusion of the elderberries and blackberries and the nesting animals seems especially significant: these are not just animals passing through the offensive junkyard, these are animals that call this place home. The pitcher plants provide something else—perhaps some kind of reminder that not many of the original species of the area are still present in the junkyard, recalling their absence through its presence, or perhaps just a point that very interesting natural things can exist in very unexpected places, that is, places exceptionally marked by the presence of human labor. There is an ecosystem, however dysfunctional it may be, existing in this most human place. And so, here Ray has rejected the notion of the purely

human. Ray brings wilderness into the junkyard, this site of human labor, and neither junkyard nor pine forest/site is untouched by the other.

Ray's complicated depiction of the longleaf pine forests is likewise complicated. Fully half the book is dedicated to this space, all of which praises it in the highest possible terms. Ray has a kind of spiritual reverence for the longleaf pine ecosystem—certainly in keeping with Muir's reveling language describing Yosemite. She writes of the unique experience that a pine forest provides, saying:

What thrills me most about longleaf pine forests is how the pine trees sing. The horizontal limbs of flattened crowns hold the wind as if they are vessels, singing bowls, and air stirs in them like a whistling kettle. I lie in thick grasses covered with sun and listen to the music made here. This music cannot be heard anywhere else on earth.

Rustle, whisper, shiver, whinny. Aria, chorus, ballad, chant. Lullaby.

(68-69)

Ray's language here reveals something of the reverence she feels for the forest—given her evangelical background, she is no doubt well aware of the spiritual connotation “vessel” has. The reference to singing bowls may be more obscure to her fellow Crackers, but again, implies something sacred and mysterious. The claims of exclusiveness further this sense of sacredness, as does her list of musical terms, all with slightly different meaning. Ray admits that the forest seems monotonous, at least to the untrained eye. Her list of musical terms, though, seems to be a counter to that suggestion. Someone unfamiliar with music may think a ballad and chorus to be essentially the same, but to the musician or educated listener, they are significantly different. This place is varied, filled

with rich, sacred beauty. Ray's construction of the longleaf forest echoes the romantic vision of nature common to writers like Muir and other romantics. Her description of the place makes it the opposite of the junkyard—pristine, sacred, filled with divine music. The entire narrative is filled with such language. But, like in her description of the junkyard, she goes on to complicate her vision of the longleaf forest, and provide something ultimately far more complex and interesting. And so, just as Ray adds nature to the site of labor in her picture of the junkyard, she inserts labor into nature's sacred space.

The most obvious example of this is in her chapter "*The Kindest Cut*". The scene is a longleaf forest, "the most elegant forest" Ray has ever seen (252). The animal species are varied, including exceptionally rare animals, like Bachman's sparrows, which are a kind of Holy Grail for birders in the region. Ray goes on at length on about the beauty and health of the forest, and she draws particular attention to the knowledge of her companion walking in the woods with her—he speaks expertly about the food needs of quail, the red-cockaded woodpecker habitat, the life cycle of longleaf pines. Her companion, significantly, is a logger. He is, of course, a different kind of logger than most, but he refers to this forest as his ideal, the model he attempts to create when he logs. He logs selectively, harvesting individual trees and not entire forests. As Ray writes, "There is a way to have your cake and eat it too; a way to log yet preserve a forest. Leon Neel [the logger] knows how" (251). It is incredibly significant that one of the best forest spaces in the book has a laborer present, and that the best description of a functional forest is found in the mouth of a logger. Ray's ideal forest is here, and it has human labor in it. This space, this idyllic, pristine, romantic, sublime forest is not at all

separated from human labor. Human labor is present in it in a limited, but functional and economically sustainable fashion. This space, while seemingly initially marked by its lack of human labor, (just as the junkyard is initially seen as a space entirely devoid of nature) is ultimately a site of it.

Ray knows that she is blurring the lines between these two (typically) dichotomous extremes, humanity and nature/human labor and pristine nature. This combination, which is maintained throughout the course of the narrative, is made more explicitly clear in her chapter “*Second Coming*,” in which she writes

A junkyard is a wilderness. Both are devotees of decay. The nature of both is a random order, the odd occurrence and juxtaposition of miscellany, backed by a semblance of method. Walk through a junkyard and you’ll see some of the schemes a wilderness takes—Fords in one section, Dodges in another, or older models farthest from the house—so a brief logic of ecology can be found (268-9).

