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Ecological Approaches to Modernism, the U.S. South and 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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December 2016  
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This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council

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## **Abstract**

This project seeks to draw from the insights of the emerging scholarly discipline known as ecocriticism, study of the relationship between human and nonhuman in all arts and in all diverse forms, and apply them to the study of a specific regional art, that of the U.S. South. As an interrogation of the human / nonhuman binary, ecocriticism is intrinsically intertwined with the concept of place. Southern studies—having long explored the diversity (in terms of both human experience and geographical terrain) characterizing the region—offers ecocriticism a ripe testing ground for theoretical mergers and analytic applications. Both fields celebrate hybridity, multiplicity, and variegation. This project, in keeping with this argumentative mandate, analyzes a number of separate primary texts in a variety of formats. Each of these narratives features a palpable, vibrantly realized setting. In most cases, the text's evocation of its integral setting becomes accessible to the reader or viewer primarily through the perceptions, words, and sentiments of a child protagonist. The characters in these texts and films operate outside of larger southern, national, and global societies, participating instead in insular communal or familial systems. Each relies upon an intimate connection to animal life for spiritual, personal, and or directly physical sustenance. Further, these texts, viewed and read as a collective, demonstrate a preoccupation with the nonhuman running through various genres, modes, and time periods of southern narrative. These preoccupations illustrate the potentials for literature and film to shed light upon the relevance of posthumanist outlooks towards biological systems and geographical methodologies and ecological paradigms of place and its nonhuman or more-than-human dimensions. Further, each of these young protagonists, as his or her respective narrative progresses, discover the previously enjoyed intimacy of their connection with the land to be endangered by modernity, capitalism, and similar threats to both natural landscapes and human

lifestyles. The project of decentering the human underlying ecocriticism and ecocinema, in the context of southern studies, enters a pre-existing conversation uniquely suited to encompass challenges to age-old binaries and hegemonies.

## Table of Contents

A. <b>Introduction: Ecology and Representation of Place in the Modern and Postmodern South</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1. <u>Overview of Key Texts and Central Ideas</u> .....	<u>2</u>
2. <u>Chapter by Chapter Discussion</u> .....	<u>16</u>
B. <b>Chapter One: The Narrative Biosphere of <i>Go Down, Moses</i>: Interconnection in Faulknerian Ecology</b> .....	<b>27</b>
1. <u>Introduction to the Text and Overview of Key Points</u> .....	<u>28</u>
2. <u>Ecological Interconnection: A Theoretical Overview</u> .....	<u>33</u>
3. <u>The Network Model: A Commentary on Existing Ecological Approaches to the Text</u> .....	<u>37</u>
4. <u>“Was”</u> .....	<u>44</u>
5. <u>“The Fire and the Hearth”</u> .....	<u>47</u>
6. <u>“Pantaloons in Black”</u> .....	<u>52</u>
7. <u>“The Old People”</u> .....	<u>64</u>
8. <u>“The Bear”</u> .....	<u>72</u>
9. <u>“Delta Autumn”</u> .....	<u>87</u>
10. <u>“Go Down, Moses”</u> .....	<u>90</u>
11. <u>Models of Assemblage and New Materialisms: Faulkner, Ecocriticism, and the Future</u> .....	<u>92</u>
C. <b>Chapter Two: <i>Power</i> and Access: Animal Consciousness and Postcolonial Ecology in the Writing of Linda Hogan</b> .....	<b>102</b>
1. <u>Introduction: Native Identity, Nature Writing, and the Fiction and Nonfiction of Linda Hogan</u> .....	<u>103</u>
2. <u><i>Dwellings</i>: A Language of Nonhuman Value</u> .....	<u>107</u>
3. <u>A Note on Existing Criticism of Linda Hogan and <i>Power</i></u> .....	<u>112</u>
4. <u>Animal Subjectivity and the Postcolonial Condition: A Theoretical Overview</u> .....	<u>120</u>

5.	<u><i>Power: Animal Consciousness, Hogan’s Panther, and the Postcolonial Ecology of her Fictional Florida</i></u>	127
<b>D.</b>	<b>Chapter 3: The Filmic and Literary Bioregions of the U.S. South: An Examination of Works by Jeff Nichols and Janisse Ray</b>	<b>135</b>
1.	<u>Bioregionalism, Critical Place, and Challenges to Traditional Borders</u>	136
2.	<u>Southern Studies and Contemporary Approaches to the Global / Local Dichotomy</u>	145
3.	<u>Review of Existing Criticism: <i>Mud</i></u>	153
4.	<u>Critical Reading: <i>Mud</i></u>	159
5.	<u>Critical Reading: <i>Ecology of a Cracker Childhood</i></u>	166
<b>E.</b>	<b>Conclusion: <i>Beasts of the Southern Wild</i>, Bioregionalism, Southern Hybridity, and the Future of Eco-Cinematic Regionalism</b>	<b>169</b>
1.	<u>Introduction to the Film and Overview of Filmic Ecology</u>	170
2.	<u><i>Beasts of the Southern Wild</i>: Review of Existing Criticism</u>	187
3.	<u>Critical Reading: <i>Beasts of the Southern Wild</i></u>	194
4.	<u>Global Regionalism, Planetary Localism, Fictive Demarcations, and Material Boundary Lines: The U.S. South, Ecological Art, and the Future of Borders</u>	203
<b>F.</b>	<b>Works Cited / Consulted: Introduction</b>	<b>202</b>
1.	<u>Primary Texts</u>	203
2.	<u>Critical Place and Bioregionalism</u>	204
3.	<u>Southern Place</u>	205
4.	<u>Cinema and Ecology</u>	206
5.	<u>Posthumanism</u>	207
6.	<u>Queer, Marxist, and Postcolonial Ecologies</u>	208
7.	<u>General Ecocriticism</u>	209
<b>G.</b>	<b>Works Cited / Consulted: Chapter One</b>	<b>210</b>
1.	<u>Primary Text</u>	211

2.	<u>Ecology in <i>Go Down, Moses</i></u>	212
3.	<u>General Faulkner and Ecology</u>	213
4.	<u>Ecocriticism and Literary Place</u>	215
5.	<u>Animal Subjectivity</u>	216
6.	<u>Posthumanism</u>	217
<b>H.</b>	<b>Works Cited / Consulted: Chapter Two</b>	<b>218</b>
1.	<u>Primary Texts</u>	219
2.	<u>Criticism of <i>Power</i></u>	220
3.	<u>General Linda Hogan Criticism</u>	221
4.	<u>Native American Place</u>	222
5.	<u>Postcolonial Ecology</u>	223
6.	<u>Animal Subjectivity</u>	224
7.	<u>Posthumanism</u>	225
<b>I.</b>	<b>Works Cited / Consulted: Chapter Three</b>	<b>226</b>
1.	<u>Primary Texts</u>	227
2.	<u>Discussion of <i>Mud</i></u>	228
3.	<u>Bioregionalism and Critical Place</u>	229
4.	<u>Southern Regionalism</u>	231
5.	<u>Southern Childhood</u>	232
<b>J.</b>	<b>Works Cited / Consulted: Conclusion</b>	<b>233</b>
1.	<u>Primary Texts</u>	234
2.	<u>Discussion of <i>Beasts of the Southern Wild</i></u>	235
3.	<u>Race and Ecology</u>	236
4.	<u>Cinematic Ecology</u>	237
5.	<u>Ecocriticism, Posthumanism, and Environmental Literature</u>	239

**A. Introduction: Ecology and Representation of Place in the Modern and Postmodern South**



## 1. Overview of Key Texts and Central Ideas

In many respects, the field referred to as ecocriticism stands unique amongst the varied sub-disciplines within literary and cultural scholarship. The field has an unusual scientific trajectory, requiring literary scholars to develop ecological and biological knowledge alongside interpretative skills (Garrard 5). Additionally, ecocriticism's unusual intellectual evolution and murky, sometimes daunting, conceptual breadth warrant mention. The discipline did not develop gradually and alongside a political movement, but (contrarily) at a time after “environmentalism had already turned into a vast field of converging and conflicting projects and given rise to other humanistic subdisciplines” (Heise *Changing* 506). As a predictable result, ecocriticism itself emerges as a widely variegated academic orientation: “a field whose complexities by now require . . . book length introductions” (Heise *Changing* 506). Numerous branches and subdivisions exist within the larger encompassing frame of ecocriticism.

In ecocriticism's emerging years, this conceptual breadth applied only to the theoretical underpinnings (as broad as those underlying environmentalism) of the field, the targets of literary investigation being, at this time, somewhat limited. The primary sites of ecocritical attention in the early days included poetry of the Romantic era or genre, and the categories of writing referred to as “wilderness narrative” and “nature writing” (Garrard 5). In more recent years, numerous ecocritics have sought to move beyond this traditional exploration of wild and rural settings in, predominantly, Anglophone locales, arguing that “if ecocriticism's level of acceptance within the academy is to continue to grow . . . ecocritics must make a unified and rigorous effort to demonstrate the field's true range and its power to illuminate an almost endless variety of texts” (Armbruster and Wallace 3). Further, many scholars contend that the application of ecocritical theory to contemporary literary texts and artistic artifacts operates as a

logical outgrowth of the need, within the field, to strive to address and confront contemporary environmental dynamics not discussed by writers of previous eras. The need to tackle pressing environmental crises specific to the historical present and unique to its all-too-contemporary sets of conditions, many scholars begin to argue, emerges as a moral and political necessity for eco-criticism (Clark 5; Garrard 15).<sup>1</sup>

Several of the subdisciplines within eco-criticism interrogate “the question of nonhuman subjectivity”: a problem in philosophy and deconstruction concerning the “fundamental repression” (ethically and politically) involved in the social process of “taking it for granted that the subject is always already human”; the term “speciesism” (following from race-, sex-, and other -isms) functions as a terminological moniker for ontological repression of animals and other forms of nonhuman subjectivity (Wolfe 1). The subset of ecocritical theory concerning animal subjectivity presently emerges as the field’s most rapidly expanding sub-discipline (Garrard 203). Broadly speaking, the term “animal studies” invokes “analysis of the representation of animals in history or culture”; though, it should be noted, literary analysts working in this vein draw extensively from other movements in the humanities addressing “the philosophical considerations of animal rights” (Garrard 146). The term “posthumanism,” also

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Garrard, an influential ecocritic, positions the field as a unique mode of study, distinctive in its close relationship to the life sciences. Distinguishing the field from other forms of social science, particularly in the humanities, is the “moral and political necessity” posed by contemporary environmental crises; these connections to science render eco-criticism uniquely suited, as a rhetorical frame, for confronting such issues (16). Timothy Clark, author of *the Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (2011), similarly points toward a “moral impetus behind ecocriticism” which “necessarily commits” those working within it to a “huge philosophical and even religious demand” of elucidating “what relationship human beings should have to the natural world” (5). Despite the moralizing tonality of such language, it is clear that ecocriticism operates within a frame of timeliness, carrying an awareness of crisis, even apocalypse.

invoked as a referent for certain works within this strain of eco-theory, refers to a philosophic, discursive, and deconstructive project which “subjects both humanity and animality to simultaneous critique” (Garrard 170).

A similar academic project, also associated (increasingly) with ecocriticism—variously referred to as speculative realism, object-oriented-ontology, new materialism, speculative realism and a host of other monikers—investigates the intrinsic vitality of objects (things). These thinkers, collectively an important component to the overall project of academic posthumanism, challenge and interrogate the “human/nonhuman boundary”: an academic buzzword identifying the insidious, latently, and near universally embraced binary opposition between humanity and everything else, including animals, objects, and the cosmos itself. Additionally, such thinkers also push back against the related, and, perhaps, even more baffling, opposition between conscious life and inert, inanimate matter.

Rather than accepting the centering of philosophy—all knowledge, really—in a humanistic cogito, these thinkers (many taking inspiration from controversial German philosopher Martin Heidegger) seek to challenge humanity's hegemony as the phenomenological center of the universe, opening up a “new age of metaphysics” for purposes of explaining “a ghostly cosmos in which humans, dogs, oak trees, and tobacco are on precisely the same footing as glass bottles, pitchforks, windmills, comets, ice cubes, magnets, and atoms” (Harmon 2). Some thinkers in this field actually discuss the possibility of something like psychic life within objects, even speculating as to the eventual need to categorize and delineate “the rights of things” (Mitchell xi).

Others, however, ask seemingly more practical environmental questions regarding the role of objects as affective forces in the universe (agents of causality), emphasizing “the capacity

of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett viii). Both of these emerging theoretical fields, within the broader rubric of ecocriticism, invite a discussion of literary texts demonstrating a complex and porous understanding of the boundaries and demarcations supposedly setting human beings apart from any other existent modality. Much contemporary eco-theory—including not only investigations of animal and object subjectivities but also the field’s broader place-based approach to literature—opens up a discussion of the tendency of literary texts to challenge the idea that humanity sits (meta-physically, ethically, historically) at the affective and interpretive center of the cosmos.

My project seeks to identify the anti-anthropocentric currents within twentieth-century American literature, particularly as these currents manifest in modernism, postmodernism, and southern literature. More generally, I wish to identify the relationship between ecology and writing of this style and era, paying particular attention to the manner in which a decentering of the human is performed textually and rhetorically. Additionally, I wish to identify the ways in which ecocriticism (including but not limited to theory of animal subjectivity and the inner dimensions of objects) helps to illumine this decentering. Ecocriticism includes certain identity political subdivisions (queer ecology, Marxist ecology, postcolonial ecology, etc.). These schools of ecocritical thought, anthropocentric as they may seem to be, may also prove to be relevant here. Such conceptual positions highlight the manner in which human identity itself sees obfuscation through overly anthropocentric, correlationist views of the cosmos, these often manifested in logo-centric, masculinized interpretations of nature and humanity’s connections to,

and roles within, it.

Literature of the U.S. South will be examined here in terms of particular contributions to this anti-anthropocentric decentering of the human. With this goal in mind, I will examine existing place-based approaches to the South (such as the global South methodology); these come to be analyzed and incorporated into this project's total view of the environmental dynamics common to, and characteristic of, various literary and filmic Souths. These approaches also, in certain instances and contexts, carry potential to transcend anthropocentric logic. They do so by recalibrating assessments of a multitude of factors (humanistic and otherwise) shaping both the perceptions and realities of contemporary globalism, localism, and regional space. Further, this project examines existing place-based genre categories of writing (the pastoral, so-called nature writing, and others) and their performance of, or unwillingness to perform, challenges to anthropocentrism. With this last goal in mind, my project is designed to answer the following questions: first, do these types writing perform this decentering of the human better or differently than other modes of writing? And, second, how are these tropes modified in the modern era and in modern American (or southern) prose writing and filmic art.

The anthology *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, edited by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace, presents a spirited argument demonstrating the necessity for ecocriticism to expand its scope (in terms of primary texts rather than conceptual underpinnings) beyond its traditional target of so-called nature writing. The body of work collected by the co-editors proves extremely useful in sorting out the distinctions (stylistic, thematic, and otherwise) between writings overtly about nature and related topics and other types of texts which, though not explicitly engaged with environmental concerns, might have something of relevance to say about ecology and the various paradigms at play in eco-theory or

speak to humanity's attenuated connections to the non-human world of forms encircling the species and operationally intertwining with it. Such genre classifications, though problematic and anachronistic, remain relevant to the study of literature and the interpretation of natural phenomenon: "Nature writing continues to be used as a term to describe a kind of creative non-fiction associated with usually meditative accounts of natural landscapes and wildlife" (Clark 5). It is important to keep in mind, however, that other forms of writing and art may also effectively comment upon environmental concerns.

Numerous ecocritical scholars argue that it has become necessary to read overt nature writing against, and in light of, other genres. This dual approach, such thinkers suggest, facilitates "a more balanced perspective on both natural phenomenon and their potential meanings for human beings" (Elder viii). My project accommodates these concerns by juxtaposing texts overtly about such concepts as nature, environment, and habitat against other types of writing and art addressing these concepts more indirectly. The overarching point of focus between the two is the manner in which "nature" and "the environment" appear (both micro- and macro-cosmically) in twentieth century prose writing; these terms are emphasized here because much of the ecocritical theory I draw from interrogates and problematizes their use and application.

Ursula Heise's book, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), blends together ecological views of the global and the emerging field of globalization theory. In doing justice to this central task, the work takes on a sprawling, multifaceted trajectory, emerging as a fully-fledged examination of our contemporary understanding of place. As Heise instructively points out, there is no existing theoretical consensus as to what globalization even is. Those seeking to understand the phenomenon must ask and answer a number of difficult questions. Heise, in her

very fascinating book, synthesizes and explains a variety of relevant paradigms. In addition, she close reads a number of diverse texts and elucidates divergent imaginative paradigms employed in the interest of conceptualizing a global existence. The fibrous connective tissue between the concepts “global” and “local” come to be explored here from every conceivable angle. In order to truly understand the evocation of setting in contemporary American literature, it is necessary to possess a theoretical understanding of place extending beyond strictly environmental topics.

Such a current and panoramic understanding of place and space is of particular relevance to the study of literature of the U.S. South, a field wherein a variegated reevaluation of locality is already taking place. The field of southern studies operates already as the hub and testing ground for variegated and widespread reevaluations of locality. Globalization theory, both within and outside of environmental contexts, serves as a vital component to the Global South movement. Many contemporary scholars of the U.S. South characterize the region as a locale characterized by hybridity, diaspora, and general multiplicity:

The South, in such a view, becomes a space where the African diaspora’s northern areas overlap the southernmost reaches of the English conquest of North America—in degrees so varying that it becomes difficult, once again, to speak of the region as unified at all except, paradoxically, in its difference from (and similarity to) the greater whiteness further north, the greater blackness further South (Smith and Cohn 4).

Christopher Rieger's book, *Clear-Cutting Eden: Ecology and the Pastoral in Southern Literature* (2009), directly engages ecological theory while, simultaneously, contributing to this ongoing reevaluation of place within southern literature. Like many contemporary eco-critics, Rieger investigates nature as a discursive construct, highlighting the myriad ways in which human social behavior organizes around and interacts with the concepts invested in the linguistic “idea” of nature (as opposed to a tangible biosphere—birds, grass, leaves, insects). As *Clear*

*Cutting Eden* functions as a study in Southern literature, the conceptual touchstones investigated here (aside from nature as social construct, generally) involve constructed notions of the South—“abundant paradise,” “pastoral haven of order and simplicity,” “feudal, aristocratic anachronism,” “a place cursed and ruined by its legacy of chattel slavery”—which derive their rhetorical power, the author argues, through “particular versions of the relationship between the South and the natural world” (1). As a literary counterpoint to these constructed notions, Rieger looks to “the period often termed the Southern Renaissance,” within which he identifies a “new wave of authors” (including Caldwell, Rawlings, Hurston, and Faulkner) who manage to “reconfigure the use of nature in their fiction in conjunction with modernist analyses of the self and the South” (1). Texts from the Southern Renaissance period receive analysis against contemporary theoretical notions of the biosphere in a manner emphasizing similarities between the field of ecology and views of land, place, and nature put forth in literary writing.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the staunch humanism of more traditional “Southern pastoral” literary visions of nature, these emerging Southern Renaissance era “ecopastorals” more vividly and accurately point toward the “symbiotic relationship of humans and their natural environment,” positing a wider, less totalizing view of “nature as a network that includes humans” (9). What Rieger identifies in these texts edges toward the textual decentering of the human examined by my project. This “network model”—a rejection of “static, passive conceptions of nature”—has a similar ring to many currently trendy eco-paradigms including Timothy Morton’s idea of “the

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<sup>2</sup> “What is so revolutionary and compelling about the ecopastorals of the Southern Renaissance and Great Depression is their prescience in articulating environmental issues that are still pressing and unresolved, as well as their skillful adaptation of traditional conventions and themes for a new era,” Rieger maintains (171). In the writings of Faulkner and other southern modernists of the era, the southern pastoral is re-tooled in a manner emphasizing clear-cutting and other opposed changes upon the contemporary landscape.



mesh,” Jane Bennett’s concept of “assemblages,” and many other worldviews seeking to decenter the human and highlight a wider, and more puzzling, connectivity (7).

Rieger, however, carefully historicizes his study, highlighting the profound changes in human interaction with the natural world endemic to the southern experience of early modernity, generally, and the Great Depression, specifically. My project expands the application of ecocriticism to southern literature in two key ways: first, by tracing the developments identified by Rieger past the southern Renaissance period, into the late twentieth century and beyond; and, second, by juxtaposing the insights of Rieger and fellow ecocritics against other contemporary theories of place, particularly those related to recent developments in southern studies. More precisely, I will be ferreting out the connection between ecology and southern literature with the specific goal of identifying works challenging anthropocentrism in meaningful ways.

My project will also examine identity-political subgenres within ecocriticism. Raymond Williams, in the concluding section of his influential study *The Country and the City*, argues that the most important factor in the linguistic construction of our notions of country and city, urban and rural, has been the capitalist system which—through “abstracted social drives,” “fundamental priorities in social relations,” and “criteria of growth and of profit and loss”—has, through years and generations, “altered our country and created our kinds of city” (302). The division of labor and the binary opposition between “country” and “city” are, for Williams, two sides of the same coin. “Country” and “city” (as well as many other monikers used by human beings to describe place on various scales and at various levels) function as political terms, invested with meaning and affect by structures of power and authority; these represent the spatial, locational, and geographic coordinates of capitalism. These claims by Williams prefigure many central ideas of the political philosophy known in contemporary critical parlance as Eco-

Marxism. John Bellamy Foster and certain other critics working at the contemporary intersection of ecocriticism and Marxism trace the historical development of ecology, arguing that theories of materialism (including but not limited to Marxism) “promoted—indeed made possible—ecological ways of thinking” (1). Collectively, selections examining the connection between Marxism and ecology will be applied in order to shed light upon literary texts exploring connections, amongst and between, economics, materialism, notions of place, and notions of nature, theoretical ecology, and interrogation of the human/nonhuman boundary.