Ray goes on to switch the metaphor around, to liken wilderness to a junkyard as well:

In the same way, an ecosystem makes sense: the canebrakes, the cypress domes. Pine trees regenerate in an indeterminate fashion, randomly here and there where seeds have fallen, but also with some predictability.

Sunlight and moisture must be sufficient for germination, as where a fallen tree has made a hole in the canopy, after a rain. This, too, is order.

(269)

She repeats these connections—seeing the unexpected in both the junkyard and the wilderness, danger in the junkyard and wilderness, driveways as creeks and rivers, and

so on. Her destabilization of these categories of human and natural by inserting nature into a site of human labor and human labor into a site of nature does much to help create a healthy vision of human labor in nature.

Just as with the spaces of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Ray complicates the human/natural dichotomy through her presentation of people. Once again, she allows an artificial dichotomy to be set up (that which is wholly human, i.e.; defined by human labor, and that which is wholly natural), but at the same time undermines the extremes suggested. Her father, Franklin, and her grandfather, Charlie, serve as these ends of the spectrum. Her father, who fears wilderness, and makes his living by working on machines (and does so with a preternatural ability), obviously represents the wholly human. Her grandfather, on the other hand, is the consummate woodsman, and is never at any point associated with machinery of any kind. He, then, represents the wholly natural.

Charlie Ray is an almost mythically huge character in *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, and one gathers, in Janisse Ray's childhood as well. He is a man of tremendous capacity, and unfortunately little means of containing or directing his strength in any positive direction for any length of time. He is an absolutely horrible father to Franklin and his siblings, a terrible husband to his wife. He seems almost more of a force than a person, violent, destructive, and astonishingly powerful. Charlie beats up men twenty years younger than him—he “[is] abnormally strong, built like a barrel, his fingers so massive he [can't] buy a wedding ring” (47). His knowledge of nature is incredible and legendary. Ray writes “As a grown man, Grandpa would disappear for days into the floodplain swamps of the Altamaha River, a truly wild place then (and even

now miraculously unchanged), where he hunted and trapped, fished and plundered. People still remember how he roamed the woods; Charlie was a folk hero” (41). And again, after describing his ability to pull catfish from the swamps and canals with only his hands, “He possessed a sort of magic when it came to nature. People were afraid of him” (41). He spends more than two months in the Altamaha swamps after escaping from the state mental hospital, walking from Milledgeville to Baxley (at least 120 miles, depending on how direct his route was) and is none the worse for wear. Ray tells a story of Charlie showing off during a coon hunt, spotting the raccoon in a tree when the dogs could not scent it. Rather than pointing the raccoon out to his fellow hunters, he told them to call off their dogs, said he would scent the raccoon himself, and crawled around on all fours, then bayed up the tree the raccoon was in. He never let the others in on what he had done, instead letting them think he was some kind of half-wild thing of the woods, a man who could sniff out a raccoon that Walker hounds could not (44-45).

This is the construction of the totally wild person—someone more at home in the woods than in civilization, and someone who “knew the woods by heart” (39) and “never loved a human the way he cherished woods; [who] never gave his heart so fully as to those peaceful wildland refuges that accepted without question any and all of their kind” (40). But Ray, of course, goes on to complicate this construction of Charlie as wholly natural. When Charlie Joe Ray does finally leave the family, he goes down to Florida. In Florida, though, we lose the thread of Charlie as a great woodsman, and hear instead of his legendary feats as a laborer. This fantastic power that defines Charlie is directed towards labor with great success—he starts “calling himself ‘Iron Man’ and setting records picking oranges, out-picking any who dared to challenge him” (55).



Interestingly, Ray tells no tales of Charlie's woodsman feats in Florida. Moreover, she also makes no clear distinction between Charlie's actions in the woods, and his actions in the orange groves. That is, while the two sets of tales—the Georgia tales of the woods and the Florida tales of orange groves—seem distinct (in one he seldom provides well for his family, in the other, he works harder than any had ever seen another person work), Ray does not draw that distinction for the reader. The completely natural man fits into the world of labor as well as he fits into the world of nature.