Two similarly titled 2011 books—*Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, and the Environment* by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin; and, *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* by Elizabeth Deloughry and George B. Handley—function as explorations of the conceptual overlap between postcolonial theory and ecology. Key topics within this particular strain of ecocriticism include post-colonialism's understanding of “environmental issues” as “central to the projects of European conquest and global domination” and “inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism,” the regarding of colonized individuals as “part of nature” (thus justifying the treatment of such individuals “instrumentally as animals”), and the co-option of colonized subjects into “western views of the environment,” making “cultural and environmental restitution” extremely problematic (Huggan and Tiffin 6).

Two 2010 works (equally similar in title)—Timothy Morton's *PMLA* article "Queer Ecology"; and, a book, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson—emerge as key texts within the relatively new field of queer ecology. Like eco-Marxism and postcolonial ecology, this field explores connections between ecology and identity politics; however, like post-humanism and object-oriented ontology, queer ecology challenges the human-nonhuman binary opposition (Morton 277). This opposition to

humanity's pristine and central conceptual position amongst the cosmos renders queer ecology particularly relevant to my project. These thinkers emphasize the irreducibility, inherent strangeness, and seemingly infinite difference latent to our perception of the ecosystem:

Strange strangers are uncanny, familiar and strange simultaneously. Their familiarity is strange, their strangeness familiar. They cannot be thought of as part of a series (such as species or genus) without violence. Yet their uniqueness is not such that they are independent. They are composites of other strange strangers (277).

The idea here is that there is nothing "natural" about humanity or the biosphere; both emerge from the analysis of queer ecology as fuzzy, ill-defined entities. Of these identity political ecologies, queer ecology bears the most direct relationship to the textual decentering of the human my project seeks to identify.

This project seeks to draw from the insights of the emerging scholarly discipline known as ecocriticism, study of the relationship between human and nonhuman in all arts and in all diverse forms, and apply them to the study of a specific regional art, that of the U.S. South. As an interrogation of the human/nonhuman binary, ecocriticism is intrinsically intertwined with the concept of place. Southern studies—having long explored the diversity (in terms of both human experience and geographical terrain) characterizing the region—offers ecocriticism a ripe testing ground for theoretical mergers and analytic applications. Both fields celebrate hybridity, multiplicity, and variegation. This project, in keeping with this argumentative mandate, analyzes a number of separate primary texts in a variety of formats.

William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (1940) and Linda Hogan's *Power* (1999) demonstrate the ways in which the nonhuman biosphere, as existing in various eras of the twentieth century U. S. South, comes to be represented in the nonfiction prose novel. Another work by Hogan, *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (1995), an account of the

various biospheres in which the Native American author has lived, illustrates similar representational capacities existing in the nonfiction memoir. Another creative memoir, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999) by Janisse Ray, further clarifies various facets of the southern landscape, as documented and celebrated in creative nonfiction. Finally, two films from recent years—*Mud* (2013), directed by Jeff Nichols; and, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), directed by Ben Zeitlin—represent the filmic manifestations of the landscapes, ecologies, and life-worlds of the southern imaginary.

Each of these narratives features a palpable, vibrantly realized setting. In most cases, the text's evocation of its integral setting becomes accessible to the reader or viewer primarily through the perceptions, words, and sentiments of a child protagonist. Even *Dwellings*, less overtly concerned with childhood than the other works, utilizes tropes of childhood in its narrative development of place, reading like a developmental biography of place, a personal treatise on the author's exposure to the natural world not unlike those by Ray and Harry Crews, another writer known for exploring childhood and southern landscapes through the medium of nonfiction prose.

In Faulkner's novel, the focus rests upon the plantations, town zones, and rustic "big woods" inhabited by Isaac McCaslin, who remains a boy or young man through most of his appearances in the text. Hogan's novel focuses upon Omishto, a Native American adolescent female residing in a swampy wilderness adjacent to sacred tribal land. Ray's memoir, suggestive of childhood in its very title, deals with the childhood of its author, who grew up in rural Georgia under circumstances approaching poverty: Her family ran a junk yard. Despite these economic conditions, the book makes clear that its author drew sustenance and energy from pine forests

and other natural phenomenon.

The films share such commonalities with their textual counterparts. Ellis, the adolescent male at the center of *Mud*, clings to a similarly hardscrabble existence, living on a boat and depending upon Arkansas's White River for sustenance. Finally, Hushpuppy, the eight-year-old lead character of *Beasts*, participates in a post-national, post-capital society, located outside New Orleans, off the grid and beyond the levee. These young protagonists, each in their own particularized fashion, interpret their local environments in manners emphasizing watersheds and resource concentrations while, simultaneously, deemphasizing the social organization of place. In doing so, they embrace bioregions rather than the socially arbitrated boundaries of cities, states, and towns. Bioregional views of spatial demarcation have taken on contemporary relevance not only in works of art and literature but also in the various fields and projects associated with critical place and interrogation of the local / global dichotomy.

The characters in these texts and films operate outside of larger southern, national, and global societies, participating instead in insular communal or familial systems. Each relies upon an intimate connection to animal life for spiritual, personal, and or directly physical sustenance. Further, these texts, viewed and read as a collective, demonstrate a preoccupation with the nonhuman running through various genres, modes and time periods of southern narrative. These preoccupations illustrate the potentials for literature and film to shed light upon the relevance of posthumanist outlooks towards biological systems and geographical methodologies, emphasizing, in keeping with ecological paradigms of place and its nonhuman or more-than-human dimensions.

Further, each of these young protagonists, as his or her respective narrative progresses, discover the previously enjoyed intimacy of their connection with the land to be endangered by

modernity, capitalism, and similar threats to both natural landscapes and human lifestyles. Prior to their exposure to corrosive outside influences, each demonstrate a limited awareness of socially demarcated space. They, for the most part, only loosely understand the sliding scale between rurality and urbanity, embracing only Raymond Williams's essential distinction between county and the city; the city, for most of the characters, is feared and misunderstood; the country, however, is embraced as essential to proper lifestyle and proper self-understanding.

## 2. Chapter by Chapter Discussion

The first chapter, “The Narrative Biosphere of *Go Down, Moses*: Interconnection in Faulknerian Ecology,” builds upon not only Rieger’s study of the unique ecological insights of Faulkner (both generally and in the specific case of *Go Down, Moses*) and other writers associated with the southern renaissance but, additionally, a broad, existing body of ecological and /or nature and wilderness based readings of both the primary text (widely known as a stand out text for environmental issues within both Faulkner’s canon and modernism as a style and movement) or Faulkner’s work, generally. As an update to, and commentary upon, these existing readings and interpretations, this reading of Faulkner’s episodic novel reads *GDM* against contemporary models of ecological networking and interconnection, paying particular attention to Jane Bennett’s philosophy of assemblage logic. Networking, always a vital figurative trope within ecological thought, takes a newfound urgency in the age of posthumanism.

The models of interconnection emerging from the work of Bennett, Timothy Morton, Graham Harman, and other philosophers, phenomenologists, and ecocritics seek to refashion the age-old metaphor of ecology / nature as a system of entanglement, a conceit associated with biological science since Darwin, in light of recent challenges to humanity’s hegemonic reign as the causal and interpretative center of the cosmos. The narrative structure of Faulkner’s text, oft mislabeled as a story collection, itself operates as an entangled system adhering to a sort of assemblage logic. Faulkner’s ecological stylistics resonate as both an integral part of a larger body of ecologically conscious writing associated with the southern renaissance and a narrative illustration of environmental systems, as emerging decades before Faulkner, evolving into the era of environmental degradation afflicting the author’s own experience of the southern landscape, and continuing to evolve into the contemporary era of global crisis and nonhuman feedback

loops from which posthumanism and ecocriticism emerge.

The second chapter, “Power and Access: Animal Consciousness and Postcolonial Ecology in the Writing of Linda Hogan,” reads both of the included works by Hogan—the memoir, *Dwellings* and the novel, *Power*—in context of the related fields of postcolonial ecology and animal studies. This theoretical intersection, embraced by many working in each field, notably Huggan and Tiffin’s animal-aware approach to the study of postcolonial environments, sheds light upon the very-real, non-theoretical conundrums involving entanglements between the rights and welfares of native human groups and those of animals and ecosystems. In *Power*, these conundrums manifest fictionally in the relationship between a tribe of indigenous Floridians and the species of panther it holds sacred.

*Dwellings*, though less overtly concerned with questions of rights, focuses at great length on the distinctions between native views of the natural world and those prevalent within the dominant culture. Overwhelmingly, the thematic and argumentative trajectories of Hogan’s autobiography weigh in against the metaphysics of the dominant culture, suggesting that its inherent views of the natural world result in toxic and corrosive influences. The symbiotic entanglements between human and panther explored in the novel, as interpreted by Omishto, come to be problematized by these very same influences. In suggesting that non-native humanity, operating within currents of modernity and capitalism, pollutes and endangers the local ecosystems encompassing and sustaining both native tribes and the forms of animal life vital to their ways of life, *Power* functions as both philosophical extension and narrative illustration of the central arguments emerging from the nonfiction text.

The third chapter, “The Filmic and Literary Bioregions of the U.S. South: An Examination of works by Jeff Nichols and Janisse Ray,” builds upon Heise’s survey of the



various paradigms of locality at play in contemporary theory of place. Of these competing viewpoints, bioregionalism stands among both the earliest to emerge and the most widely discussed. Peter Berg is an integral and much admired theoretical pioneer of the bioregional movement. His piece, “Growing a Life-Place Politics” (1986), outlines core values and founding principles still integral to work of contemporary followers: “Growing the politics for a life-place has to be based on the reality of living there, and it is necessary to remind ourselves that no facts are established without evidence” (39). Such a political vision, he explains, takes root and “originates with individuals who identify with real places and find ways to interact positively with the life-web around them” (39).

Within Berg’s original formulation, several such “seed groups”<sup>3</sup> band together to represent bioregions—which, he specifies, “are usually larger than one watershed”—in order to function as “practical institutions for resolving bioregion-wide problems”; these initial groups (“watershed councils”) join together “to form an independent body to represent their entire bioregion” (40). Such disparate groups achieve unity through “a common interest in applying their convictions to local situations (in addition to having opinions about more distant ones)” (44).<sup>4</sup> Berg views bioregional social organization as “a large step toward taking the strain off”

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<sup>3</sup> “This seed group is and will remain the most important unit of bioregional political interaction,” Berg writes. “Several social sheds of neighbors working on a wide variety of different projects . . . can easily join together to form an organization for the broader local community” (39). Though small groups do band together, bioregional governance generally operates on a much smaller scale than nation-state logic and global economics.

<sup>4</sup> “Their political activity is an extension of the work they do,” Berg adds. “They have a hands-on identity that is compatible with the goals of restoring natural systems, meeting basic human needs, and creating support for individuals” (44). There is an awareness of global ecosystems which are seen to benefit from such regional proactivity.

the planet (48). Writing decades ago, he uses language similar to the networked terminology utilized by eco-theorists, mentioning a mysterious “web of life” in which “we are all completely enmeshed” (48). He advocates bioregionalism as a means of living within this network, making full use of our limited knowledge of its intricacies, in order to “stop tearing the web apart, and consciously build a role as partners in all life” (48).<sup>5</sup>

James T. Parsons, in a more contemporary explanation of the movement, “On Bioregionalism and Watershed Consciousness” (2013) puts forth the claim that regionalism is undergoing a “reawakening of interest” in the academic humanities, with increasing attention paid to “the character and functioning of regions and microregions” (49). One possible explanation for this renewed popularity within the social sciences relates to the bioregional movement’s tendency to spawn “considerable literature”: “Its leaders and theoreticians have included poets, novelists, and philosophers,” Parsons writes. He further discusses the movement’s “remarkably sensitive, literate” participants and their shared passion for “an almost mythic reciprocity between people and place” (50). Bioregionalists, in addition to this literary leaning, adopt a strange position in relation to mainstream environmentalism: “They are of, but not in, the organized conservation movement and have no ties with groups such as the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, or the Audubon society” (50). The piece also includes language echoing Berg’s call to alleviate the burdens placed upon the planet by industrial capitalism, describing bioregionalism as both “a kind of unifying principle” and “an action-oriented cultural

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<sup>5</sup> “Bioregional politics does not try to overcome the mystery; it is aimed toward making a social transition so that we can live with that mystery,” Berg writes (48). Cosmologies/ideologies like posthumanism and queer ecology similarly emphasize the need to harmonize with entities one might not fully comprehend.

geography” (56).

Finally, to conclude this overview of bioregional theory and literature, in “Place: An Argument for Bioregional History” (1994), Dan Flores (also intrigued by the purported “reawakening” of regionalism as a pursuit within the academic humanities) discusses bioregionalism’s relationship to historical views of place: the phenomenon, as “a modern social movement” offers interest, he contends, to “environmental historians” because of its “focus on ecology and geography” and “emphasis on the close linkage between ecological locale and human culture” (5).<sup>6</sup> Further, he argues, it connects to “central questions of environmental historical inquiry” through its “implication that in a variety of ways humans not only alter environments but also adapt to them” (5).

My project’s application of bioregional paradigms to narratives of the U.S. South begins here, in the third chapter, with close reading of Nichol’s film and Ray’s autobiography (*Mud* and *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, respectively), yet carries forward into the concluding section on *Beasts*. Both sections call attention to a wide array of southern works either conjuring landscapes as identifiably southern bioregions, emanating a bioregional sensibility concerning the human sense of place, or challenging traditional models of socially organized space. Ray’s biography falls in line with the traditions of bioregional writing, conjuring a history of regional place along the lines of those called for by Flores. *Mud* functions as a postmodern, filmic update

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<sup>6</sup> Declaring the “politically-derived boundaries of county, state, and national borders” to be “mostly useless in understanding nature,” Flores, following this logic, calls for environmental history to “follow the lead” of bioregionalism in “drawing the boundaries of the places we study in ways that make real sense ecologically and topographically” (5-6). Janice Ray’s memoir offers precisely the sort of bioregional history called for here, detailing the evolutionary development of Georgia pine forests and other southern landscapes.

of the genre.

The conclusion, “*Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Bioregionalism, and the future of Eco-cinematic Regionalism,” draws extensively from the emerging discipline of filmic ecology, or ecocinema, which emerges within posthumanist and global frames and involves numerous issues and topics of relevance to the study of regional and/or ecologically-oriented filmmaking. It is the filmic manifestation of textual ecocriticism. Doris Balthruschat, Pat Brereton, and the writing team of Sydney Dobrin and Sean Morey each explore the concept of media ecologies. Dobrin and Morey—editors of *Ecosee: Image, Rhetoric, Nature* (2009), a text analyzing all forms of visual media—offer important insights regarding the role of moving images in representation of ecological concepts, outlining the basic tenets of their critical methodology in the anthology’s introduction, “Ecosee: A First Glimple,” wherein the term Ecosee is explained to reference “the study and the production of the visual (re)presentation of space, environment, ecology, and nature in photographs, paintings, television, film, video games, computer media, and other forms of image-based media” (2).<sup>7</sup> In accordance with this conceptual approach, *Ecosee* regards the contemporary ecological conundrum as “a dilemma of representation . . . of rhetorical and visual choices” rather than just a political/ecological crisis” (3).

Zeitlin’s film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, offers an illuminating and illustrative example of a media generated ecology actively addressing the “representational dilemma” identified by

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<sup>7</sup> *Ecosee*, the editors maintain, “considers the role of visual rhetoric, picture theory, semiotics, and other image-based studies in understanding the construction of space, place, nature, and ecology” (2). It works towards these ends, further, by functioning as “an analysis of existing images,” “a work toward making theories that put forward ways of thinking about the relationship between image and environment,” and “a theory of visual design for those who make images” (2).

the *Ecosee* writers. Wide arrays of images reflect and refract against one another, each holding a unique place within director and crew's carefully curated array of metonymic environmental snapshots. Few current films, from the U.S. South, the global South, or any other identifiable region, offer such bountiful and panoramic exploration of the conceptual and perceptual connectivity between image, static or moving, and the human sense of place. *Beasts*, like most of the narratives evaluated here, is the tale of a young southern person and their experience of a unique community and biosphere.

Hushpuppy, the young narrator and central character, lives with her father in the bathtub, a community not found on maps. In a precarious biological system, subject to rapid environmental change, the members of the bathtub community—located outside of New Orleans in a swampy, boat navigable region past the levees—resist the trappings of industrial society. They live in ramshackle, hybrid architectures constituted by a blend of natural and man-made elements, all scavenged and arranged into a visual and functional harmony with the landscape. Despite this post-capital, low-fi approach, a rich culture abides, including a vibrant musical tradition and a functioning system of childhood education.

In an early scene, Hushpuppy (holding a net) sits in a boat atop a large body of water, with Wink, her father. As the camera lingers upon the boat, the structure pans out to reveal that the boat shares the horizon with an expansive, smoke-emitting offshore oil drilling installation. The waters adjacent to and surrounding the bathtub contain both the hybrid technological apparatuses furnished by these central characters and the mechanical masses of industrial capitalism. Late capitalism, along with its accompanying eyesores and pollutants, stand contrasted against the more benign, more celebrated human constituency of Wink, Hushpuppy and the bathtub community. Variegated, disparate, and seemingly contradictory affective

elements merge together through carefully selected and arranged images, into a unified climatology of audiovisual place.

Networking and interconnection, recurring and persistent tropes within textual ecocriticism, take on filmic resonance in both *Beasts* and cinematic analyses performed by scholars such as Baltruschat, Sean Cubitt, Stephen Rust, Salma Monami, and Adrian J. Ivakhiv. These tropes, as in environmental literature, become particularized imagistic preoccupations within the media ecology engendered by the film. Cubitt's 2014 article, "Affect and Emotion in Two Artists Films and a Video" explores the idea of "connectedness" underlying mainstream environmentalism, which is, to use his language, "premised on . . . a call to efficient management of resources in a closed system" (251).<sup>8</sup> His work connects eco-cinema to the study of nonhuman affect emerging from new materialism and other branches of posthumanism.<sup>9</sup> As a specific cinematic work, *Beasts* offers telling examples of both filmic deployment of the tropes of ecological networking and imagistic representation of the sense of primal connectivity identified here by Cubitt.

My reading of Zeitlin's film considers *Beasts* to be a telling example not only of eco-cinema but also a specifically regional work of art which resonates against critical approaches to the region. The visual eccentricities and human-mutated constructions common to the bathtub's

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<sup>8</sup> To "understand the cultural appeal of eco-apocalypse, . . . we need to understand and deploy a primal, affective connection with the world, Cubitt explains, positioning filmic art, "the audiovisual moving image as the art of time par excellence," as an illustration of such "primal" connectivity" (251).

<sup>9</sup> Cubitt further writes that "there are specific threads in . . . these films that can help us understand the role of affect in cinema, the specificity of time as the native dimension of affect, and the relation between affect and environment which the moving image . . . is uniquely fitted to express" (251). Film, he further maintains, presents the viewer with a unique "awareness of time" through which "the perilously rapid passage of affect can be experienced" (263).

constructed architecture serve as visual placeholders for the senses of regional hybridity and diasporic identity emerging from the work of Jon Smith, Deborah Cohn, and a variety of other scholars, including Scott Romine, author of “Where is Southern Literature? The Practice of Place in a Postsouthern Age” (2002), working to reevaluate Southern place, overhauling its theoretical frameworks for the era of postmodern identity, environmental trauma, and globalized subjectivity.

Romine’s text sheds light upon the question posed by his title, though his elucidation posits a polymorphic, fluid conceptualization of both regional identity and “sense of place”: “For my purposes here, it is precisely the nebulous content of ‘place’ that makes it so useful a point of entry into examining how critics have defined and practiced Southern literature” (33). Though the region has been appropriated and discussed as a fixed and stable entity by onlookers situated within totalizing critical contexts, Romine maintains that the region itself, though it functions as “both ‘description’ and ‘distinction’” in relation to various literary and artistic categories, resists such conventional and convenient classification (33).

In an invaluable piece of writing, “Uncanny Hybridities”—the introduction to the 2004 book, *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*—Smith and Cohn, the editors, emphasize the problematic nature of familiar, conventional, and one-dimensional understandings of the region: “While the U.S. South is no ‘happy medium,’ it is a zone where the familiar dichotomies of postcolonial theory—unstable enough since the early 1990s—are rendered particularly precarious” (9). The piece’s titular hybridity highlights the fact that regional identity must be rethought in the context of post-colonialism, queer theory, and other movements of “problematic identity” (10-11). The works of art evaluated in this study suggest that ecological hybridity abounds in the South as well, with posthumanism emerging as yet another problematic

interrogation of identity.

In the wake of such reconceptualization, Smith and Cohn maintain, it is impossible to pin down southern identity and southern regionalism as fixed, singular, or stable entities: “To critics who imagine themselves, more or less unproblematically as either third or first world, the U.S. South has appeared compellingly as both familiar and exotic, both self and other” (9). In order to account for and challenge this condition of critical myopia, the *Look Away!* selections challenge “nostalgic and decline narratives” while advocating a redirection of the “critical gaze of southern studies outward, away from the nativist navel-gazing that has kept mainstream southern studies methodologically so far behind American studies” (12). The volume’s contributors shun “traditional (and even progressive ‘Americanist’)” perspectives in favor of a focus upon “other zones of U.S. hegemony” (13).<sup>10</sup> These visions of the U.S. South as a zone of hybrid contingency, hold a number of relevant implications for potential ecocritical and/or posthumanist approaches to the South. For example, a great deal of conceptual overlap exists between the bioregional movement and the model of specific regional hybridity put forth here. Both carry an implicit challenge to traditionally socialized and/or nationalized demarcations of space and location. Gazing toward the nonhuman factors characterizing a region might present a functional methodology for “looking away” from outdated, static views of the South. The project of decentering the human underlying ecocriticism and ecocinema, in the context of southern

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<sup>10</sup>To Smith and Cohn, such critical repositioning offers a much-needed counterbalance against a variety of dangerous misapprehensions concerning the region and its inhabitants. These include the tendency of “southernists” to speak of the South “as though its borders were clear,” the parallel tendency of “americanists to think of the plantation system as the exception within American exceptionalism rather than “the new world paradigm,” and a third tendency of “postcolonialists” to avoid “the question the U.S. South raises concerning the first world/third world binarism” (15). Ultimately, they maintain, scholars of all such types ought “cease to speak of ‘Southern identities’ except as contingent and performative” (15).



studies, enters a pre-existing conversation uniquely suited to encompass challenges to age-old binaries and hegemonies.

**B. Chapter One: The Narrative Biosphere of *Go Down, Moses*: Interconnection in Faulknerian Ecology**

## 1. Introduction to the Text and Overview of Key Points

Numerous critics have remarked upon the theme of interconnection—as pertaining to communities, family histories, racial dynamics, and nonhuman (ecological) elements—in *Go Down, Moses*, one of William Faulkner’s structurally panoramic novels. The work’s focus upon history and causality (explored in the context of a complicated, miscegenation-laden, multi-ethnic, and, ultimately, geographically migratory family tree) historically and persistently serves as a logical site for critical investigation. Further, the novel’s structure—in addition to its deep thematic rooting in setting (in both bioregional and community-based senses of the term)—clarifies and bolsters these themes of interconnection, symbioses, and mutually determined destiny. *GDM*’s composition as a series of cross-referential vignettes dovetails intriguingly with this thematic focus upon connectivity in familial, racial and geographic contexts. The text itself—like the McCaslin-Edmonds-Beauchamp family which provides its cast of characters, and the setting (ranging from the wilderness zone of the big woods, to the plantation, to the town of Jefferson)—emerges as a motley crew of composite parts and irreconcilable contrasts.

Throughout the various sections of the text, Faulkner conjures vibrantly rendered imagistic tableaux encompassing both human and nonhuman elements. These conceptual assemblages frequently manifest in the form of chase scenes and hunting sequences. Faulkner, a recognized pioneer of many of the stylistic innovations characteristic of the modernist movement, experiments in this text with a cinematic form, preferring montage and movement over static description. The structure of the novel, reifying and reinforcing this imagistic preoccupation, gathers together seemingly disparate elements into an autonomous total collective. In the fields of eco-theory and eco-philosophy, a variety of divergent paradigms—each envisioning the composition of the biosphere (both local and global) as a similarly

relational network—see emergence in recent years. The reading of Faulkner’s text put forth here will account for this emerging panoply of competing models of ecological interconnection, reconcile the novel’s unique structural composition with its environmental thematic impetus, locate the model put forth in *GDM* on a continuum of competing paradigms, elucidate the novel’s unique view of biological and ecological interdependence, and, finally, connect the human drama (historically, the central context for critical analysis of the work) to the connected overarching theme of landscape change.

In the 2009 book, *William Faulkner and the Southern Landscape*, Charles S. Aiken performs an invaluable, meticulously researched, and carefully explained study of Faulkner’s methodology of landscape depiction and topographic representation. He pays particular attention to the manner and extent to which the real-life Mississippi locales of Oxford and Lafayette County inform the depictions of their fictional counterparts (Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha, respectively): “Many analogies exist . . . but close scrutiny reveals profound breakdowns between the actual and the apocryphal”; “Yoknapatawpha, then is not an actual place but a fictional mutation with certain of its geographical components drawn from a reality that was deliberately altered” (23-4).<sup>11</sup> To the extent that Faulkner’s depiction of place demonstrates an ethic of representational fidelity, this concern seems targeted at the life-world—the nature, constituency, and relational dynamics characterizing human and biotic communities—

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<sup>11</sup> We may readily infer, based upon Aiken’s language here, that Faulkner largely ignored concerns about textual adherence to the strictures of real-life geography; he made alterations from the actual topography and appears to have done so methodologically.

engendered by the novel.<sup>12</sup>

The formal shifts and experimentally nonlinear structure of Faulkner's writing in *GDM* each operate in keeping with the mandates of an author unconcerned with the static, stratified form of the landscape yet deeply concerned with, almost fixated upon, the encounters, interactions, relationships, connections, and systems of movement located within (and transpiring and operating upon) the nonhuman biosphere. In keeping with this authorial fixation, the idea of a causal network resonates throughout the human drama of *GDM*, mostly connotative of racial strife and familial inter-relations, in the setting of the novel—composed of contrasts and encompassing townships, plantation-zones, and wild, untamed reaches of the earth—and, finally, in the formal structure of the text itself. Though composed of seven distinct vignettes each taking place in a separate time period and, in several cases, featuring distinct central characters, *GDM*, nevertheless, functions as a cohesive total novel.

Despite its continuity and cohesion, the text mistakenly appeared, in terms of historical labeling, marketing, and interpretation, as a short story collection. Faulkner was irked by this upon initial publication, insisting that the work be understood as a novel (Buell 7). This initial error plagues criticism of the text throughout the decades, preventing the sort of coherence seen in criticism of Faulkner's more famous works (Wagner-Martin 5). Faulkner's insistence that the work not be understood as a collective, but as a total entity, speaks to both his well-established interest in a style of modernist fragmentation and, as I argue in this chapter, his thematic preoccupation in this novel with assemblage, variegation, and questions of autonomy and

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<sup>12</sup> Conversely, the verbal or visual mapping of an actual Mississippi geography functions, in and of itself, as a secondary concern to be readily dispensed with or deliberately altered in the interest of thematic emphasis.

individuation.

This analysis will refrain from referring to the compositional segments of the novel as stories in an effort to avoid perpetuating the confusion surrounding the structure of the text. The distinction between novel and short-story-cycle is integral because the vignettes are not meant—carefully juxtaposed, sequenced, and cross-referenced as they are—to stand on their own as artistic units. In this sense, the text may not be fairly positioned as radically distinct in form from the most lauded works in Faulkner’s canon. A careful look at the most critically analyzed works—*The Sound and the Fury*; *As I Lay Dying*; *A Light in August*; and *Absalom, Absalom!*—reveals that each similarly features marked shifts in chronology, point-of-view, and tonality. When contextualized properly, the fact that the novelistic structure of *GDM* flew under the critical radar must be considered an anomalous phenomenon; equally fragmentary and episodic works by Faulkner evade even hesitant, resistant, or temporary categorization as story cycles.<sup>13</sup>

The true distinction between *GDM* and such core-canon works relates more directly to theme than formal structure. The novel’s ecological sensibility imposes and encourages this particular critical obfuscation: unlike the aforementioned texts, it lacks a humanistic through-line tying everything together. Faulkner’s insistence that *GDM* responds best to analysis understanding it formally as a novel rather than collection forces readers and critics to evaluate the parameters and requirements necessary for our consideration of a given piece of writing as a unified, thematically cohesive, novelistic whole. The notion that a novel must revolve around a single human character or set of characters, while short story collections and cycles may be

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<sup>13</sup> The confusion surrounding *GDM* originates with a title error on the part of the publisher (*Go Down, Moses and Other Stories*). Critics, however, failed for many decades to correct the error and the text is, to this day, readily discussed as a story cycle.

organically unified by times, places, ideas, and other such considerations, represents a dangerously anthropocentric interpretative position: such a literary expectation emerges as symptomatic of, and in keeping with, a worldview in which everything (place, the cosmos, life, being) presumptively organizes itself, coheres, around human beings and human beings alone. The distinction between short story cycle and novel bears no relevance in consideration of the novel's intellectual merit and artistic cohesion; however, it carries prescient and persistent relevance in contextual relation to an authorial project of deconstruction, one related to ecologically problematic and staunchly anthropocentric expectations concerning phenomenological and cosmic organization.

## 2. Ecological Interconnection: A Theoretical Overview

Many recent theories of ecological inter-dependence (emerging from diverse fields including ecology, ecocriticism, bioregionalism, eco-cosmopolitanism, animal studies and object-oriented-ontology) likewise posit new materialisms, new ways of interpreting causal phenomena. A number of these emerging models of connectivity share a philosophical through line in that they insist that human beings do not stand at the ontological-phenomenological center of the universe: “If we take seriously the idea that all objects recede interminably into themselves, then human perception becomes just one among many ways that objects might relate,” writes philosopher Ian Bogost; “To put things at the center of a new metaphysics also requires that they do not exist just for us” (9). Most of the existing ecological approaches to Faulkner tend to mimic the philosophical tendency highlighted here, placing the human characters at the center of Faulkner’s textual “network” and ignoring other elements at play within the model of interconnection presented by the novel.

The philosophical project of widening our understanding of causality—de-centering our understanding of the cosmos, de-wiring it from pervasive, overriding insistence upon human instrumentality—arrives in the form of diverse scholarly projects and theoretical rubrics. Bogost is one of many theorists working for broader understanding of the operations of objects, things typically understood as inanimate, as active agents of causality. Theorists working in the fields of animal studies and posthumanism (including the prominent scholars Marianne Dekoven, Cary Wolfe, and Donna J. Haraway) take so-called animals as their in-road to de-centering the human, pointing toward “an awareness of the intricate and massive interdependence between humans and other animals” (Dekoven 366). *Go Down, Moses* features many descriptions of human encounters with both animals (particularly dog, deer, and bear) and objects (such as harvesting



tools, gun-parts, divining machines, and trains).<sup>14</sup>

Many contemporary scholars similarly seek to interrogate and explore the nonhuman, particularly as manifested in the forms of objects and animals. Jane Bennett—a theorist taking aim not only at the dualism between human and nonhuman but also at the broader and equally baffling conceptual demarcation between life and non-life—writes about the manner in which humans encounter aggregated entities as assemblages, tableaux; she describes the experience of encountering such an assemblage in a remarkable passage about various items collected together, seemingly arranged, on a street named Cold Springs Lane: “When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the pollen, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark, it was in part because of the contingent tableau they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather, that morning, with me” (5). Bennett further clarifies the manner in which this perceptual experience arrives as the result of a precise tuning together of contingencies:

For had the sun not glinted on the black glove, I might not have seen the rat; had the rat not been there, I might not have noted the bottle cap, and so on. But they were all there just as they were and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert (5).

The idea of “energetic vitality” expressed here is central to Bennett’s thought, which proposes that things need to be taken seriously as agents of causality that exist “in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects”; for Bennett, so-called stuff (seemingly life-less matter) exhibits a vibrant “thing-power” and provokes operations and effects on the

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<sup>14</sup> Though several of the vignettes (“The Fire and the Hearth,” “Was,” “Pantaloons and Black,” and the title vignette) center upon interplays amongst human characters and move in primarily humanistic directions, others (“The Old People,” “The Bear,” and “Delta Autumn”) emphasize nonhuman elements, speculating about animal consciousness and depicting a changing, modernizing landscape.

cosmos beyond any potential encounter with humanity (4). Within her philosophy of *Vibrant Matter*, the title to her 2010 book, all materiality is “vital”; nothing is inert or passive; boundaries between life and non-life, dead stuff and living consciousness, are meaningless (xiii). The term “vitality,” in this context, refers to “the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii). As Bennett points out repeatedly, our understanding of causality, ethics, politics and related concepts will necessarily broaden and change if we account for such affects and operations, or what she terms the “vitality” of things.

Our systems of thought include human beings as the only principle agents of responsibility and causality when, in fact, we are at the mercy of a distributive causality involving the agency of various swarms, conceptual tableaux, systems of interconnected parts and pieces.<sup>15</sup> Numerous literary scholars attempt to figure out the manner in which the “new materialisms” articulated by Bennett and other thinkers might be meaningfully applied to literature. Writing in the context of imaginative works dealing with oceanic settings, Patricia Yeager thoughtfully speculates about potential applications of Bennett’s work to literature:

Bennett asks us to identify the contours of the swarm—the relations among its bits—and to abjure the romance of human purposiveness by thinking outside systems of instrumentality. What happens when we imagine human- ocean interfaces as fractal, Ping- Pong circuits in which every origin is multiple,

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<sup>15</sup> Bennett’s writing about Cold Springs Lane reveals a new way of thinking and writing about human encounter with the nonhuman: “In this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics” (5).

outside intentionality, suspenseful, and heterogeneous? (Yaeger Sea Trash 539-540).<sup>16</sup>

Faulkner's text explores precisely such "contours of the swarm"; the work is riddled with descriptions of packs, assemblages, and other such circuitous aggregations. The characters frequently encounter these "swarms" of vitality in the form of conceptual assemblages similar to those of Bennett's description of the gutter on Cold Springs Lane. In rendering such images, Faulkner calls attention to the bits and pieces, the dizzying array of attuned and attenuated elements that compose his Yoknapatawpha universe.

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<sup>16</sup>Yaeger invites us to think through causality, unbundling the concept from anthropocentric thinking. Answering this invitation, as her language suggests, poses new challenges to our imaginations and interpretative capacities. When we abandon instrumental logic we wade into an ontological wild west in which inexplicable potentialities roll past like so many tumbleweeds.

### 3. The Network Model: A Commentary on Existing Ecological Approaches to the Text

My discussion of ecological connectivity and entanglement in the novel builds upon existing discussions of the trope of interconnection in familial, racial and geographic contexts. Critics traditionally appropriate each of these contexts, individually and on their own terms, as inroads into thematic reconciliation of the novel. The question of what exactly Ike McCaslin's saga of wilderness destruction in "The Old People," "The Bear," and "Delta Autumn" has to do with the racial tragedies at the centers of both "Pantaloon in Black" and the titular "Go Down, Moses" remains largely unanswered and underexplored. Further complicating the situation, the more tonally comedic stories "Was" and "The Fire and the Hearth" must be also be incorporated into a proper view of the novel's function as a total assemblage of seemingly disparate elements. The few critical interpretations seeking to reconcile the human drama of the novel with its equally resonant focus upon a changing landscape emerge fairly recently and within the theoretical rubric of issues somewhat contentiously labeled natural or environmental, also falling under the scope of the more recently preferential descriptive moniker of "ecology."

Both Christopher Rieger and Judith Bryant Wittenberg, each writing about the text's connections and affiliations with discourses of ecology, discuss the concept of a "network" model, characterizing interaction amongst and between human and nonhuman elements, as a central thematic concern in both ecological thought, generally, and in Faulkner's text, specifically (Wittenberg 53; Rieger 7).<sup>17</sup> A variety of ecological and other landscape or place-

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<sup>17</sup> Wiley C. Prewitt, writing in relation to "hunting and habitat" in the novel, makes a similar declaration, stating that, in the text, human and nonhuman elements function as various "parts of a broad cycle of life and death" (219).

based readings of Faulkner, including but not limited to interpretations of *Go Down, Moses*, see publication in the years since the 1990s. In addition to Rieger, Wittenberg, and Prewitt, critics writing in this vein include Phillip Weinstein, Francois Pitavy, Thomas L. McHaney, Donald M. Kartiganer, David H. Evans, and Charles S. Aiken.<sup>18</sup>

In “*Go Down, Moses* and the Discourse of Environmentalism” Wittenberg emphasizes the conceptual scope of the novel, arguing that its treatment of identity political issues (pointing toward race, class, and gender) is “splendidly amplified by its consideration of the interrelationship of the human problems with basic questions concerning not only land ownership . . . but also the very essence of the connections between human beings and the natural environment” (49). She further claims that Faulkner highlights “the tragic implications of land ownership and the depredation of the wilderness,” clarifying that he does so in an “ambiguous” manner intended to “suggest the complexity of the issues” (51).<sup>19</sup> Wittenberg argues for an “intertextual” reading of Faulkner against later environmental texts on the basis of a shared “thematic nexus” illustrating and emphasizing “the delicate and crucial interconnection of all things on and of this earth, and the alarming human capacity for violent disruption” (53). She further clarifies that this shared (between Faulkner and environmental texts) “vision of discursive interconnection” revolves around the notion of “network,” a term denoting a view of

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<sup>18</sup> Of the various readings put forth by these and other critics, those by Rieger, Weinstein, and Wittenberg engage most directly with questions of causality and issues of interconnection between human and nonhuman.

<sup>19</sup> Wittenberg’s analysis makes much of the work’s environmental legacy within the literary canon, stating that it “is often cited as one of the most significant American novels—if not the most—that deals with wilderness and environmental themes,” yet is cautious about suggesting a direct correlation between Faulkner’s themes and the mainstream environmental movement emerging decades later; to position the novel as “protoecological,” she specifies, would “overstate the case” (51).

“the entire earth as a single community that functions as an intricate web” (53). Wittenberg’s commentary further sheds light upon the “seven-part structure” of the text, emphasizing that the various sub-sections of *Go Down, Moses* connect together through “recurrent thematic elements” intended to illustrate “a community paradoxically at once interconnected and atomized” (60).

In “The Land's Turn,” a reading primarily concerned with *Absalom, Absalom!*, Weinstein lays out the general tenets of what he terms “Faulknerian ecology,” characterized by “impersonal forces immune to individual will and likely at any moment to torpedo the progressive reach of individual projects” (26). Indeed, in many of Faulkner’s texts the land occupies the position of a subaltern entity, one that is spoken for or ignored only with disastrous implications and consequences. Weinstein uses the term “dark ecology” to describe this precarious textual situation in which the “wounded land itself turns and destroys” (27). Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, within this reading, emerges as a “precarious ecosystem” repeatedly and systematically assaulted by “crises, incursions, these driven by long-inculcated convictions and practices of opposing races, classes, and regions” (17). Weinstein clarifies that the “precariousness” of Faulkner’s textual ecology stems also from a collision between the resistance of traditional practices and the rapid pace of modernity’s imposed change, arguing that the “shattering that occurs when events of break-neck speed burst upon traditional practices” represents a virtual “hallmark of Faulknerian narrative” (21). Faulkner’s “ecological imagination,” as understood here, attends to “long-inculcated traditions about how individuals move in space and time” and repeatedly insists that static force of nature “trumps the individualist projects of today and

tomorrow” (26).<sup>20</sup>

In his book, *Clear Cutting Eden: Ecology and the Pastoral in Southern Literature*, Rieger points toward the novel’s complex understanding of causality, specifically the “rippling effects of I.Q.L. McCaslin's actions on his descendants,” arguing that the novel’s dual thematic focus upon both the “the interrelations of black and white Southern families” and “issues of land ownership, hunting ethics, logging practices, and the destruction of wilderness” sheds light upon the fact that both of these central thematic preoccupations engage with the “long-term, unintentional effects of the past” (12). In conjuring such reverberations and butterfly effects, the text establishes an ecological model of agency in which individual actions and decisions do not stand on their own terms: they may be understood, meditated upon and considerately responded to only within the context of broader systems of entanglement and interconnection.

Rieger’s interpretation emphasizes Faulkner’s focus upon the material agency of nature, the extent to which it “affects” and is “affected by” human operations (137). This emphasis upon materiality and affective agency seeks to highlight “the symbiotic relationship of humans and their environment” (146). The reading of the novel put forth here operates within Rieger’s larger interpretation of southern modernism, within which he positions several works of the so-called Southern Renaissance era as “postpastoral”; he borrows this term, which denotes “literature that goes beyond the closed circuit of pastoral and anti-pastoral to achieve a vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human,” from ecologically oriented critic Terry Gifford (20). Rieger’s classification of *Go Down, Moses* specifically as a postpastoral work stems from

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<sup>20</sup> Weinstein finds no clearly marked “positive alternative to change” in Faulkner’s fictional county, a zone he describes as “riddled by brutal tensions of race, class, gender, and region” (26). Yoknapatawpha emerges from his reading as “a microcosm of American (indeed, hemispheric) troubles, not a sanctuary of escape from them” (26).

“Faulkner's metapastoral approach of using pastoral elements while questioning the efficacy of the mode” in addition to “the novel's ecocentric sensibility, which anticipates some core principles of the modern environmental movement”; Rieger further argues that Faulkner’s “emphasis on nature's destruction” justifies classification of the novel as “a precursor to, or early example of, a postpastoral that overtly responds to environmental issues” (18). The issues Rieger considers integral to Faulkner’s revision of the pastoral genre include “ownership of land,” “human responsibility for nature,” “imagined Edens,” “associations of women and blacks with nature,” and “the idea of wilderness as the antithesis of civilization” (136).