Charlie's son, Franklin, is the other side of this initial dichotomy. As much as Charlie is associated with the natural, Franklin is associated with machinery, and thus, human labor. As much as Charlie was a master of the woods, Franklin is a master of machines. Of his capacity to repair machines, Ray writes "I've seen him haul a vacuum cleaner or a fan from the dump and have it working in an hour.... I have seen him sit for hours with loupes strapped to his eyes, taking apart a railroad watch, lifting with tweezers gears and screws no bigger than atoms" (75). He built machines as well:

When he built guns, Daddy manufactured firing pins out of old Chevrolet push rods and flat gun springs from Ford door-handle springs. The swing set we played on he welded of pipe. He cut glass with nothing more than a table or other flat surface, a bottle of alcohol, and a glass cutter. He fit a Buick piston in a John Deere tractor. (91)

Just as Charlie was legendary for his abilities in the woods, so Franklin was legendary for his ability to find or make parts to fix anything. He was friends with people well beyond his social status because of his remarkable skill with mechanical things (75-6). Interestingly, Ray at times uses natural language to describe his mechanical prowess:

“He hunts the bolts, cotter keys, wires, shafts, and belts that hold together metal pieces, engineering usefulness. He is on the trail of a sprung spring or a broken part” (75).

Given that this line comes not long after Ray’s chapter on her grandfather and his talents as a woodsman, the irony in it must be intentional. If there is a trail for Franklin, it is a trail to a mechanical thing. If he hunts anything, it is parts for more machines. Her language pushes him even further from the natural world than his interest in machines (and corresponding lack of interest in hunting, fishing, etc.) already has. Franklin seems totally marked by human labor, and thus ostensibly totally disconnected from the natural world.

Furthermore, Ray goes to lengths to show Franklin’s fear of the natural world. She recounts two specific instances in which Franklin makes it very clear he has no interest in participating in the natural world. In the first, Charlie, for reasons known only to him, takes his (four-year-old) son (Franklin) hunting, and then convinces him that they are lost and will likely die in the woods. Franklin later tells Janisse “...that was enough for me never to want to go again” (96). In the second, Franklin attempts to take his family out on the Altamaha River in a homemade boat dubbed the PM38, but catches a snag in the river while going full speed, and the boat sinks before he can get it to shore. Everyone survives, but Franklin “considered the accident a sign. He repaired and sold the boat and quit going to the Altamaha” (224). He told Janisse “I’d try not to even cross the river bridge” (224). Thus, we see Franklin, initially, not only as someone who is not connected to the natural world, but as someone who has a serious aversion to it. His affinity and aptitude for machinery tie him to human labor, and his fear of the

natural world seals the matter. Franklin is wholly of the human world, and not of the natural.

Once again, though, Ray complicates this artificial dichotomy. While Franklin thinks that he fears the natural world, and while his skills seem initially to be entirely in the realm of human labor, neither of these are completely true. Franklin and Janisse do eventually return to the Altamaha, and complete a trip down the river, in another homemade boat, this time without serious mishap (232-3). And despite his fear of the natural, Franklin repeatedly plans trips to the West with his family (though none of them pan out), and talks about wanting to see different animals and kinds of terrain (230). More dramatically, when Franklin's son Steve, who at the time could not swim, slips and falls into the Altamaha, Franklin dives in to save him. Ray writes "He sailed over the railing like a high jumper, in his best Sunday suit, white shirt, black pants, cuff links. There wasn't time to kick off his black polished shoes....His dive was a masterful feat" (225). Of course, Franklin was driven by the love of his child to do this, not by some love of nature, but Ray's description of him here is significant. His actions are beautiful—"masterful" and "sailed" point us towards that. Moreover, he performs this feat while wearing some of the least appropriate clothing in which to perform such a task. That is, he is presumably somewhat limited by his clothing, but still performs this task excellently. We see relatively few descriptions of Franklin's physical actions in this text, especially when contrasted with his father, but here we have him performing beautifully in nature.

Finally, Franklin constantly heals injured creatures. Ray recounts his stitching up of a wounded toad—poking the organs back inside the body and stitching the wound shut with dental floss and a sewing needle (129). He kept a car-struck beagle alive,

feeding it Valium and giving it water until it crawled off, only to reappear completely healthy some weeks later (130-1). He found a green heron with a broken leg on the side of the road, and set the leg. The heron lived in the Ray family living room, and the junkyard, for years following (136-8). He was horrified, and punished his children when he learned that they stood by while a neighbor's child killed a snapping turtle needlessly (135-6). Ray writes this, of all of these stories:

I tell these stories so that you see my father is a curious man, intrigued by the secret lives of animals, a curiosity that sprang from his desire to fix things, to repair things of the world and make them fly and hop and operate again, and to mold his children into good people. He would with equal fury rethread a stripped bolt or solder a heat-split frying pan or patch a bicycle tire or reset a dog's broken leg or pull a tooth. (139)