Each of these critics filter Faulkner’s “networked” dynamics through a specific lens: Wittenberg comes at the issue from an identity-political angle, arguing that the novel’s dramas of human subjectivity receive “amplification” through its exploration of the human-nonhuman binary; Weinstein views Faulkner’s systems of causality within a historical framework, emphasizing the temporal fragmentation of modernity, hence his focus upon the collision between change and tradition; Rieger’s reading, echoing Marxist thought, calls attention to the role of nature as a material factor in human life. Both Wittenberg and Rieger seek to ask and answer questions of genre, reading Faulkner, respectively, against environmental literature and the pastoral tradition. My own reading of Faulkner will address generic and identity political issues only tangentially, paying more focused attention to the mechanics behind Faulkner’s exploration of ecological interconnection, understood here as its own thematic means and end,



not as a method of emphasizing and reinforcing more anthropocentric concerns.<sup>21</sup>

The novel's nonlinear structure highlights the operations occurring within these systems of causality by showing the same landscape (in the sense of both human community and local biosphere) at various time periods. The operations of humans, objects, animals, systems, and other agents of causality ripple throughout the novel and become visible through the layering of one chronological-temporal snapshot against the next; events set in motion in one sub-section of the novel carry far-reaching consequences and manifest, often with disastrous implications, in other sub-sections. This rippled portrait of causal interrelations forces the reader to rethink familiar dynamics of southern life, including both ecological and anthropological histories of place and region, by offering a panoramic illustration of the operations of affect and causality behind them. The novel calls particular attention to the manner in which these ecological and anthropological histories overlap with and mutually determine one another.

Faulkner's formal experimentations with time and chronology function in this text as more than stylistic window-dressing or the self-aware genre-positioning of a committed modernist. These methods receive textual utilization and appropriation in the interest of documenting changes in the landscape and of conjuring the sense of loss following logically from them.<sup>22</sup> Further, the reader's experience of their own, post-textual environment similarly

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<sup>21</sup> Despite their preoccupations with identity-politics and (or) questions of literary classification, these readings of the novel each, in their own unique way, point toward Faulkner's awareness of a divergent, polymorphic system of causality and affective relations, characterizing both the human sense of place and the fuzzy, ill-defined realm of connectivity between human and nonhuman.

<sup>22</sup> When Isaac McCaslin laments (in the vignette "Delta Autumn" and in the later sections of "The Bear") the destruction of wilderness, his pain resonates with readers who have themselves

demands awareness of time, change, and causality. In order to mourn or celebrate a landscape, one must understand the temporal dimensions at play.

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encountered and appreciated the more pristine, idyllic past of said landscape. The reader's own sense of sentimental attachment becomes threatened and problematized in a fashion similar to Ike's experience.

#### 4. “Was”

The opening vignette, titled “Was,” represents the earliest chronological look at both the McCaslin-Edmonds-Beauchamp family triad and the Jefferson-Yoknapatawpha landscape. Prior to the onset of the story’s rather limited action—primarily involving an arranged marriage that alters the lives of Buck and Buddy McCaslin, ancestors of many characters featured later on in the novel—Faulkner introduces the reader to Ike McCaslin, the most consistently appearing personage in the text: “Isaac McCaslin, ‘Uncle Ike,’ past seventy and nearer eighty than he ever corroborated any more, a widower now and uncle to half a county and father to no one” (3). The language here situates a clear understanding of Ike’s relational connection to the community around him; his place in Faulkner’s broader genealogy is spelled out clearly. The narrator goes on to establish Ike’s relational connections in regard to, respectively, the world of human-inflected objects and the non-human realm of the woods:

a widower these twenty years, who in all his life had owned but one object more than he could wear and carry in his pockets and his hands at one time, and this was the narrow iron cot and the stained lean mattress which he used camping in the woods for deer and bear or for fishing or simply because he loved the woods, who owned no property and never desired to since the earth was no man’s but all men’s, as light and air and weather were . . . (3-4)

To the contemporary reader, Ike seems an amateur phenomenologist, a marooned Heideggerian stranded in a rapidly modernizing South. Bizarrely, he has come across as strangely anachronistic to readers of all eras. His unique views on property ownership and his disdain for human-appropriated objects (instrumentalization) fit easily into the southern mindset common to neither the time periods discussed in the novel nor the years during which Faulkner composed the text. Though his later lament for the destroyed wilderness seems to prefigure the soon-to-emerge mainstream environmental movement, as critics like Rieger and Wittenberg

amply demonstrate, and late-twentieth century “nature writing,” these phenomena did not emerge until several decades later and arrived in the U.S. South somewhat later than the rest of the nation. Such a preservationist ethic was hardly common to the South of Faulkner’s own time and would have seemed quite strange indeed to a Mississippian of the even earlier era in which Ike McCaslin’s saga begins (Buell 11).

The events depicted in the story “Was” actually precede Ike’s birth, culminating in the arranged union of his parents, settled over a comically depicted poker competition. The story also deals with the union of a pair of slaves from separate plantations. These characters also represent the ancestors of characters featured prominently later in the text. Events hinted at in this story later re-appear and receive further clarification, accentuating the novel’s themes of causality and interconnected destiny. This story is a bit more whimsical than any of the others, suggesting a romanticized attitude toward “the old time, the old days” that prefigures both Ike McCaslin’s anachronistic preservationist mentality and the theme of landscape change that emerges in subsequent vignettes (4). Faulkner begins his novel of a modernizing biosphere in a pre-modern time, wherein the characters seem less troubled, unburdened of modern melancholic calamities.

“Was” also lays the groundwork for some of Faulkner’s thematic and imagistic preoccupations in the novel. Notably, the novel’s tendency toward portraying swarms and assemblages (inclusive of human, animal, and mechanical elements and descriptions) first manifests here: “Uncle Buddy bellowing like a steamboat blowing and this time the fox and the dogs and five or six sticks of firewood all came out of the kitchen together, with Uncle Buddy in the middle of them hitting at everything in sight with another stick. It was a good race” (5). As in later sections of the text—particularly the stories centered on Ike McCaslin (“The Old People”,

“The Bear,” and “Delta Autumn”)—Faulkner tends to couple this imagistic impetus toward tableaux and assemblages with a thematic impetus towards sportsmanship and pursuit. Uncle Buddy McCaslin functions here, as the character Boon Hogganbeck operates later on in “The Bear,” as the frustrated human component within a broader, swarming assemblage of animals and objects.

### 5. “The Fire and the Hearth”

“Was” is followed by a story titled “The Fire and the Hearth,” whose central character, Lucas Beauchamp, is an African-American descendant of the McCaslin-Edmonds-Beauchamp line. The narrative voice spells out in rather precise detail the nature of Lucas’s connection to the land and life-world around him:

He had worked on it ever since he got big enough to hold a plow straight; he had hunted every foot of it during his childhood and youth and his manhood too, up to the time when he stopped hunting, not because he could no longer walk a day or a night’s hunt, but because he felt that the pursuit of ‘possums for meat was no longer commensurate with his status as not only the oldest man but the oldest living person on the Edmonds plantation, the oldest McCaslin descendant even though in the world’s eye he descended not from McCaslins but from McCaslin slaves. (36)

Faulkner’s language comments here on Lucas’s familial lineage, including its profound implications for his life and destiny, his intimate knowledge of the plantation land, and his views on the merits of various types of game (connected, for many characters in the novel, to notions of class and masculinity). Lucas’s relationship to the landscape changes as the story presents him with the possibility of finding long lost gold, rumored to be buried underground somewhere on the plantation. Initially, he displays a decided disdain for modernization and modern technology, expressing contempt towards the modern conveniences of his white employers (also his distant cousins): “the gleam of electricity in the house where the better men than this one had been content with lamps or even candles,” “a tractor under the mule-shed,” and, most especially, “an automobile in a house built especially for it which old Cass would not even have put his foot in” represent a changing world encroaching upon Lucas’s tranquil existence; he prefers “the old days, the old time, and better men” of the Old South era conjured in the previous story (43-4).

Like his cousin Isaac, he surrounds himself with a precise category of objects, seemingly

resenting all others: “He had liked it; he approved of his fields and liked to work them, taking a solid pride in having good tools to use and using them well, scorning both inferior equipment and shoddy work just as he had bought the best kettle he could find when he set up his still” (42). Both of these McCaslin cousins appreciate objects that bring them closer in their connection to the land; they take issue with objects to the extent that they represent the dangerous, electrical gleam of modernity. Lucas’s descent into ruin is intimately connected to his affiliation with precisely such a modern appliance: a “divining machine” or metal-detector used to discover lost treasures in the soil (89).

The encounters with the divining machine, acquired through swindling a salesman from a nearby city, lead to a series of events in which Lucas pursues the lost gold with the relentless abandon of a madman, working day and night, neglecting his fields, and provoking great fear and resentment in his wife, who eventually seeks intervention from the white landowners under whom they share-crop: “But he’s sick in the mind now. Bad sick. He don’t even get up to go to church on Sunday no more. He’s bad sick, marster. He’s doing a thing the Lord aint meant for folks to do. And I’m afraid” (99). His wife, Molly (the speaker here), still clings to a pre-modern, religious past, and sees nothing but doom in the search for mythic gold: “Because God say, ‘What’s rendered to My earth, it belong to Me unto I resurrect it. And let him or her touch it, and beware,’ And I’m afraid. I got to go. I got to be free of him” (99).

Faulkner’s unique style of natural evocation is on full display in “The Fire and the Hearth.” Consider this whimsical scene, encountered by Lucas Beauchamp as he approaches the plantation home of his white, landowning relatives: “Then in the lane, in the green middle-dusk of summer while the fireflies winked and drifted and the whippoorwills choired back and forth and the frogs thumped and grunted along the creek, he looked at his house for the first time, at

the thin plume of supper smoke windless above the chimney . . .” (Faulkner 47-8). Avid readers of Faulkner notice, in many of his great works, passages filled with poetic references to wisteria, cicadas, magnolia trees, the whippoorwills of this passage, and other such metonymical stand-ins for a certain type of natural southern tranquility.

These poetic interludes tend to coincide with confrontational sequences; Faulkner’s works contain harsh realities that, to borrow a phrase from Rieger, cannot be “masked by moonlight and magnolias” (5). The above passage sets the scene for a confrontation between Lucas and one of his white employer-relatives. When the white cousin’s wife dies under tragic circumstances, Lucas’s wife, Molly Beauchamp, moves in to this other man’s home for an extended period of time; this situation inspires much resentment, suspicion, and contempt on the part of her husband: “Maybe when he got old he would become resigned to it. But he knew he would never, not even if he got to be a hundred and forgot her face and name and the white man's and his too” (48). The complicated interactions between white and black McCaslin descendants (the former typically carrying the last name Edmonds, the latter Beauchamp, as Ike adjures his inheritance and ends the proper McCaslin line) serves as a prominent theme in “The Fire and the Hearth.”

Despite Lucas’s present day anger and distrust toward his kinsman, the two men’s lives intersect in a variety of ways: “the man whom he had known from infancy, with whom he had lived until they were both grown almost as brothers lived,” Faulkner writes. “They had fished and hunted together, they had learned to swim in the same water, they had eaten at the same table in the white boy's kitchen and in the cabin of the negro's mother. . . .” (54). Lucas’s son and the son of this kinsman (who outlives the father and eventually becomes the landowner and employer of his African American cousins) also end up being close, with the younger Edmonds



looking upon Molly as his de facto mother: “the white child and the black one sleeping in the same room with her so she could suckle them both until he was weaned, and never out of the house very long at a time until he went off to school at twelve . . .” (97). The novel never ceases to clarify interrelations and interactions of all kinds, examining here the manner in which race and family heritage swirl together into a particular person’s identity, which, like the broader macro-cosmic family tree, must be understood as an assemblage rather than a fixed, wholly individuated entity.

Lucas, in particular, views his own identity as a synthesis, a reconciliation of hesitantly compatible elements: “Instead of being at once the battleground and victim of the two strains, he was a vessel, durable, ancestryless, nonconductive, in which the toxin and it antistalemated one another, seetheless, unrumored in the outside air” (101). This racial self-assessment evocatively implies a sort of connective reconciliation in which balance is achieved through opposition and variegation. The novel includes numerous characters embodying a sense of ethnic hybridity; the members of the McCaslin-Beauchamp-Edmonds triad, particularly those of the African-American branch therein, are liminal in the sense of being both things, not in the sense of being neither. These synthesized subjectivities speak to the novel’s fascination with assemblage and variegation. Lucas’s sense of self-understanding is intimately defined, not only by these familial and racial dynamics, but also, as has been previously suggested, by a prescient sense of connection to the land that he, unlike any of his siblings, opts voluntarily to work and reside upon:

But Lucas remained. He didn't have to stay. Of the three children, he not only had no material shackles (nor, as Carothers Edmonds began to comprehend later, moral one either) holding him to the place, he alone was equipped beforehand with financial independence to have departed forever at any time after his twenty-first birthday (102).

Lucas embodies the agricultural side of a subsistence-based approach to the landscape, while his white McCaslin and Edmonds kinsmen, represent, within the novel's multiple tapestry of land use paradigms, "the nomadic life of herders and hunters" (McHaney *Teaching* 105). Despite this distinction, which looks back to old world lifestyles, Lucas shares with his slightly older McCaslin cousin, Isaac, an intimate connection to the landscape that, at least temporarily, shields him from modern influences and illustrates the affective operations of nonhuman elements upon human subjectivities. Both Lucas and Ike resemble their McCaslin ancestors, in both demeanor and lifestyle, much more so than their cousins, the Edmonds (descended from a female line), who ended up with the family estate and inheritance. In a sense, Lucas and Ike inherited the McCaslin way of life while the Edmonds inherited the McCaslin properties. Neither the male nor the female McCaslin branch managed to fully sustain the legacy of their ancestors. The family legacy, like the community and habitat surrounding it, comes to be divided and atomized. The theme of formerly autonomous entities descending into variegation runs throughout the novel and reflects against the novel's own variegated presentation of an autonomous chronology.

## 6. “Pantaloon in Black”

The next of Faulkner’s composite vignettes, “Pantaloon in Black,” departs from what, up to this point, appears as a central thematic preoccupation with the McCaslin family, only mentioning the McCaslin plantation briefly and featuring none of the family’s members. The central character here is Ryder, an African American factory worker dealing with the death of his beloved wife, whose grave he is digging in this section of the novel’s evocative opening:

. . . flinging the dirt with that effortless fury so that the mound seemed to be rising of its own volition, not built up from above but thrusting visibly upward out of the earth itself, until at last the grave, save for its rawness, resembled any other marked off without order about the barren plot by shards of pottery and broken bottles and old brick and other objects insignificant to sight but actually of a profound meaning and fatal to touch, which no white man could have read. (131-2)

Here once again, the narrative voice investigates the manner in which human beings have particular affective responses to particular objects; Ryder is uniquely able to “read” this tableau of stuff which, much like Bennett’s similar conglomeration of objects, might not prove revelatory to a differently attenuated person. He sees, in the viscera of the grave and other present objects, traces of the no-longer present object of his wife: “the narrow, splay-toed prints of his wife's bare feet where on Saturday afternoons she would walk to the commissary to buy their next week's supplies . . .” (133). Ryder’s encounters with these traces of a missing presence frame other prevalent encounters (notably involving animals and objects) in the narrative of “Pantaloon in Black.” The sort of “thing power” discussed by new metaphysicians emanates throughout this vignette.

Though the story is punctuated with the somewhat ghostly presence of a dog whose fate seems somehow connected to Ryder—“He remembered neither seeing nor hearing it since it

began to howl just before dawn yesterday—a big dog, a hound with a strain of mastiff from somewhere . . .”—the central encounter of the vignette is between man and log (135). Each vignette featured in *GDM*, even those that don't involve hunting or take place in the woods, feature some sort of encounter between a human being and an animal. Bizarre encounters abound in the gothic ecosystems of this novel; rural or urban, each of the principal sites of action developed by Faulkner in this work—the mill, the McCaslin plantation house, the plantation property, the Beachamp home, the hunting camp, the small-game woods around Jefferson, downtown Jefferson, Hoke's commissary, the train station, and, most significantly, the big woods—may be considered an ecosystem, complete with its own unique inhabitants and its own unique system of reverberated causes and effects. We encounter several of these ecosystems in different time periods and observe changes and evolutions in them.

Faulkner's depiction of Ryder's encounter with the log yet again evokes a sense of thing-power, an affective presence emanating from seemingly, supposedly, inanimate objects:

facing the log which still lay on the truck. He had done it before—taken a log from the truck onto his hands, balanced, and turned with it and tossed it onto the skidway, but never with a stick of this size. For a time there was no movement at all. It was as if the unrational and inanimate wood had invested, mesmerized the man with some of its own primal inertia (141).

Faulkner's language of “primal inertia” dovetails intriguingly with Bennett's notion of intrinsic vitality, or vibrancy. Both Ike and Ryder become mesmerized by wood, in some shape or form. The log of Faulkner's passage carries inner dimensions; it boasts value outside of contact with humanity and brings the capacity to exert affective influence upon human beings like Ryder and his coworkers. The log is a living entity bearing causal and affective capacities. Wood—as both specific, individuated object, and as generalized, omnipresent idea—functions as an important signifier in the text of this novel. The rapidly disappearing big woods of the three

stories centered on Isaac McCaslin disappear to mills like that depicted here. Ike comes to be as mesmerized by the big woods as Ryder is, in this instant, mesmerized by the log.

Though the story is mostly disengaged from the novel's interest in the McCaslin clan, it taps directly into the racial and environmental thematic at play in the larger textual assemblage of *GDM*. Ryder's story does not end well: in a fit of rage and despair, he ends up murdering a white supervisor and suffering the consequences. In a curious concluding section, a sheriff's deputy banters with his wife about Ryder's death, expressing a total lack of empathy with, and understanding of, his African American neighbors and community members: "Them damn niggers," he said. "I swear to godfrey, it's a wonder we have as little trouble as we do. Because why? Because they aint human," the racist rant continues. "They look like a man and they walk on their hind legs like a man, and they can talk and you can understand them and you think they are understanding you, at least now and then" (149). These comments illustrate the connections between anthropocentrism and racism, with marginalized others equated with animal subjectivity so as to justify oppression of such groups.

Numerous critics find themselves perplexed by this vignette's inclusion in the overall structure of *GDM*, especially in light of the author's claim to have written a novel rather than a story cycle. Most of his other novels, after all, evolve (despite Faulkner's nonlinear story structures) as focused family sagas, lacking encounters extraneous to the writer's genealogical focus. *GDM* does not operate single-mindedly as the McCaslin saga, not in the sense that *As I Lay Dying* presents the Bundren saga, *The Sound and the Fury* tells the Compson story, and *Absalom, Absalom!* recounts the Sutpen history. The assorted vignettes add up more concisely as a geographic history than as a familial one. Ryder's tale, irrelevant as it is to the McCaslin saga, plays an important role in Faulkner's history of place, community, and habitat. The McCaslin

family exists in the novel to illustrate the ways in which environmental histories intertwine with social and familial ones; they encapsulate but do not exhaust Faulkner's historical preoccupation in constructing this expansive, century-spanning epic.

The central conflict of the text, if you reflect the various sequential vignettes and time periods against one another, crystallizes to be Isaac McCaslin's lifelong and perpetually unsatiated quest to achieve some sort of Thoreau-centric, mystical, porous, communal, and transcendent experience of the natural world. *GDM* functions as a carefully constructed meditation upon humanity's desire to be a part of something if not larger than, at least categorically distinct from, oneself. Ryder's story, like Ike's, also happens to be tragic, but in a tellingly distinct way. Through Faulkner's descriptions of his various encounters with the dog, the log, and the assorted objects surrounding his wife's grave, Ryder demonstrates a natural predilection toward the sort of resonating and porously connected experience of nature so longed for by Ike.

This man whom the reader, in the context of the novel's other storylines and themes, finds themselves conditioned to accept as a mystic, messianic figure, comes to be regarded as a beast; his fate is to be a story told by a man as closed off as he himself is open and porous. Ryder's tragedy is the opposite of Ike's; despite his ability to resonate with the world, his openness, his near mystical ability to exchange energy with other beings and objects—there is, in his true moment of need, no one around with the capacity to understand and resonate with him. Throughout the text, the ever-present specter of race appears capable of sabotaging even the most sincere and preternaturally ingratiating attempts at human connection and communally shared experience. The entire community, not just one family, is divided along racial lines. *Pantaloons in Black* functions not as an insular racial tragedy but as a parable illustrating the

dangers of a destabilized habitat. Ryder's fate parallels the fate of Jefferson, the big woods, and Faulkner's imaginary South writ large. Rather than the fly in the ointment of the text's cohesiveness (the irreconcilable element marginalizing the text as a story cycle, disqualifying it from the lofty heights of novelization), *Pantaloon in Black*, I would suggest, functions as a narrative Rosetta stone tying everything else together. Without *Pantaloon in Black*, *GDM* would be Faulkner's least compelling family saga rather American high modernism's central rumination upon the natural world.

Intriguingly, Faulkner includes this racist and anthropomorphic commentary from the deputy just prior to the beginning of the tale of bears, bucks, dogs, and other beasts that begins in the "The Old People," extends forward into "The Bear," and concludes with "Delta Autumn." These three hunting stories represent the novel's longest and most sustained arc. The view of animal subjectivity emerging from them draws a categorical, hard and fast line between person and beast. In contrast to this racist rant equating minorities with animals, Faulkner shows us in "The Bear" a multi-ethnic group of men (including black, white, and Native American Southerners) unquestionably united in their pursuit of a beast. In a contest between species, race does not exist; loyalty lies with other humans, regardless of color. Given that every locale conjured here by Faulkner fully functions as a developed textual ecosystem, it is fair to say that the racial divisions characterizing Jefferson, and the Edmonds/Beauchamp/McCaslin properties, render these ecosystems unstable and tenuous. Ryder's death illustrates the contagion and danger endemic to such instability.

The deputy's rant resonates a lack of understanding toward not only minority groups but also toward animal life. One of the major themes established by *GDM* is that faulty views of, and misunderstandings toward, the natural world can have disastrous consequences, not just in terms

of habitat destruction but in social and communal terms as well. The idea that classes of human beings are no better than animals is but one of many faulty views of nature and animal life that Faulkner warns us against in the novel. In addition to anticipating decades of later developments in phenomenology, Faulkner's motifs of animal encounter and thing-power serve to make racism seem (as it should) unscientific and somehow against the natural order of how a habitat or community should function.

Faulkner's experiments with chronological shifts and temporal change follows, as it does in all of his great works, a particular and thematically calculated trajectory. As the relations between black and white McCaslin descendants continue to deteriorate, the landscape itself suffers as well. Faulkner, with Ike McCaslin's last chronological appearance, takes this development further: not only has the McCaslin plantation been deforested; the entire town of Jefferson no longer has legitimate wilderness areas that can be accessed without the newly invented automobile. Dedicated hunters, who used to travel by foot, must spend an entire day in the car. If we take the thematic structure imposed by Faulkner upon the McCaslin family and the habitat they once occupied, it is not a stretch to infer that the racial divisions present in Jefferson (consistently documented throughout Faulkner's canon) resulted in corrosive influences upon the landscape. The human population, divided as it was by arbitrary and unnatural considerations, failed to put up a united front against the forces of development, capitalism, and urbanity which were identified by Faulkner and other writers of the southern renaissance.

*GDM*, overwhelmingly, functions as a cautionary tale against the dangers of faulty, one-dimensional views of nature. The equating of categories of human beings with animal subjectivity is a dangerous view of animal life, and a way of using so-called nature to justify violence and hatred. Beyond the need to prevent violence, the novel suggests that persons of



different races must work together to save habitats. Until it is destroyed by forces of modernization beyond the control of any of the characters, the hunting camp is kept in business, fully operational, and thriving under the support of a group of men and adolescents who are more or less one-third European-American, one-third African American, and one-third Native American.

Conversely, the racial conflict between the white and black McCaslins causes their lands and properties to deteriorate. Unmistakably, Faulkner's thematic schema in this novel suggests that racial harmony functions as an important, if not essential, condition for effective and responsible land use paradigms. Just as the text argues that persons of different races should ignore their differences when attacked by vicious animals, it similarly suggests that communities must unify, even in the racially divided South, if existing lifestyles and sustaining landscapes are to be maintained in the face of the encroaching forces of modernity, commercialization, and development. Faulkner, with the post-pastoral approach correctly identified by Rieger, sidesteps the heavy-handed appeals to morality and justice that so persistently handicap even the best intentions of white writers seeking to indict racism. *GDM* is not a sentimental appeal to justice; it is not a rumination upon morality, fairness, or love for one's fellow man. Conversely, it is a brutal, meticulously constructed, stoically presented warning against real-world dangers. *GDM* positions racial division not as a moral abomination but as an impending disaster, a ticking time bomb endangering human communities and biotic habitats with indiscriminate abandon. Racism, to Faulkner, emerges as much more than a flawed viewpoint or moral conundrum; it is, in this novel, a destructive and cataclysmic force, a danger to the natural order.

The racial rot afflicting the McCaslin plantation and its surrounding properties eventually brings ruin to all of its inhabitants. *GDM* is a novel of ecosystems; more to the point, it is a

meditation on various ways ecosystems come to be endangered. And, in all of Faulkner's chronological tap dancing, elegiac eco-poetics, dissonant celebration of primal animalism, and genealogical prodding at identity and familial acceptance—only two irrevocable causes of habitat loss truly emerge: first, the outside and persistently encroaching forces of capitalism and development (correctly forecasted by Faulkner in this and other novels); second, conflicts between various groups already residing in the habitat. The second condition, clearly, leaves a community dangerously vulnerable to the first. The message we must infer from Ike McCaslin's final musings in the novel, unfortunately, is that Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha ultimately went the way of clearcutting and habitat loss. The town's old world paradigms left it vulnerable to new world threats.

This is hardly the only novel where Faulkner shows us that racial strife can ruin families, legacies, fortunes, and even communities. He was always one of American letters' most subtle, comprehensive, scathing, and occasionally brutal indicters of racism; that being said, he performs something here unique within his canon and, by and large, unique within southern modernism. Never has an artistic writing so explicitly and compellingly united—in terms poetic, rational, imagistic, or even logically rooted in causality—the relationships between the South's age-old social conflicts and the environmental havoc which persistently and predictably dovetails with it. *GDM* suggests that racial conflict causes habitat destruction; people don't work together and things fall apart. Everyone loses at the end of *Go Down, Moses*. Everything has been clear-cut. The lands that sustained the white and the black communities are gone. There is no hunting and no agriculture anywhere in driving distance. And this is one of the chronologically last references to Jefferson in any of his works. The town goes bankrupt, essentially, and there is no wilderness left. In a sense, Faulkner's entire canon is a cautionary tale about what will happen if

southern whites and southern blacks never learn to get along. Essentially, his claim is that if the racism never ends, there eventually won't be a South. It takes a community to preserve a habitat. This is as true of bacteria communities as it is of human communities. A racially divided community is left in a very bad position when it comes to challenging unchecked development, clear-cutting, strip-mining, and other disasters that have historically afflicted Faulkner's Mississippi and the South in general.

The story's contribution to the novel's overarching thematic cohesion can be defended on a number of other grounds. For example, "Pantaloons in Black" and the final vignette of *Go Down, Moses*, also the titular section, each take place in the town of Jefferson, rather than in the woods or upon the plantation. Ryder's tale depicts a factory worker, examining an occupation far more distinctly modern than the hunting and farming trades of Lucas and Ike's stories. For most critics, this tragic tale is the most difficult to reconcile within the broader frame of the novel. Rieger offers one possibility in his argument that the novel is typical of a new breed of southern pastoral emerging in the work of Faulkner and other southern modernists; among the key differences, for Rieger, between this new model and earlier versions of the southern pastoral is an emphasis upon "work and on knowing nature through labor" (13). *Go Down, Moses* certainly conjures a wide array of work-based engagements with the land, from farming to hunting to modern factory labor. Ryder's tale represents the novel's somewhat counter intuitive suggestion that the latter category of factory labor carries a potential for sublime encounter with the natural world. The story stands out in a novel mostly concerned with a family of farmers, hunters, and plantation owners. "Pantaloons" also creates a subtly effective foil to resonate against the novel's most central character.

Faulkner sets up, in this seemingly random exchange, the tragedy of Isaac McCaslin, who

actually wishes to understand and resonate with both animal subjectivity and his African American kinsman. In the end, despite his best wishes, he remains strangely disconnected from both groups. His disconnection parallels Ryder's own tragic alienation. Both men have strange connections to wood, connections that mask lives lacking in sublime experience. Ryder's visceral longing for his dead wife, who he sees traces of everywhere, parallels Ike's inability to have a truly transcendent experience in nature (though he sees traces of it everywhere too).

In a novel preoccupied with questions of causality, which also explores clearcutting and deforestation, it is no coincidence that the lumber industry provides the backdrop for one of the stories. It is telling that Ryder's connection with the log emerges as more primal than the connection Isaac wishes to have with the big woods. Faulkner explores the differences between a sporting, romanticized connection to nature and a labor-based connection. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Faulkner avoids the pitfall of suggesting that non-white persons exhibit some mystical-supernatural connection to nature. What at first appears to be a stereotype of Native and / or African Americans and their mythical connections to the land could just as easily be viewed as an endorsement of one land use paradigm over another. Ike's overly romanticized, near-fetishistic preoccupation with nature, Faulkner's language and thematic maneuvers suggest, ultimately provides less fulfillment than the more practical approaches to the landscape embodied by Lucas and Ryder.

The distinction is not rooted in race but in means of subsistence and modes of thought. Though Ryder and Lucas (prior to his contamination by modernity and technology) do enjoy greater environmental intimacy than Ike, it would be a mistake to read them as magical natives, connected to the soil by virtue of blood and skin color. Ryder's porousness only operates in one direction; his capacity for connection is unreciprocated, at least by his fellow humans, and does

little to hedge against what should have been a highly preventable death. Lucas, for his part, eventually becomes seduced by modernity. In obtaining the divining machine and pursuing mythic gold, he forfeits his practical view of nature in favor of a toxic attitude blending the Edmonds' family's seductive love for modernity, technology, and greed with Isaac's reductive view of nature as a mechanism for human fulfillment rather than a source of value on its own terms.

Lucas's tragic fate, curiously, also transcends the stereotypes of sentimentally depicted racial tragedy. He makes his way as a resourceful, keenly intelligent black man for many years. His descent into turmoil and hardship ensues only after his view of the natural world becomes corrupted by the forces of modernity and greed. It is modernity, not race that finally catches up with him. After years of castigating his white cousins and their forfeiture of family legacy in favor of modern convenience, Lucas arrives at a chillingly similar fate. Rather than insulating his black characters away from the forces of modernity and change afflicting their white counterparts, Faulkner, particularly here and in the titular final story, acknowledges that minority populations experience a degree of endangerment that, if anything, exceeds that of their white counterparts. |

That the white members of the McCaslin family, the former elites, end up making much poorer choices than those whom they formerly considered plebian servants, while not surprising (Faulkner, after all, didn't invent families of elite Southern gentry unless he planned to torture and annihilate them), plays out a bit differently in *GDM* than in more traditional southern pastorals. The text explains why the African-American half of the McClasin clan (the Beauchamps) make their way in nature more effectively than the Edmonds, their remaining white cousins. The Edmonds have opened businesses, left the big woods, and, in some cases,

even moved into town. The Beauchamps, however, never lost track of the McCaslin roots; they remain skilled, subsistence based laborers (at least up until the point of Lucas' ruination). The fact that the unclaimed, bastard-labelled descendants end up carrying on the family legacy more effectively than their openly acknowledged counterparts calls attention to a bleakly funny, and typically Faulknerian, irony. This irony is, not subtly, magnified by Ike's status as a failed mystic, perpetually striving for, yet never achieving, a pure harmony with nature.

## 7. "The Old People"

"The Old People," the vignette Faulkner includes immediately after Ryder's story, deals with Ike McCaslin and his boyhood encounters with Sam Fathers, a man of combined Native American and African American descent. Sam, the son of a chief, is a highly skilled hunter who mentors the boy in the ways of the woods. Ike learns to hunt in the plantation zone but, like Lucas Beauchamp, he grows tired of the small game available therein, longing for the deer and bear of the Big Woods. Sam, for his part, seems to agree with the boy's assessment of the situation: "'I done taught you all there is of this settled country,' Sam said. 'You can hunt it good as I can now. You are ready for the Big Bottom now, for bear and deer. Hunter's meat,' he said" (167). This graduation-like event, basically a transition from the hunting of small game to the more celebrated hunting of large game, for Ike seems to mark an advancement on his path toward adult masculinity: "and the moment would come and he would draw the blood, the big blood which would make him a man, a hunter. . ." (168). A notable passage involves Sam standing over the young Ike as he slits the throat of his first slain buck (158). "The Old People," a story principally concerning Ike's earliest exposure to the big woods of the incorporated hunting club and his initial experiences hunting game larger than squirrel and rabbit, takes on the tonality and trajectory of a story about rites and passages, initiations into manhood.<sup>23</sup> The theme of pursuit, emerging earlier in "Was," returns here. Ike's cousin and legal guardian belongs to an incorporated hunting club and the boy is eventually allowed to spend time there, participating in

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<sup>23</sup> "So the instant came," writes Faulkner. "He pulled the trigger and Sam Fathers marked his face with the hot blood which he had spilled and he ceased to be a child and became a hunter and a man" (171). Lucas similarly associates the transition from hunting small game to hunting large game with status, maturation, and masculine bravado.

trips that are, for the boy, too few and far between. Throughout this section of the text and the two subsequent vignettes, Faulkner depicts thrilling sequences in which dogs chase after deer, with men and guns hot on the tails of both. Ike is deeply meditative in regard to his encounters with animals, speculating about these events, which carry ghostly connotations:

Then the buck was there. He did not come into sight; he was just there, looking not like a ghost but as if all of light were condensed in him and he were the source of it, not only moving in it but disseminating it, already running, seen first as you always see the deer, in that split second he has already seen you, already slanting away in that first soaring bound (157).

The buck is, for Ike, a mysterious thing, yet a thing perceived as a charged entity, signified by light and its distribution; this imagery calls attention to the inner vitality of the deer, its energy apart from encounter with humanity.<sup>24</sup> Like Lucas Beauchamp, Sam Fathers is described in such a way that his mixed racial heritage emerges as an assemblage of composite parts; his pairing with the young Ike also makes for a strange conglomeration:

the old man of seventy who had been a negro for two generations now but whose face and bearing were still those of the Chickasaw chief who had been his father, and the white boy of twelve with the bloody hands on his face, who had nothing to do now but stand straight and not let the trembling show (158-9).

The boy accepts Sam as a high priest of nature and adopts an exalting attitude toward Native Americans—who nevertheless appear to him alien and other, a thing apart—and the purer time in which they roamed the landscape in large numbers:

whose grandfathers had owned the land long before the white men ever saw it and who had vanished from it now with all of their kind, what of blood they left behind them running now in another

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<sup>24</sup> After the encounter, the animal subjectivity withdraws back into its own inner dimensions, “slanting away,” and is not exhausted by its appearance in this relational form, the manifestation of its presence to human perception.



race and for a while even in bondage and now drawing toward the end of its alien and irrevocable course . . . (159).

Like Ryder, some of the white characters around Sam talk about him in a manner connotative of animality: “Like an old lion or a bear in a cage,” McCaslin said. “He was born in the cage and has been in it all his life; he knows nothing else. Then he smells something. It might be anything, any breeze blowing past anything and then into his nostrils . . .” (161).<sup>25</sup> Like Ike, Sam is a bit of an anachronism, a relic of a pre-modern past encaged, as Cass suggests, within a changing world. Both Sam Fathers and Lucas Beauchamp represent ways of life challenged by yet simultaneously embodying the diasporic, fragmentary, and experientially myopic modern condition.

The two, Ike and Sam, operate as kindred spirits in terms of their celebration of the primordial, old world past: “The boy would just wait and listen and Sam would begin, talking about the old days and the People whom he had not had time ever to know and so could not remember . . .” (164). These two characters utilize their interactions with one another as a refuge against the encroachment of the modern condition. In addition to this celebratory attitude toward the past—not even the old South era typically celebrated by Faulkner’s characters, but an even more distant past—Ike adopts a peculiar view of land ownership, a view he must reconcile with his inheritance and family legacy:

that although it had been his grandfather's and then his father's and uncle's and was now his cousin's and someday would be his own land which he and Sam hunted over, their hold upon it actually was . . . trivial and without reality, it was he, the boy, who was the

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<sup>25</sup> The speaker here, Ike’s cousin McCaslin Edmonds, clarifies that the cage referred to “aint McCaslins.” Sam, he explains to his young cousin, “was a wild man. When he was born, all his blood on both sides, except the little white part, knew things that had been tamed out of our blood so long ago that we have . . . forgotten them. . . .” (161).

guest here and Sam Father's voice the mouthpiece of the host (165).

This emerging attitude is explored further in “The Bear,” culminating in Ike’s ultimate decision to relinquish his claims upon his family’s lands and holdings, allowing the Edmonds family that privilege. In Ike’s view, as suggested here and explained further in subsequent vignettes, the transaction in which Sam’s ancestors sold the land to his own is invalid and without merit. He believes that the land belongs to everyone; the decision of one man, or group of human beings, to sell it to another invalidates the worth of the land itself.<sup>26</sup> Faulkner explores this pivotal decision, which exerts a causal affect upon many of the novel’s characters in addition to Ike himself, from multiple angles: each influence is explored in more than one of the seven vignettes, illustrating the work’s pluralistic understanding of causality. Ike’s understanding of Sam Fathers as a truer guardian of the land than himself must also be understood as a pivotal influence upon his decision to relinquish the plantation and other holdings. Sam plays a key role in the young Ike’s exposure to the wilderness areas around Jefferson, which retreat further away from the community’s borders as the novel progresses. The boy’s fascination with the lands owned by the hunting club begin when Sam himself declares to Ike’s cousin and guardian his desire to retire away from the plantation zone, stating “‘I want to go,’ . . . ‘I want to go to the Big Bottom to live’” (166). After the boy Isaac is allowed to travel to this area himself and participate in the semiannual hunting expeditions, the life-world of the area percolates in Ike’s

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<sup>26</sup> The decision to relinquish his inheritance also stems from Ike’s discovery of his Grandfather’s miscegenation and subsequent unjust treatment and disenfranchisement of said grandfather’s African-American descendants, both by the grandfather himself and by subsequent white McCaslin and Edmonds descendants. But this distrustful and contemptuous view of land ownership also plays a major role in the decision, which marks a key turning point in both the text itself and in Ike’s maturation and development as a character.

mind, prompting this curious train of thought:

having brought with him, even from his first brief sojourn, an unforgettable sense of the big woods—not a quality dangerous or particularly inimical, but profound, sentient, gigantic and brooding, amid which he had been permitted to go to and fro at will, unscathed, why he knew not, but dwarfed and, until he had drawn honorably blood worthy of being drawn, alien (169).

Most students of the relationship between nature and culture would be tempted here to invoke the term “anthropomorphism,” calling attention to Faulkner’s use of words like “sentient” and “brooding,” connotative of human emotion and thought. Yet the language here also calls attention to the “alien” difference of the big woods, also ascribed with decidedly nonhuman traits like uncanny largeness and lingering emotive influence.<sup>27</sup>

In all three of these hunting vignettes, Faulkner’s depictions of the voyages—either by wagon or train, between plantation, town, and hunting zone—call attention to the strange areas in which nature and civilization border each other in mutually accentuating ways: “Then they would emerge, they would be out of it, the line as sharp as the demarcation of a doored wall . . . .” Faulkner continues: “there would be a house, barns, fences, where the hand of man had clawed for an instant, holding the wall of the wilderness behind them now, tremendous and still and seemingly impenetrable . . .” (170). These types of descriptions resonate with Rieger’s claim that this and other works from the same era of southern writing represent an attempt to refashion the pastoral genre. The language utilized here is certainly connotatively similar to the retreat and return pattern typical of pastoral tropes, yet the delineation between urban and rural, in this and

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<sup>27</sup> Rather than a purely anthropomorphic depiction, Faulkner creates an imagistic framework that conjures the manner in which the hunting lands have their own intrinsic vitality, a “sentience” not exhausted by contact with other entities—the land is, at once, both similar to and distinct from humanity.

other Faulkner works, emerges as an unclear, unstable demarcation.

The text features numerous descriptions of border zones that seem to synthesize urban and rural, civilized and wild, elements into a singular, if unfixed, conglomeration. The McCaslin plantation, from which the characters of these hunting stories depart into the wild, also represents such a border zone: it is a place apart from the big woods, lacking the sentient wildness ascribed to said location by the young Ike; it is also a place apart from the relative urbanity of Jefferson and the vibrant, if distant, urbanity of Memphis, a modern Mecca flocked to by Faulkner characters in a variety of the writer's texts.<sup>28</sup>

Ike expresses a conservationist ethic that is deeply rooted in the experience of hunting and intimately associated with his self-understanding as a country person. As the text progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Ike takes issue with even the relative civilization of Jefferson, whose surrounding rusticity rapidly disappears and retreats further from the township, longing for a more primitive lifestyle than that available to him. In both "The Old People" and "The Bear," Ike is contrasted against McCaslin "Cass" Edmonds, his cousin and legal guardian. Cass emerges as a man much more attached to civilization and modernity; he owns shares in banks and other businesses and seems equally at home on the plantation lands as upon the grounds of the hunting club. In the concluding section of "The Old People," Ike and Cass engage in a sort of metaphysical conversation, eventually circling back to a mythic buck, encountered by both men at a certain point in their path to adulthood; the older cousin understands Ike's experience

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<sup>28</sup> Ike, for his part, seems to recognize a distinct difference in terms of potential life-styles available in and upon various points on the sliding scale of urban versus rural, or as he (echoing proto-eco-Marxist Raymond Williams) understands it, country versus city: "Or perhaps that made no difference, perhaps even a city-bred man, let alone a child, could not have understood it; perhaps only a country-bred one could comprehend loving the life that he spills" (175).

without hearing his description: “‘Steady. I know you did. So did I. Sam took me in there once after I killed my first deer’” (180).

In this rather speculative conversation, Cass expresses a viewpoint suggestive of the intrinsic vitality of nonhuman elements. Both men seem to attach mythic and ethereal implications to the nonhuman biosphere surrounding them; Cass, however, differs from his cousin in that he minimizes the threat posed to nonhuman vitality by technology and modernization, insisting that there remains “plenty of room about the earth, plenty of places still unchanged from what they were?” (179).

While Sam Fathers functions in all three of the hunting vignettes as a mentor to the young Isaac, Cass transitions, in his textual relationship to his cousin, from a mentor figure into a foil. Eventually, Cass and his descendants, more attuned to the modern condition, become the beneficiaries of Ike’s relinquishment of his inheritance. “The Old People” sets the stage, so to speak, for the events depicted in “The Bear” and “Delta Autumn,” by detailing the influence of these two older men upon the maturation, and associated initiation into the ways of the natural world, of the young Ike.