These tales of healing animals, on their own weight, obviously do not ameliorate the damage to nature created by labor in south Georgia. What they can show, though, is that while Franklin (and others like him) may lack the understanding about how he should best care for the landscape around him, he does not lack for a desire to do so.<sup>3</sup> And so, while Franklin's love for and understanding of nature is not so immediately apparent as Charlie's, it is certainly there. Franklin does not fit into typical romantic environmental narratives. He is not the great, seemingly independently wealthy, prophet that is Muir. Nor is he the raw, almost inhuman force that his father was. Franklin is defined by human labor, working in the junkyard amidst the detritus and refuse of other people, building something useful out of the trash. Illustrating that Franklin does have an understanding of the systems of nature (however limited that understanding may be) is

a very strong statement on Ray's part. On the other hand, showing Charlie, this purely natural force, as a laborer complicates things as well. Charlie is a wild thing; a hunter/gatherer, a fighter, a character too large for life, who is also the best orange picker the groves had ever seen. Ray shows that two seemingly disparate worlds are not actually so disparate, and offers Charlie and Franklin as evidence.

Interestingly, the idea that both the human and natural are a part of all people is present from the beginning of the narrative. In "Child of Pine," the first full chapter of the narrative, Ray tells the story her parents told her of her own origin. Her coming into their lives is associated with the natural—they tell her they went out searching for a sheep that was close to giving birth, and hear her crying. Her cry is mistaken for that of a newborn lamb, but they find her beneath palmetto fronds, with pine needles in her hair. The stories her parents told of her siblings' origins are similar—"My sister had been found in a big cabbage in the garden; a year after me, my brother was discovered under the grapevine, and a year after that, my little brother appeared beside a huckleberry bush" (6). All of these images are wholly natural—presumably the effect intended by Ray's parents. Ray gives these stories a delightful twist though: "From as early as I could question, I was told this creation story. If they'd said they'd found me in the trunk of a '52 Ford, it would have been more believable" (6-7). This line is almost just a toss-away line—Ray immediately moves on to talk about Baxley, GA, her hometown, and abandons the origin myths for the remainder of the text. But the suggestion that the story would have been more believable if it had included something of the detritus of humanity says something significant about both the physical composition of the junkyard and Ray's conception of humanity. She knew from some early age that she was not

wholly the product of nature. She knows herself to be at least as associated with machinery, doubtlessly symbolic of human labor, as she is the natural. She, and all humanity, in her writing, are something between the two.

Regarding human labor as something antithetical to nature—the gnostic approach we see in Muir’s work, the ripples of which are unmistakably present in contemporary environmentalist thought—encourages an environmentalism that cannot offer an effective critique of how we perform labor in nature, but can only flatly reject it. At the same time, wholly embracing human labor in nature leads to obviously disastrous results—strip mining, clear cuts, and industrial mono-crop agriculture. Both of these extremes are unproductive—indeed, dangerous—and must be avoided. There is no single answer to this complex theoretical problem of how we should integrate human labor into nature. However, it is essential that environmentalist take a more serious approach to developing strategies for dealing with this ever-present reality. Flatly rejecting labor in nature only writes environmentalists out of the conversations where their perspective would be helpful, and suggesting partial solutions that do little to address the issues of resource production internationally is almost as useless. Ray’s work offers a wonderfully nuanced approach that stands far from the dominant gnostic trends of contemporary environmentalism, and the field would do well to pay attention.

## Notes

1. Throughout Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierras* he bemoans the fact that his body requires bread, and maintains that could he find a way to do without it, he would never see civilization again.

2. Perhaps backtracking a bit here, but Berry's recent short story "Dismemberment" could be a step towards this, as we see Andy Catlet's missing hand reflective of the necessity of involvement with an industrial world that his characters would just as soon forget. But a begrudging acceptance of the practical world as necessary and Ray's complex integration are worlds apart, and this is where Ray's work shines.

3. The following quotation from *Drifting into Darien* is appropriate here:

Poor people live up and down this river. We work for years to buy a johnboat. Some of us are badly educated, even ignorant. We throw car tires and deer carcasses in the creeks. We dump trash and other bad stuff in. We cut down trees.

But if we could understand a car engine, we could understand a river system, and for it to run it needs all its parts, and the parts have to be clean, in good working order, and they need fuel. (128-129)

While Franklin and many like him operate in ignorance, and do near-irreparable damage in the process, they are not, universally, "ecovillains," to borrow a term from Bart Welling (Welling 128).

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