The natural world also exerts its own—unique, magical, and distinctly palpable— influence upon the boy. Francois Pitavy, addressing this influence, comments upon the epiphanic nature of Ike’s encounters with the nonhuman: “The wilderness opens itself to Ike in brief moments of epiphany in which the divinity is present and all-seeing even before the viewer can see anything, he suddenly becomes aware of some presence” (91). The various encounters with deer at the center of “The Old People” offer a poignant example of the type of encounter emphasized here. As Pitavy goes on to establish, the events of the two subsequent stories suggest that Ike experiences a bizarre form of epiphany, one without revelations and heightened levels of

self-awareness:

So his ritual initiation into the wilderness, even in brief glimpses of epiphany, has brought Ike no revelation and left him with no heritage to bequeath, because he did not have the courage to confront his heritage and his own self in the mirror of the wilderness, and then to endure the inescapable wrong and shame of his predicament (94).

David H. Evans—in a similar interpretation focusing upon “The Bear,” the story immediately following “The Old People”—argues that the story explores the insidious side of human conceptions of nature, as distinct from the actuality of the nonhuman world: “I am going to argue that Faulkner was no naïve celebrant of the naturalness of nature, but that he was actually conscious of the ways the concept had been defined, and the cultural symbolism that had been invested in the notion” (180). “The Bear,” as Evans reads it and as this analysis understands all three of the Ike McCaslin vignettes, explores the manner in which the principle character invests meaning into the conception of nature—or to use Evans’ language, his “invention of nature” and, more broadly, the role of nature in “the American imagination” (180).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> While numerous interpretations recognize Isaac McCaslin as a conservationist, the various green readings of *Go Down, Moses* agree, almost across the board, that the character hardly offers a perfect ecological model. In his relation to the biosphere Ike seeks a level of porous attunement that he never quite arrives at; his connection to the nonhuman is a perpetual “striving for” with no clear realizations or resolutions.

## 8. “The Bear”

“The Bear” continues the adventures of these characters upon the lands of the hunting club. A bear, as the title indicates, plays a central role; a number of hunting dogs, including a particularly vicious one, are also featured prominently. Boon Hogganbeck—another character illustrating ancestral hybridity (he is a descendant of the same tribe as Sam Fathers, though he is of a “plebeian” strain rather than the chiefly strain embodied by Sam)—also becomes increasingly prominent as the story progresses (180). This is the story in which Faulkner’s imagistic conjuring of assemblage takes on the most prescient resonance. The culminating assemblage of the story, and *Go Down, Moses* generally, arrives at the conclusion of a great chase and involves the great bear, the dog, and Boon Hogganbeck.

Faulkner hints at this image, which arrives near the end of “The Bear,” close to the onset of the vignette: “There was a man and a dog too this time. Two beasts, counting Old Ben, the bear, and two men, counting Boon Hogganbeck, in whom some of the same blood ran which ran in Sam Fathers, even though Boon’s was a plebeian strain of it and only Sam and Old Ben and the mongrel Lion were taintless and incorruptible” (183). Each of the elements within this composite assemblage are given separate developmental treatment in this highly complex story, one of the only vignettes within *Go Down, Moses* to have been published separately, both in periodical form and in a collection of Faulkner’s hunting stories.<sup>30</sup>

Isaac’s internal musings about the landscape take on greater textual prominence here and largely direct the movement and trajectory of the vignette. He views the land itself as “bigger

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<sup>30</sup> The version appearing in the novel includes notable differences from the other two permutations of the tale; Faulkner tailored it specifically to fit into the novel’s larger compositional structure and overarching thematics.

and older than any recorded document”; it, for him, is an entity transcending the various groups of humans—southern whites, African Americans, and, in the older times, whole tribes of Native Americans—as well as the nonhuman elements composing it (183-4). He also views the landscape as carrying its own ethical system, which humans contribute to through the honorable practice of hunting: “the ancient and immitigable rules which voided all regrets and brooked no quarter;--the best game of all, the best of all breathing and forever the best of all listening. . . .” (183-4). The bear at the center of the story comes to function as the centerpiece of Ike’s understanding of nature, embodying all of these connotations of greatness and transcendence: “It loomed and towered in his dreams before he even saw the unaxed woods where it left its crooked print, shaggy, tremendous, red-eyed, not malevolent but just big, too big for the dogs which tried to bay it.”

The bear itself is a sort of assemblage, carrying within its skin shrapnel, lead, and other fragmentary bits of human technological weaponry. The bear, to the boy’s mind, is an anachronistic relic of a more primal time, much like Ike himself (and other human characters like Sam and Lucas): “a mortal beast but an anachronism indomitable and invincible out of an old dead time, a phantom, epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life which the puny humans swarmed and hacked at in a fury of abhorrence and fear like pygmies . . .” (185). This conjuring of a time period when “puny” humans were overwhelmed and powerless against the natural world sets the thematic stage for developments, later in the novel, which demonstrate human



mastery of, and threat to, the nonhuman biosphere.<sup>31</sup>

Faulkner's imagistic preoccupation with transitions from rural into wild, often centering upon permeable border zones between the two, also continues in "The Bear": "the surrey moving through the skeleton stalks of cotton and corn in the last of open country, the last trace of man's puny gnawing at the immemorial flank, until, dwarfed by that perspective into an almost ridiculous diminishment, the surrey itself seemed to have ceased to move . . . He entered it" (187). Both of these passages conjure a situation of perpetual contest, or attack, between the zones of human civilization and the zones of the wilderness; this language of "hacking" and "gnawing" suggests that the two pose a mutual danger to one another. The subsequent depiction, particularly in the final hunting vignette, "Delta Autumn," of the wilderness's retreat further and further away from the city borders of Jefferson, reinforces this theme.

Faulkner continues to depict Ike's interactions with animals; the pattern of encounter and withdrawal, characterizing his encounter with deer, continues to manifest. Ike perceives the deer, here and in the previous story, for only brief moments before the animals either perish or withdraw back into their own inner dimensions: "he could actually see the deer, the buck, smoke-colored, elongated with speed, vanished, the woods, the gray solitude still ringing even when the voices of the dogs had died away . . ." (188). The deer of these stories are typically pursued by dogs, whose nature Isaac is equally speculative about, describing them in a manner that approaches, yet never quite arrives at, anthropomorphism; he is particularly attentive to the

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<sup>31</sup> At numerous points throughout the novel, Faulkner provides historical context for his tale of landscape change, offering the reader glimpses of the man-nature interrelation in a single biosphere throughout various time periods.

sounds made by these dogs: “leaving even then in the air that echo of thin and almost human hysteria, abject, almost humanly grieving, with this time nothing ahead of it, no sense of a fleeing unseen smoke-colored shape” (189).<sup>32</sup>

In his initial perception of the bear, Ike considers it to be a sort of mythological being, impervious and omnipotent. Yet he begins to realize, throughout the course of the story, that the beast represents something akin to his own consciousness: “for the first time he realized that the bear which had run in his listening and loomed in his dreams since before he could remember. . . was a mortal animal. . .” (192). Ike’s various encounters with the bear carry the same sort of ghostly connotations as his previous encounters with deer and dog: “He only heard the drumming of the woodpecker stop short off, and knew that the bear was looking at him. He never saw it” (194). When the bear withdraws away from its encounter with Ike, the rest of the landscape seems to snap back into activity, having ceased in the moment for this fleeting engagement between man and bear: “Then it was gone. As abruptly as it had stopped, the woodpecker’s dry hammering set up again, and after a while he believed he even heard the dogs. . .” (194-5). These sorts of fleeting encounters between human and non-nonhuman bring to mind the newly emerging metaphysical vision of various objects bumping into, interpreting yet not

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<sup>32</sup> The use of the word “abject” rings intriguingly in this context, suggesting that the expressive tenor of the dogs, and the mode of consciousness behind it, ring as uncannily similar to Ike’s own modality; he considers both himself and the dogs to be dwarfed against the larger framework, or network, of the wilderness: “It was in him too, but only a little different—an eagerness, passive; an abjectness, a sense of his own fragility and impotence against the timeless woods. . .” (192).

entirely comprehending, one another.<sup>33</sup> Faulkner hints that the animals have inner dimensions, like Ike's own, but what he dramatizes in his own peculiar eco-mimesis is collision, revealing the manner in which Isaac, the dogs, the deer, the bear, bump into, withdraw away from, and mutually define one another. In this novel, Faulkner speculates about the nature of animal consciousness and the affective presence of objects, attempting to delineate similarities and distinctions between human and nonhuman modalities.

*Go Down, Moses* attaches dramatic and mythical (potentially sublime) implications to encounter between human and nonhuman while simultaneously emphasizing the inability of humans to properly interpret and make sense out of such encounters. Isaac's own perception of his encounters with the bear emerge as decidedly less enlightened than the eco-mimetic flourishes of Faulkner's authorial voice:

He would not even be afraid, not even in the moment when the fear would take him completely: blood, skin, bowels, bones, memory from the long time before it even became his memory, all save that thin clear quenchless lucidity which alone differed him from this bear and from all the other bears and bucks he would follow during almost seventy years . . . (198).

Pitavy's suggestion that Ike's experience in the wild is one of epiphany without realization is clarified and supported by this musing about the distinction between himself and the bear. Despite his attaching of mythic significance to the beast, he still understands the bear as something less thinking and thus less real (less "lucid") than humanity; ultimately, his fear of the

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<sup>33</sup> As we see here, the language of the novel privileges encounter over essence. According to the subset of phenomenology known as object-oriented-ontology, the autonomy of a given object is defined by relations and encounters, its ability to influence other objects, rather than its own cognition (as Descartes famously suggested).

alien, monstrous other overwhelms and undermines the potential insights of these fleeting glimpses at nonhuman modality. Pitavy's explanation of Isaac McCaslin's failure as a moral protagonist hinges upon the idea that his experiential interpretation of nature is somehow flawed or unenlightened.<sup>34</sup> For Pitavy, Faulkner's vision of the biosphere is one of aporia, ontological impossibility: "In the last analysis, the wilderness must remain unknowable, tremendous and indifferent, like God, unapproachable, like a dream, and man must remain alone, cut off from his dream. . ." (94).<sup>35</sup> Faulkner's vision of human-nonhuman encounter functions in a manner vastly ahead of its time, representing a similar attempt to prod-at, interrogate and widen human interpretation of other modalities. The question isn't, as Pitavy suggests, one of whether or not Isaac succeeds as a moral protagonist (or as some sort of test-case for human harmony with nature); a more pressing set of questions concern the nature of his encounters (beyond sheer success or failures) with the nonhuman and the extent to which these encounters are relatable to broader human paradigms of symbiosis and coexistence.

"The Bear" further explores Ike's disdain—hinted at in the opening vignette "Was," in a brief depiction of a much older Isaac McCaslin—for instrumentalized and human-inflected objects. When the boy Isaac of "The Bear" sets out to find the hiding place of the titular beast, he senses, and subsequently confirms in a conversation with Sam Fathers, that he must leave behind

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<sup>34</sup> Object-oriented-ontology, which posits that all encounters are aesthetic-perceptual interludes, within which one object (or person, or animal, we must become accustomed to a very loose understanding of what constitutes an object) receives a brief, withdrawing snapshot of another, emerges as an attempt to explain such failures of interpretation; all human experience of nonhuman modalities is, according to many of these new materialisms, something akin to the "epiphany without revelation" identified by Pitavy's reading of Ike's presence in the novel.

<sup>35</sup> Object-oriented ontology transcends (or at least attempts to transcend) this sort of aporetic dead-end by mapping out and seeking to widen the limits of human perception, which also happen to be the limits of bear perception, deer perception, and log perception.

his watch, compass, and gun in order to arrive at a hidden, elusive corner of the wilderness. After initially leaving the gun, he comes to understand that his continued attachment to the watch and compass preclude the sort of emergent encounter he seeks: “He stood for a moment—a child, alien and lost in the green and soaring gloom of the markless wilderness. Then he relinquished completely to it. It was the watch and the compass,” he intuits, concluding that “He was still tainted” (199).

Ike’s discarding of these remaining tainted implements sets the stage for one of the most memorable of his sublime, if not truly epiphanic, encounters with the nonhuman. This encounter is brilliantly rendered through Faulkner’s evocative deployment of his unique eco-mimetic trope of encounter and withdrawal: “Then he saw the bear. It did not emerge, appear: it was just there, immobile, fixed in the green and windless noon’s hot dappling, not as big as he had dreamed it but as big as he had expected, bigger, dimensionless against the dappled obscurity, looking at him. Then it moved” (200-201). Just after this riveting depiction of the moment of encounter, through which Isaac gains a new sense of the scope and dimensionality of the animal, Faulkner once again renders the telling moment in which the nonhuman withdraws away from relational encounter and back into its own inner dimensions. Faulkner’s narrative decision to juxtapose Ike’s relinquishment of instrumentalized objects against the novels culminating imagistic depiction of encounter and withdrawal illuminates the intense sophistication of the precise eco-poetics at play in *Go Down, Moses*. This sequence calls attention to the fact that encounters between human and nonhuman evade uniformity of type and carry varying degrees of

ontological significance.<sup>36</sup>

As the story progresses (and the titular bear slaughters domesticated animals belonging to members of the hunting club) all of the vignette's central characters become centrally concerned, for some to the point of obsession, with a mission to slay Old Ben, the titular creature. After the men discover that none of their hunting dogs are up to the task of trailing the dangerous beast, Sam enlists Lion, a wild dog. When McCaslin Edmonds and others insist that Sam will never be able to tame the dog, perceived by them to be nearly as dangerous as the bear itself, Sam explains that "I dont want him tame'" (208).<sup>37</sup> Eventually, Boon takes over care of the dog from Sam and he and the dog form a strong bond.

This series of events sets the stage for both a fated (and final) pursuit of the bear and a return to the novel's imagistic preoccupation concerning assembled tableaux. The ensuing chase sequence—in which the "thick, locomotive-like shape" of the bear is pursued by "a streaming tide of dogs"—ranks among the novel's most hyperkinetic depictions of pursuit (228). All of this culminates in a conglomerated depiction adjoining man, dog, and bear: Lion lunges and latches on to the bear; Boon, in a failed attempt to save the dog, leaps upon the bear as well, plunging his knife into the animal and hanging there. Faulkner's language captures a moment in which all

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<sup>36</sup> Instrumental objects (tools, guns, etc.) carry a bit of the human shadow; these assemblages are arranged a bit too carefully and appear a bit too autonomous; only with great effort may one notice the attenuations, arrangements, and composite parts behind them. Thus, mundane encounters with appropriated objects and tools lack the transformative potential of something like Bennett's encounter on Cold Springs Lane or Ike's vibrantly depicted arrival at the bear's sacred lair.

<sup>37</sup> This comment resonates with the contrast between wild and tame characterizing Sam's own depicted image in the novel, particularly as described and perceived by his white associates. Like Sam, Boon, Lucas and others human characters in the novel, Lion is a hybrid, an assemblage of composite strains ("part mastiff, something of Airedale and something of a dozen other strains probably") (209).

three composite beings fall, at once, and as an autonomously composed tableau:

It fell just once. For an instant they almost resembled a piece of statuary: the clinging dog, the bear, the man stride its back, working and probing the buried blade...then the bear surged erect, raising with it the man and the dog too, and turned and still carrying the man and the dog it took two or three steps toward the woods on its hind feet as a man would have walked and crashed down. It didn't collapse, crumple. It fell all of a piece, as a tree falls, so that all three of them, man dog and bear, seemed to bounce once. (231)

With the comparison to a “piece of statuary”—and the precise language indicating how the assemblage, referenced with the un-individuated moniker of “It,” falls down “all of a piece” rather than collapsing back into variegation—this passage renders a vibrant conglomeration: the fates of man, dog, and bear tie together within a confederated agency; their bodies fall together, precipitating the subsequent deaths of both Lion and Old Ben. Sam also collapses, off screen but in tandem with the fall of the assemblage, his fate also emerging (inextricably and inexplicably) as connected to those of the tableau’s assembled entities: “only the boy knew that Sam too was going to die” (236). Causality, in this work, functions as a variegated and networked entity much like concepts of place and location. As one linked entity falls, so does another, and so on ad infinitum.

At this point, “The Bear” begins to explore causality in a different way, returning to the novel’s exploration of race and familial ancestry. The next section of the vignette takes place back at the plantation where, in the commissary ledgers, Ike discovers his grandfather’s miscegenation (and the subsequent disenfranchisement of his African American descendants), prompting his repudiation of his title to the McCaslin lands and holdings. Cousin Cass, ultimately, comes to possess this “tamed land which was to have been his (Ike’s) heritage” because the younger cousin believes that this “tamed” component of the land underlies and

influences the racial injustices incumbent within southern life (243). Such identity-political tragedies form a crucial thematic centerpiece within Faulkner's canon, globally, within the novel proper, and, finally, within the specifically depicted inter-workings of the McCaslin-Beauchamp-Edmonds familial triad (243). The commingling of such issues with and against discussions of land use paradigms and ecological catastrophe, however, distinguishes *GDM* as a unique example of ecological modernism, un-paralleled by Faulkner's other writings.

Ike's ancestors, as he comes to understand their actions, appropriated the land—"already tainted even before any white man owned it by what Grandfather and his kind, his fathers, had brought into the new land"—toward an evil purpose, namely agricultural cultivation through the institutional mechanism of human bondage (248). In doing so, Ike further intuits and suggests that they replaced a superior and just land use with a cruel and abusive one for "the reason," insufficiently justifiable as it is, "that the human beings he [ancestor] held in bondage and in the power of life and death had removed the forest from it [pre-plantation wilderness] and in their [slave's] sweat scratched the surface of it to a depth of perhaps fourteen inches in order to grow something [cotton] out of it . . ." (243-4). Ike discovers his grandfather's misdeeds by putting together, in detective-like fashion, various facts recorded in the commissary ledgers. His tragic discovery resonates powerfully with his existing radical views concerning land ownership and also broadens his sense of his own (racial and cultural) identity:

not alone of his own flesh and blood but of all his people, not only the whites but the black one too, who were as much a part of his ancestry as his white progenitors, and of the land which they had all held and used in common and fed from and on and would continue to use in common without regard to color or titular ownership. He knew what he was going to find before he found it.  
(256-7)

Ike is uncomfortable with this challenge to the homogeneity of his self-understanding and, in a dramatic confrontation with McCaslin, echoes countless other Faulkner characters by



describing the Southern landscaped in the fatalistic language of the accursed: “This whole land, this whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse?” (266).

Ike differs from the Quentin Compsons of the Yoknapatawpha universe only in the sense of understanding the causal factors underlying this purported curse on a more nuanced and sophisticated level. The final section of “The Bear” and the near entirety of the final hunting vignette, “Delta Autumn,” concern the “taming” of the hunting lands around Jefferson and Ike’s reaction to both the disappearance of his remaining refuge against the corrosive influence of modernity and also the poisonous identity-political nexus referred to by himself and numerous other Faulkner characters as the “curse” of the South. Specifically, the remainder of “The Bear” details Ike’s final, emotionally rending visit to the lands of the incorporated hunting club, now largely owned by lumber companies like that depicted in “Pantaloon in Black.” Shortly after his final visit, the land is cut for timber.

Faulkner’s textual exploration of the uncanny borderlands between civilization and wilderness continues into this final sequence of “The Bear.” After arriving by train at Hoke’s, a milling town that was formerly an outpost of the hunting club, Ike observes the movement of the train as it carries on down the tracks, noting as “it ran once more at its maximum clattering speed between the twin walls of unaxed wilderness as of old” that “It had been harmless once” (304). The once harmless train acted, in Ike’s view, as the ambassador and harbinger of mechanization and modernity, having “brought with it into the doomed wilderness even before the actual axe the shadow and portent of the new mill not even finished yet and the rails and ties which were not even laid.” It is at this moment, in his observation of the seemingly (or formerly) innocuous train, that Ike realizes the sad truth that he shall never again, after this final visit, see the sacred

big bottom: “he knew now what he had known as soon as he saw Hoke's this morning but had not yet thought into words . . .” (306-7).

In this final encounter Ike once again, possibly for the last time, edges toward a sublime and epiphantic understanding of the natural world: “The wilderness soared, mused, inattentive, myriad, eternal green; older than any mill-shed, longer than any spur-line” (307). He is, in this sequence, presciently aware of the myriad vastness of the natural world. Additionally, he seems to, if only briefly, understand that his relations to other human beings suffers on account of all that he emotionally invests in the concept of wilderness: “but still the woods would be his mistress and his wife” (311). The following vignette, “Delta Autumn,” clarifies the consequences of this latter realization, establishing through narrative flashbacks that Ike’s decision to relinquish title to the McCaslin inheritance ultimately destroys his very brief marriage.

This final section of “The Bear” represents the peak of Ike’s sublime connectivity to nature; the next story, also the final hunting vignette, explores the tragic consequences of his familial and geographic relinquishment, juxtaposing said consequences against Ike’s growing internalization and disconnection from the world around him. Had the novel ended with “The Bear,” Isaac McCaslin might not be viewed, at least in the present day era of mainstream environmentalism, as the failed protagonist the typical critical understanding identifies in, and transposes upon, his developmental characterization in the text. However, the mournful tonality of the novel’s overarching depiction of landscape change begins to emerge with Ike’s visit to Hoke’s camp in “The Bear,” an event thematically anticipating much of what transpires in “Delta Autumn,” and it eventually culminates with a discussion, in the latter story, of his inability to promote positive, and arrest negative, changes to the life-world he so fervently admires.

Soon after arriving at Hoke’s—a modern and mechanized site with loads of machinery;

its depiction possessing none of the rustic character of the former hunting outpost—Ike sets out to find Boon Hogganbeck, now employed as a Sheriff by the milling operation. He ascertains that Boon, repeatedly referenced in the story as a terrible shot, recently set out toward a valuable squirrel hunting site, described as “a single big sweet-gum just outside the woods, in an old clearing” that “if you crept up to it very quietly this time of year and then ran suddenly into the clearing,” Faulkner’s descriptive narration explains, “sometimes you caught as many as a dozen squirrels in it, trapped, since there was no other tree near they could jump to” (307). The notion of assemblage comes across, through its lingering imagistic resonance, even in this brief and preliminary instance of narrative stage-setting.

In the course of his walk toward Boon’s location, Ike comes across the makeshift gravesite of Lion and Old Ben, referenced as the holding site of a tin box containing both one of the bear’s paws and the dog’s bones. Ike’s reaction to this sacred corner of the wild prompts one of the novel’s most intriguing and speculative passages concerning the material constitution of the natural world:

. . . the myriad life which printed the dark mold of these secret and sunless places with delicate fairy tracks, which, breathing and biding and immobile, watched him from beyond every twig and leaf. . . not held fast in earth but free in earth and not in earth but of earth, myriad yet undiffused of every myriad part, leaf and twig and particle, air and sun and rain and dew and night, acorn oak and leaf and acorn again, dark and dawn and dark and dawn again in their immutable progression and, being myriad, one . . . (313)<sup>38</sup>

The notion of a “myriad yet undiffused” biosphere, encompassing all composite

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<sup>38</sup>The “delicate fairy tracks” of this passage conjure the internal operations of the nonhuman, the sense of vibrant activity discussed by Bennett; the nonhuman is here represented as a “breathing” entity that watches the human observer.

elements—enumerated by a metonymic chain of signifiers: “leaf,” “twig,” “air,” “sun,” “rain,” “dew,” “night,” “acorn,” “oak”—bears much similarity to the emerging metaphors for interconnection and networking characterizing much of contemporary eco-philosophy. In the interim between his observation of this “secret and sunless” place and his ultimate arrival at Boon’s location, Ike observes a snake: “he could not quite believe that all that shift and flow of shadow behind that waling head could have been one snake. . .” (314).<sup>39</sup>

The final image of “The Bear,” encountered by Ike shortly after his discovery of the snake, takes on the connotations and descriptive trajectory of a vibrant, swarming assemblage. As Ike approaches the aforementioned tree, Boon’s location, he notices that the tree is “alive with frantic squirrels”: forty or fifty of the critters dart around, leaping from branch to branch, until the entire tree appears as “one green maelstrom of mad leaves” swirling around a “frenzied vortex” (315). Boon is a composite component within this image just as he earlier functioned as an inclusive element within Faulkner’s earlier imagistic swarm of man, dog, and enormous bear. Boon, as Ike encounters him, sits against the trunk, surrounded by the pieces of his dismembered gun, “hammering the disjointed barrel against the gun-breech with the frantic abandon of a madman” (315).<sup>40</sup> “The Bear,” the longest and most critically discussed vignette in the novel, concludes, radically and resonantly, with the image of an assemblage that literally vibrates, conjuring—through the precise, and meticulously calibrated, consistency of the imagistic tableau

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<sup>39</sup> In the moment of this description, he glimpses into (or maybe merely senses) the vibrating inner dimensions of the snake, its essence apart from encounter with humanity; though, it must be noted, the non-relational form of the critter is fuzzy and elusive to his perception, a “shift and flow of shadow.”

<sup>40</sup> Boon’s incessant hammering upon the gun, a mechanistic assemblage that has devolved away from instrumental form and back into variegation, shakes the tree and spurs the activity of the squirrels.

presented therein—both the intrinsic vitality of animals, human beings, and objects (each in and of themselves) and the extraordinary capacity of such modally disparate entities to form confederations of movement and mayhem, action and agency, cataclysm and causality, and, last but not least, attenuation and attunement.

### 9. “Delta Autumn”

“Delta Autumn,” the final hunting vignette, finds a fragile, very elderly Ike McCaslin (referred to as “Uncle Ike”) on a hunting trip with much younger men, descendants of former (now deceased) companions like Cass Edmonds. The men drive deep into the Mississippi Delta, described as “rich unbroken alluvial flatness,” hundreds of miles from Jefferson (319). The wilderness, Ike’s continuing internal monologues suggest, retreats increasingly further from Yoknapatawpha County (“the territory in which game still existed drawing yearly inward as his life was drawing inward”) prompting the necessity of a journey now taken by automobile (“driving faster and faster each year because the roads were better and they had farther and farther to drive”) rather than by wagon or mill company train (319-320).<sup>41</sup> The narrative voice lingers over strange juxtapositions of civilization against the wild: ‘the diminishing fields they now passed once more scooped punily and terrifically by axe and saw and mule-drawn plow from the wilderness' flank, out of the brooding and immemorial tangle. . .’ (325). In this distant locale, miles from his home and in a partially uncorrupted locale, Ike views the natural world as something larger (even, perhaps, stronger) than humanity, an enduring entity “punily” fought back and tamed in sections. Once again, the biosphere emerges, through the maneuverings of Faulkner’s unique eco-poetics, as a “brooding,” internally vibrant and uncannily anthropomorphic entity.

But Ike also envisions the wilderness as a fleeting modality, constantly endangered and

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<sup>41</sup> As Ike speculates about (and muses upon) the delta region, Faulkner highlights, yet again, the wide variety of ways in which persons and animals engage with the landscape: “fecund up to the very doorsteps of the negroes who worked it and of the white men who owned it,” Faulkner writes, channeling Ike’s observations, “which exhausted the hunting life of a dog in one year, the working life of a mule in five and of a man in twenty . . .” (324).

forced to withdraw further from the centers of human settlement: “retreating southward through this inverted apex, until what was left of it seemed now to be gathered and for the time arrested in one tremendous density of brooding and inscrutable impenetrability at the ultimate funneling tip” (326-7). Through the observations captured by these passages, Ike appreciates those dimensions of the natural world that remain observable to his senses. The overall tone of “Delta Autumn,” however, is overwhelmingly elegiac with regard to the reaches of woods and wilderness disappearing before his (and the reader’s) eyes.

Ike’s belief in the duality between man and nature renders him staunchly and increasingly misanthropic: “The woods and the fields he ravages and the game he devastates will be the consequence and signature of his crime and guilt, and his punishment” (332). He understands his repudiation of the McCaslin inheritance as an attempt at absolving himself of this “crime” against the woods, an ill-fated attempt to “arrest at least that much of what people called progress” and “measure his longevity at least against that much of its ultimate fate” (337).<sup>42</sup> Ike, in his final appearance in *Go Down, Moses*, holds fast to the idea that the South is a land cursed for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways. The land itself, such language suggests, may function as the mechanism of, and righteous enforcer behind, the curse of southern doom.

The narrative arc of “Delta Autumn” primarily concerns an encounter between Isaac and a young African American woman, a distant cousin of his who became fatefully entangled with the current male landowning Edmonds, and is now pregnant and near-abandoned by the young man (Ike’s travelling companion and younger kinsman). Ike’s legacy of repudiation, in addition

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<sup>42</sup> His actions, he is forced to admit, accomplished very little in terms of turning the tide against progress: “No wonder the ruined woods I used to know dont cry for retribution!” Faulkner writes, “He [Ike] thought: The people who have destroyed it will accomplish its revenge” (347).

to its benign effect upon the changing landscape, also failed to end the cycle of disenfranchisement, abuse, and neglect characterizing engagement between white and black members of the McCaslin-Beauchamp-Edmonds family tree. The young woman, knowledgeable about their mutual family history, partially blames Ike for her predicament, postulating that he “spoiled” the young Edmonds: “When you gave to his grandfather that land which didn't belong to him,” she clarifies, “not even half of it by will or even law” (343).

The ill-fated consequences of Ike's repudiation are further explored in the titular and final story, *Go Down, Moses* (a racial tragedy thematically similar to “Pantaloons in Black”). “Delta Autumn” renders clearly, by distilling and illuminating the consequences of events taking place elsewhere in the text, the sad fact that the destruction of Ike's beloved wilderness—in addition to the troubled racial dynamics common to his family, community, and topographical region—each persist despite (and in the face of) Ike's best efforts at reversing or even arresting them; he has done nothing to alleviate the tragic causal influence of these crimes and has, at best, merely minimized his own guilt and complicity.



10. “Go Down, Moses”

Much like the earlier “Pantaloon in Black,” “Go Down, Moses” concerns the violent death, at the hands of law enforcement, of a young black man. In the titular story, the death occurs in Memphis and the ill-fated young man is the grandson son of Molly and Lucas Beauchamp. Gavin Stevens—a white public servant who undertakes to have the remains of the young man, Butch Beauchamp, returned to Jefferson—receives textual introduction through a bit of Faulkner’s typical eco-poetic flourish: “On that same hot, bright July morning the same hot bright wind which shook the mulberry leaves just outside Gavin Stevens’ window blew into the office too, contriving a semblance of coolness from what was merely motion” (353). These hints of southern pastoral splendor, as in the earlier vignettes and in Faulkner’s work beyond *GDM*, set the stage for events characterized by hardship and racial calamity.

At various points in this final vignette, Stevens overhears Molly and other relatives of the deceased young man singing biblical spirituals, somehow drawing comparisons between the hymns and the tragic fate of Butch (the young, now deceased, McCaslin descendant): “Sold him to Pharaoh and now he dead,” they sing (362). Stevens, through a combination of recollection and insightful inference, deduces a connection between this religious iconography and the family history of Molly’s Beauchamp family and its white cousins, the McCaslins and Edmonds: “He remembered now that it was Edmonds who had actually sent the boy to Jefferson in the first place, he had caught the boy breaking into his commissary store and had ordered him off the place and had forbidden him ever to return” (355). The Edmonds in question is yet another descendant of Cass, Ike’s cousin and guardian. When the young landowner banished his black kinsman, he sent the young man spiraling into a cycle of poverty and crime, ultimately

culminating in his death.

The tragic fate of the African American branch of the McCaslin family figuratively connects (hence the title of this final vignette and of the total novel *Go Down, Moses*) to the iconic enslavement of the biblical Israelites; over many years, the white landowning Edmonds “sell” their erstwhile cousins into exile and ruin. All of this tragedy stems, at least in some sense, from Ike’s relinquishment of the McCaslin title and the subsequent empowerment of the Edmonds clan. The implications of Ike’s fateful decision emerge only partially (incompletely) through his own stories; in order to interpret them properly, it is necessary to view and interpret them through the broader relational network of the novel’s total assemblage of precisely layered vignettes. The novel constructs a wide, reverberating network of causes, antecedents, and echoing implications.

Near the end of “Go Down, Moses,” both novel and sectional vignette, Faulkner’s language hovers upon a travelling hearse containing the remains of the deceased Butch, in addition to the still living personages of Molly and the white public servants assisting her (“the high-headed erect white woman, the old Negress, the designated paladin of justice and truth and right, the Heidelberg Ph.D.”); diverse members of the Jefferson population are frozen together by this image into a (now familiar) unifying, imagistic tableau in the novel’s final signifying illustration of assemblage logic (364).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Like this and other of Faulkner’s vibrantly rendered snap-shots of conglomeration and confederation, the novel’s formal structure gathers together seemingly disparate vignettes into an autonomous total collective; hence, *Go Down Moses* functions, both thematically and structurally, as a novel of interconnection rather than a congregation of hastily lumped together stories, united only by the coincidence of setting.

### 11. Models of Assemblage and New Materialisms: Faulkner, Ecocriticism, and the Future

The stated need to transcend anthropocentrism, thus arriving at something like post-humanism, ranks highly amongst the issues contested within the ongoing re-evaluation of materialism. Faulkner's text operates ahead of its time in this sense, particularly in context of the story-cycle versus novel distinction. *GDM* represents a visionary turn in the evolution of the novel, one whereby human beings function not as the single unifying element, but as one particle among many. The McCaslin clan swirls around in the background of this text in a manner strangely parallel with (and contrary to) Faulkner's typical strategies regarding the role played by family in novelistic structure: *The Sound and the Fury* clearly revolves around the Compson family just as *As I Lay Dying* coheres around the Bundrens and *Absalom, Absalom!* organizes itself around the Sutpen clan. Each of these great works traces such concepts as history, causality, genealogy and ancestral heritage. *Go Down, Moses*, however, pushes its familial elements into the background: though Lucas and Ike represent the most sustained voices in the narrative, the legacy of their ancestral history is located within a larger affective and operative community.

The Yoknapatawpha life-world, then, is the true conceptual glue linking everything together: it is the only element connecting, for example, Isaac's story to Ryder's. "Pantaloon in Black," oft viewed as the fly in the text's structural ointment, illustrates the affective operations of the land and community (and composite elements like logs) upon human beings; in this sense, it fits right in to Faulkner's panoramic portrait of place. The typical tropes of nature writing deal with human operations (typically destructive) upon the land and biosphere. These elements take on resonance in *GDM*, but the text distinguishes itself by according equal thematic development

to the reverse situation: the nonhuman's capacity to emanate into and alter the human.

The novel distinguishes itself not only within nature writing but also within the broader currents of Twentieth-century modernism, which produced countless texts united by setting, time-period, concept, worldview, and other nonhuman elements: examples include Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*, and Southern short story champion Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find* and *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. While each of these texts contributed to the project of expanding conceptual understandings of what can and cannot unify a text, it is telling that each is considered, both critically and self-consciously, as a story cycle or collection. Novels, to this day, typically need human characters or groups in order to be taken seriously as unified, coherent works of art. Faulkner, both in constructing *GDM* with a novelistic intentionality and in repeatedly insisting on such classification after the novel's mislabeling, gestures toward a new paradigm whereby nonhuman elements may dictate novelistic structure. The decades between Faulkner's era and our own see precious few writers attempting such an emboldened move: the novel remains a trenchantly anthropocentric art form.

In addition to simply challenging human-centric textual organization, Faulkner also renders a fictional biosphere, one similarly resistant to anthropocentric understanding. Rather than depicting an insular human community, *GDM* instead (echoing many contemporary thinkers) presents a system of assemblages and feedback circuits. Similar concepts (like aggregation and assemblage) take center stage in the ongoing and vibrant theoretical investigation into the murky depths of symbiosis and biological interdependence: "In present-day materialism one speaks . . . of quarks and infinitesimal strings," writes object oriented ontology advocate Graham Harman; "In all such cases, the critical method is the same: what seems at first

like an autonomous object is really just a motley aggregate built of smaller pieces” (Harman Tool-Being 7). The cosmos, many contemporary theorists suggest, presents itself to us in interpretative vignettes much like the composite sections of Faulkner’s novel.

Ecocriticism—a recently emerging branch of literary scholarship studying, stated broadly, the relationship between human and nonhuman—has the potential to contribute meaningfully (particularly if it focuses upon complicated place-based texts like *Go Down, Moses*) to the ongoing philosophical reevaluation of causality, biological diversity, and symbiotic interconnection. Memes of a de-centered humanity and a networked ecology, in fact, centrally influence the very term “Ecocriticism” (Glotfelty and Fromm xx).<sup>44</sup> “Ecology,” in the life-sciences sense of the term, also proposes numerous metaphors and models connotative of concepts like interdependence, integration, and constituent connectivity. In the philosophical domain, entire fields—complete with esoteric names like post-humanism, object-oriented-ontology, and new materialism—emerge in contemporary academia in answer to the call to map out a cosmos in which human beings exist as just mere specs on a much larger grid.

Timothy Morton, a thinker who dabbles in a variety of these disciplines, derives his ecological model of “the mesh” from Darwin’s earlier metaphor of an “entangled bank”: “Notice how Darwin’s ‘entangled bank’ suggests that we visualize interconnected life-forms as a whole—and what is ecology if not the study of the fact of this interconnection?” (22). “Yet what is this whole if not a flowing, shifting, entangled mess of ambiguous entities . . . ,” he continues, eventually elucidating a precise ecological metaphor: “the whole is a mesh, a very curious,

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44 “[I]n its connotations, enviro- is anthropocentric and dualistic, implying that we humans are at the center, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment,” a useful primer on the emerging critical discipline explains; “Eco-, in contrast, implies interdependent communities, integrated systems, and strong connections among constituent parts” (Glotfelty and Fromm xx).

radically open form without center or edge” (22). “The mesh,” Morton maintains, is a useful metaphor because it conjures boundaries—between life-forms, between life and non-life, between human and nonhuman—as “permeable and wide” rather than “rigid and thin” (22). Though all points in “the mesh” connect, nothing lies in “a definite foreground,” “a definite background,” or at an “absolute center or edge” (25)<sup>45</sup>.

The various vignettes composing the novel overlap one another in a fashion similar to the interconnected life-forms of Morton’s “mesh”; no one story, character, or even species lies at the center or edge of Faulkner’s multiple tapestry of southern life. Within the novel’s variegated network of causality, assemblage, and interconnection—cycles of race, family, and community (characteristic of life in the U.S. South) receive presentation and exploration in new ways, ways that parallel the operations of the nonhuman biosphere. The numerous parallels between Faulkner’s ecological vision and a variety of contemporary environmental metaphors and paradigms speak to the complexity (in his own time period or any other) of Faulkner’s presentation of place. The writing in *Go Down, Moses* transcends the geographic, arriving at the relational.

Morton’s vision of ecological interdependence derives from a radical revisiting of Darwin’s much earlier insights on the subject of biological entanglement: Morton insists that the implications of evolution necessarily entail a recognition that life-forms are “mutually determining,” “made out of other life-forms”; “Nothing exists independently and nothing comes

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<sup>45</sup> Morton concedes that many of our metaphors for interconnection are compromised by internet-related connotations; “mesh,” however, “has uses in biology, mathematics, and engineering, and in weaving and computing”; it is a conceptually elastic term that suggests “both the holes in a network and the threading between them” (24).

from nothing,” he ultimately concludes (Morton Queer 275). In Morton’s neo-Darwinian view, all life-forms are monstrous chimeras, Frankenstein-monster like assemblages of bits and pieces of other life-forms. The novel, similarly, functions as a monstrous and unruly conglomeration of seemingly disparate vignettes.

Darwin’s original “entangled bank” metaphor signifies the evolutionary processes within which various species branch out of the experiential history of previously existing species: roots entangled below the surface of the bank represent the species of the past; branches sprouting above the surface, conversely, represent newly emerging species evolving out of what preceded them. All life, as suggested by both the trope of “the mesh” and the image of an “entangled bank,” exists on a deeply symbiotic continuum. Faulkner’s imagistic tableau of Lion and Boon astride the vicious Old Ben offers a similarly chimeric metaphor for interconnection and entanglement.

The insights emanating out of the novel’s structure receive magnification through the carefully attenuated imagery conjured within several of the vignettes. Bennett’s recent work, particularly a 2012 article titled “Systems and Things,” goes further than *Vibrant Matter* in elucidating the benefits and necessity of the sort of assemblage logic conjured by both her own writing and Faulkner’s imagistic tableaux in *GDM*. The article explains the distinction between Bennett’s vision of materiality and the competing paradigm offered by Object-Oriented Ontology; she specifically addresses the work of Morton and the more phenomenologically-inclined, neo-Heideggerian Graham Harman. Bennett challenges OOOs vision of “aloof objects . . . positioned as the sole locus of all the acting” (222). Faulkner objects to discussion of *GDM* as a cycle of stand-alone short stories, thematically “aloof” to one another, on similar grounds. He insists that *GDM* receive examination and interpretation as a novel, rather than collection, not to

emphasize the thematic autonomy of the total text but to de-emphasize the individuated autonomy of the composite parts. Bennett similarly prefers a model of “things-operating-in-systems” to one of autonomous individual agents (228). For both Bennett and Faulkner, the operative question is not how the system functions as a sum of its parts but of how the individual parts operate under, and become shaped by, influences and determining implications consequent to their attenuated locus within the system.

Bennett justifies her cosmological system on the grounds that the dynamic crises that afflict the contemporary biosphere, including complex phenomena such as climate change, emerge from the “fragile, fractious connectedness of earthly bodies”; such things evade explanation and considered reaction when viewed through the conceptual paradigm of holistic thinking, even of the “fractious-assemblage kind” (228-229).<sup>46</sup> Faulkner’s novel operates ahead of the phenomenology and environmental philosophy available in the author’s own time, recognizing that even seemingly less dynamic (in comparison to contemporary crises) environmental phenomena, such as land use and deforestation, receive illumination through the systemic model of assemblage logic.<sup>47</sup>

Faulkner’s application of a visionary logic of systemic assemblage draws attention to

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<sup>46</sup> For Bennett, all forms of holism fail: only a contemporary materialism, one affirming “a vitality or creative power of bodies and forces at all ranges or scales” carries potential to “cut against the hubris of human exceptionalism” and, thus, pave the way for workable models of sustainability (230).

<sup>47</sup> Bennett suggests, in “Systems and Things,” a potential for literary works to not only enrich understanding of past phenomena such as those tackled by Faulkner, but to advance the vision of a sustainable future “with less violence toward a variety of bodies”: “Texts are bodies that can light up, by rendering human perception more acute, those bodies whose favored vehicle of affectivity is less wordy . . . ,” she writes, further suggesting that literature “can help us feel more of the liveliness hidden in such things and reveal more of the threads of connection binding our fate to theirs” (232).



reverberating systems of cause and butterfly effect that demand to be taken seriously by ecological thought of the contemporary (and future) era. The novel illuminates the sort of “liveliness” (vitality) discussed by Bennett, hardly the only contemporary theorist exploring the environmental affect (pre- and post- textual) of literary works. Others working in this vein include Morton and Hans Gumbrecht, German author of the groundbreaking *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*. Gumbrecht uses the word *stimmung*—which, in German, connotes a variety of ideas including mood, atmosphere, and the tuning of an instrument—to describe physically “concrete encounter” between text and reader. Books carry the capacity to “envelop” and “surround” readers, Gumbrecht maintains, in a fashion similar to the causal operations of mood and weather upon human beings: “Reading for *Stimmung* always means paying attention to the textual dimensions of the forms that envelop us and our bodies as a physical reality, something that can catalyze inner feelings without matters of representation necessarily being involved” (5). In other words, texts represent imaginary forms (which may or may not have real life counterparts) but also function as operative and affecting forms in their own right.

*GDM*'s model of ecological connection emerges partially through its structured representation of the textual biosphere it renders; additionally, and perhaps more tellingly, the novel engenders a post-textual environment constitutive of and by its encounter with the reader. The reader becomes “attuned” to the novel (and its formal and thematic structure) in similar fashion to both the nuanced and attenuated relational condition of the fictional characters within their representational habitats and the equally precarious “attunements” required by real-life human beings in their encounters with post-textual environments.

Morton, though he differs from Bennett on the question of assemblage systems versus

autonomous objects (presumably locating as much agency in the individual strands of “the mesh” as in the network of overlaps and intersections amongst and between them), similarly insists that texts carry post-textual affectivity beyond and buttressing the representational operations occurring within the text proper: “A poem is not simply a representation but rather a nonhuman agent,” he writes, in a 2012 article titled “An Object Oriented Defense of Poetry” (215).<sup>48</sup>

The notion of attunement at the center of Gumbrecht’s thought emerges also as a central issue in Morton’s essay, which takes Shelley’s famous discussion of the “Aeolian Harp” (a metonymic stand-in for cosmic attunement) as its springboard and starting point: “Sentience, on this view, is vibing with (or out of tune with) some other entity: Sentience is attunement,” Morton proposes. (205). Reading and translation of Faulkner’s textual environment, and of the networks of representational and post-representational causality at play within it, parallels the manner in which OOO understands causality in both textual and post-textual environments.

One does not have to side with Morton and OOO over Bennett and assemblage logic in order to see the value in these ideas of attunement and mutual translation. Faulkner’s systemic thematics attribute Ike McCaslin’s failure to enact positive change not to a failure to act, but to a failure to translate, attune, and, thus, calibrate action accordingly. In *GDM*, Faulkner concerns himself, eco-poetically, not only with representing nature and place but also with calibrating the

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<sup>48</sup> For Morton, and other OOO advocates, “causality is aesthetic”; the material plane of causality is composed of various internally autonomous (yet externally indecipherable) objects “translating one another” into their own ontological systems; anthropocentric thinking, in this view, emerges not as a process unique to human beings but a microcosmic manifestation of a larger phenomena universally applicable to any given object (205-6). Because encounter and causality themselves function as processes of translation, Morton maintains, “poetry simply is causality, pure and simple” (216).

present operations of the text, syncing the reader up to a network of mutual translation in which they themselves take part.

In the terms utilized by the advocates of the various and competing new materialisms, the text combines a vision of aesthetic causality reminiscent of OOO with a model of systemic assemblage paralleling Bennett's model of collaborative agency. The reader of *GDM* emerges with an enhanced understanding of the causality underlying the environmental (and racial, familial, historical, etc.) dynamics of Faulkner's time and, additionally, a model of ecological affect equally applicable to those of their own. Further, Faulkner contributes provocatively to a heated, ongoing, and (at least potentially) highly consequentially debate over environmental dynamics and competing models of agency. Texts like *GDM* may, and perhaps should, play an important role in the future of ontology.

Gumbrecht's notion that texts bring both present and past operations carries an important interpretative implication: when one reads for Stimmung rather than character, the relevance of Faulkner's work to our time and our environmental situation carries the same evaluative weight as its relevance to decades past. Thinkers like Gumbrecht and Morton ask us to observe textual affect directly rather than simply speculate, post-hoc, as to past operations. When Morton claims that literature is indistinct from causality, he also (tellingly) claims that literature can change the world. The present world is in desperate need of the sort of operatic model (one wherein human beings become equally as disconnected and discombobulated as everything else) proposed by Faulkner in *GDM*.

Though anthropocentric logic currently continues to dominate our understanding of the novel as an art form, contemporary materialism and William Faulkner point us in a new direction. *GDM*— though published decades before the advent of posthumanism, new

materialism, OOO and similar movements toward decentering the cosmos out from under the death grip of human purposiveness—offers, nevertheless, a telling example of the potentiality for novel writing to promote such agendas and challenge anthropocentric, correlationist thinking. The notion of a novel lacking a human through-line creates a valuable model for a cosmos, universe, habitat or biosphere similarly lacking a human through-line.

**C. Chapter Two: *Power* and Access: Animal Consciousness and Postcolonial Ecology in the Writing of Linda Hogan**

## 1. Introduction: Native Identity, Nature Writing, and the Fiction and Nonfiction of Linda Hogan

In *Dwellings* (1995), a nonfiction work that is at once a memoir and an unconventional example of the “nature writing” genre, Native American author Linda Hogan argues powerfully that Western culture fails to appreciate the nonhuman on its own terms, emphasizing that a concept like “wilderness” acquires value only in the sense that “it enhances and serves our human lives, our human world” (45).<sup>49</sup> Hogan’s writing, here and elsewhere, puts forth a contrasting view that the nonhuman deserves and possesses value beyond and transcending “our spiritual and psychological well-being”: “it is a container of far more, of mystery, of a life apart from ours” (45). While so-called “wilderness” offers escape for humans—escape from “who we have become and what we have done”—it also represents, within the author’s formulation, “something beyond us, something that does not need our hand in it” (45).<sup>50</sup> In this memoir, Hogan grasps for a language to capture this inherent value, transcendent of anthropocentric concern, “a language that takes hold of the mystery of what’s around us and offers it back to us,

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<sup>49</sup> “The ears of this language do not often hear the songs of the white egrets, the rain falling into stone bowls,” she writes. Such language calls attention to the differences between indigenous and mainstream views of nature. “So we make our own songs to contain these things, make ceremonies and poems, searching for a new way to speak, to say we want a new way to live in the world, to say that wilderness and water, blue herons and orange newts are invaluable not just to us, but in themselves, in the workings of the natural world that rules us whether we acknowledge it or not” (46). It is important to pose linguistic challenges to the dominant view of nature; the “songs” mentioned here celebrate the intrinsic vitality of the nonhuman.

<sup>50</sup> “The land itself bears witness to the way elements trade places; it is limestone that floated up from the sea, containing within it the delicate, complex forms of small animals from earlier times; snails, plants, creatures that were alive beneath water are still visible beneath the feet. To walk on this earth is to walk on a living past, on the open pages of history and geology,” she writes (79). Such historical detail contextualizes human experience within larger scales and prehistoric timelines.

full of awe and wonder,” “a language of creation, of divine fire,” “a language that goes beyond the strict borders of scientific inquiry and right into the heart of the mystery itself” (59). In her call for this evolved language of the nonhuman, Hogan’s elucidation is more evocative than specific; she defines this new language negatively, through her multifaceted critique of traditional Western discourse, both generally and in specific relation to concepts like “nature” and “wilderness”: “Ours is a language of commerce and trade, of laws that can be bent in order that treaties might be broken, land wounded beyond healing. It is a language that is limited, emotionally and spiritually, as if it can’t accommodate such magical strength and power” (45-6). If Hogan is elusive in terms of describing the consistency, texture, and composition of this ideal mode of ecological discourse, she is rather clear about what it should avoid, what limitations and pitfalls it might seek to avert: it should be a language of intrinsic power, not of commercial value.

Hogan’s understanding of power receives further clarification in a novel simply titled *Power* (1998). The novel prods and problematizes many generic and theoretical classifications (Southern studies, Native American studies, postcolonial literature, ecocriticism, nature writing, ecofeminism, and many others) but the central question, binary opposition, or division implicit in the text relates to interaction between and distinction amongst human and nonhuman subjectivities. Hogan utilizes reference to animal consciousness and other nonhuman elements to broaden our understanding of descriptors like southern, indigenous, postcolonial, or ecocritical. *Power* is a text that actively resists classification while actively emphasizing hybridity and permeability. Its central protagonist is conflicted not only by the conflation of two separate cultures—to use postcolonial language, her liminality—but also by divisions and questions of loyalty and affiliation related to species. Her narration highlights permeable border zones

between human and nonhuman modes of life.<sup>51</sup> Throughout the pages of *Dwellings*, Hogan's personal accounts exude a similar preoccupation with the edges and endpoints of the Anthropocene experience.<sup>52</sup>

*Power* functions as both a coming of age tale and an account of human experience in the natural world. The young girl at the center of the story, like Isaac McCaslin and other young protagonists in southern fiction, must reconcile herself with both cultural and natural phenomenon. Omishto belongs to the Taiga tribe, a fictional group of Native Americans invented by Hogan, herself a Chickasaw. She operates within three separate modalities of existence: a dominant culture, an indigenous subculture, and a nonhuman biosphere improperly understood by each. The story functions as a postcolonial and ecological bildungsroman centering upon its central character's navigation of these three disparate yet interconnected spheres.

The Taiga reside in a swampy region of Florida occupied by a diverse array of wildlife. Many animals carry spiritual and cultural weight within their traditions; in particular, a resonant mythology builds itself around the figure of a sacred panther. Despite its importance to this native culture, the Florida biosphere surrounding both the panthers and the Taiga tribe becomes endangered by forces of modernity and development. Due to this loss of habitat, the worshipped

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<sup>51</sup> "Aunt Ama says what you look at is what you become, so I don't look into the trees. I don't want to become like the shadows hiding the eyes of animals, harboring insects and lizards or runaways" (2-3). This language of "becoming" prods at the human/nonhuman boundary.

<sup>52</sup> "They call this region the Boundary Waters, and it is. It's the place where one country joins another, where bodies of land and water are broken by each other," she writes. These physical and geographic boundaries resonate symbolically with the borders of perception and subjectivity. "The skeletal gray branches of trees define a terrain that is at the outermost limits of our knowledge and it is a shadowy world, one our bones say is the dangerous borderland between humans and wilderness," she continues (63).



panther comes to be listed as an endangered species. The story concerns Omishto's aunt, an adherent to Taiga traditions, and a fatal and culturally problematic encounter with one of the surviving sacred cats.

*Dwellings* functions as an autobiography, rather than bildungsroman, of environmental place. Hogan chronicles various locales she has lived within and visited at length. The text expresses her views on the topics of place and environment. These views reflect both Native American views of nature and a background of postcolonial liminality not unlike Omishto's. The distinctions between native-ecological modes of thought and the views of nature adopted by the postmodern West come to be prominent topics. *Dwellings* includes many accounts of encounters with animal life; Hogan is fascinated by predators, writing about wolves here with the same resonance as her discussion of panthers in the novel. In both works, she exhibits not only a fascination with animals but an ecological awareness of their habitats and states of endangerment. Additionally, each text juxtaposes humanity's coming to terms with a broader eco-sphere against the implicit contradictions of postcolonial subjectivity and the struggles of a native lifestyle to preserve its existence within a dominant culture. Hogan emerges as a writer capable of toggling not only differing cultures but also divergent modes of prose, writing about ecology in both fiction and nonfiction.

## 2. *Dwellings*: A Language of Nonhuman Value

If “power” is the organizing concept of the novel, the related concept of “value” functions as an organizing principle in *Dwellings*, a text wherein Hogan repeatedly contrasts the language of commerce against her longing for the aforementioned language of intrinsic value. The development of this new language, Hogan insists, is crucial to an “ecology of the mind” that is desperately needed in the present age: “Without it, we have no home, have no place of our own within the creation” (60). “Power” and “value” are very much related concepts within Hogan’s particular brand of eco-poetics: both are fuzzy concepts that relate to the question of whether life-forms and things are worth something in and of themselves, outside of value systems and hierarchies and subjective human judgment. Hogan understands power in a manner that accounts for the concerns of both postcolonialism and posthumanism, treating the concept as the elusive and slippery entity it inherently is.

Hogan’s writing in *Dwellings* also demonstrates that the author, like the character Omishto in *Power*, feels intimately connected to (and derives power from) animal consciousness; her encounters with various nonhuman subjectivities push her closer to the new language of the nonhuman that she so fervently grasps for: “Anyone who has heard the howl of wolves breaking through a northern night will tell you that a part of them still remembers the language of that old song. It stirs the body, taking us down from our world of logic, down to the deeper lost regions of ourselves into a memory so ancient we have lost the name for it” (64). Hogan writes particularly evocatively when describing the dynamics of interaction between human and wolf. She describes the nature of such encounters as “especially fragile,” rendered so by the “psychological fact that wolves carry much of the human shadow” (71). Human beings, in Hogan’s view, endow wolves with a “special association with evil” precisely because they

“mirror back to us the predators we pretend not to be” (71). The predatory panther of *Power* similarly reflects back the human, though it comes to embody human ills beyond predatory violence, such as weakness, endangerment, habitat loss, and identity crisis. The panther is rendered as a mighty beast brought low, thus bringing the creature into close circumstantial proximity to the Taiga (Native American) culture that values it so highly.

Hogan’s encounters with the wolves teach her the latent limitations of cross-species contact, the impossibility of “knowing the inner terrain of the wolf”: “I realize now that I won’t learn about the wolves, our ancestors. They are too complex for that” (73). Hogan’s language in the nonfiction work suggests, however, that, in the past, the bridge between woman and wolf (at least for persons of particular cultures) may not have been quite so vast as it is today: “Inside people who grow out of any land there is an understanding of it, a remembering all the way back to origins” (80). Hogan tends to causally attribute the diminishment of this “understanding” and “remembering” to the postcolonial condition and its implicit and ever-pervasive threat of a “split from the connection between self and land” (82). From Hogan’s prose in both *Power* and *Dwellings* one gets the sense that the instrumental logic of the dominant culture increasingly diminishes the possibility of true and proper “access” even for native or indigenous persons and groups: “We have come so far away from wisdom, a wisdom that is the heritage of all people. An old kind of knowing that respects a community of land, animal and other people as equal to ourselves” (133). The notion of “contemporary humans having lost a formerly intimate connection” with the natural world emerges as a pervasive theme in both ecocriticism and ecological art, yet Hogan’s work distinguishes itself from the conventions of these traditions and from those common to many Native American texts, by extending the “conventional western separation of human and nonhuman nature” into indigenous contexts (Schweninger Changed

188). Human access to the nonhuman, Hogan's writing suggests, becomes increasingly (and universally) problematic in the modern era; the connectivity attributed to Native American culture is, at best, a matter of degree.

*Dwellings* demonstrates cultural liminality in its hybrid structural form, weaving together "history, philosophy, autobiography, and storytelling," all centered within a "rubric" of place (Dreese 6). Hogan explores place through language consistently aware of the mandate to value the nonhuman on its own terms. Such language seeks to repair the "only recent," "severing of the connections between people and land" by fostering the desire to "step outside our emptiness and remember the strong currents that pass between humans and the rest of nature, currents that are the felt voice of the land, heard in the cells of the body" (83-4). Hogan blames a variety of factors for the typically modern inability to resonate with such "currents"; in addition to the language of trade, commodification, and commerce she calls attention to the "spiritual history" of the "Western belief that God lives apart from earth," which she views as having "taken us toward collective destruction" by creating "people who neglect to care for the land for the future generations" (85-6). Throughout *Dwellings*, Hogan's language challenges the Western idea that value is detached from the forms around us, off there somewhere in the abstract peripheral distance, blaming it for the environmental catastrophes of the modern era:

And we have been wounded by a dominating culture that has not listened to the voice of the land, has not believed in the inner worlds of human dreaming and intuition, all things that have guided indigenous people since time stood up in the east and walked this world into existence, split from the connection between self and land (82).

Encounters with animals offer one in-road into the experience of such currents of intrinsic value. At one point in the text, Hogan describes a group of humans crowding around to pet a somewhat domesticated deer: "What need we humans have, a species lonely and lacking in

love,” she provocatively observes, stating further that “these are gestures reserved for animals because the distance between one human and another is often too great to bridge” (73). For many human beings, animals offer an opportunity for empathy apart from the baffling and frustrating encounters amongst one or more human beings. Humans, for Hogan, emerge as preternaturally lonely creatures, lacking a sense of connection, always questing to be a part of something larger than individual autonomy.

Such desires for connection drove Hogan to travel to Ely, Minnesota, having “followed some inner impulse to this cold region,” with a group of researchers studying wolves: “We are looking for the clue to a mystery, a relative inside our own blood.” (64-5). Hogan depicts landscapes in terms of the relational networks, the potentialities of connectivity and encounter, composing them: “The lives of wolves and men have crossed one another often in this northern land,” she writes of the backcountry around Ely, noting that “fortunes grew from the trapped spoils of beaver, wolf, and fox”; in connecting to this landscape and to the wolves, or in trying to connect, Hogan seeks to rekindle the ways of a past in which “animals and people spoke the same tongue” (64-6). Like encounter with animal subjectivity, the cultivation of a proper language of nonhuman value helps to repair a lost sense of connectivity to the nonhuman; Hogan views her ancestors as having demonstrated a primal and intimate knowledge of the world around them; such intimacy becomes difficult to maintain, for mainstream Americans and indigenous peoples alike, in the era of late capitalism.<sup>53</sup>

*Dwellings* also includes more panoramic and abstract depictions of the natural world,

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<sup>53</sup> “I think of the people who came before me and how they knew the placement of stars in the sky, watched the moving sun long and hard enough to witness how a certain angle of light touches a stone only once a year,” she writes, hinting at this constantly waning sense of intimate connectivity to the natural world (158).

even demonstrating some prominent Western influences: “Every piece fits and each life has its place, we learned from Darwin,” she writes, drawing the conclusion that “there is an integrity, a terrestrial intelligence at work” (51). While she makes these few concessions to western science, she writes about her own cultural history in terms demonstrating an innate, pre-scientific sense of connectivity: “Without written records, they knew the god of every night, the small, fine details of the world around them . . .” (158). A variety of influences coalesce in Hogan’s cosmology and eco-poetics. Each of these issues—differing cultural views of the biosphere, the sense of a pervasive modern disconnection, the use of animal encounter and a linguistic preoccupation with nonhuman value as a corrective against said disconnection—receive further treatment in the pages of *Power*. The fictional scenario played out in the novel dramatizes many of the issues and conflicts at the center of *Dwellings*. The use of a young narrator and a bildungsroman form, further, contextualizes Hogan’s environmental politics, translating her ideas into experiential terms more accessible to non-native readers.

### 3. A Note on Existing Criticism of Linda Hogan and *Power*

In a fascinating discussion of *Power*, Eric Gary Anderson comments upon the novel's unique contribution to certain theoretical and generic discourses, particularly the combination of ecocriticism and the language of the under-explored Native American South. As his article appears in a collection—*South To a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture* (2002)—intended to broaden definitional and topical notions of Southern literature, Anderson pays particular attention to the manner in which understanding of the South broadens and evolves in the light of Native American and ecocritical perspectives. Further, he acknowledges that in order to make sense out of the novel's contribution to such discursive intersections, one must disentangle the complicated notions of “power” at play in *Power*. The sharp contrast between different cultural views of the dynamics of interaction between human and nonhuman ranks highly amongst the numerous complexities mentioned here by Anderson; he is rightly hesitant about indulging in the judgment that Native American individuals are closer to the earth and more connected than other persons:

Access to the old ways, to the natural world that drives them, to the small Florida tribe that still bears responsibility for both, and to the American Indian South writ larger, is a form of literary and multicultural power, but power, as Hogan understands it, is a deeply fraught, deeply ambiguous entity that defies all desires—characters' and readers'—for instant gratification and confident cultural authority. Her welcome reminder of an Indian presence in the South carries with it a number of unwelcome, or at the very least vexing, complexities (167).

Anderson's reading of the novel emphasizes the fact that Hogan's decision to set the novel in Florida underscores and reminds us of the oft overlooked fact that the American South “figures prominently in the literary as well as the larger multicultural history of Indian Country”; the necessity of this reminder is tragic, in Anderson's view, and symptomatic of the “various

ways in which American Indians of the South have been colonized, dispossessed and erased” (165). It is not simply an issue of the South’s marginal, minimized, and overlooked role in the history of Native American place; we must also, according to Anderson, acknowledge that the inverse situation—namely, the pivotal role played by Native Americans in the history of the U.S. South—receives an equally marginal and diminished treatment. Further, Anderson reminds us of just “how decentered, how inaccessible, how fictive, indeed how absent such lives and experiences can be in non-Native cultural histories of the South” (166). In short, the Native American South, his reading demonstrates, remains under-explored in a variety of cultural and academic contexts.

Anderson’s discussion of the novel revolves around the notion of “inaccessibility,” a term he applies not only to the limitations of Western access to and understanding of the natural world (and to the modes of access purportedly available to indigenous peoples) but also a more general inaccessibility of the nonhuman biosphere to any human being (native, western, or otherwise): “Hogan suggests that even an Indian-centered, Indian-narrated history of the American South will be incomplete . . .,” because “the elements of Florida Indian history that she transmits remain inaccessible, or grow increasingly so, even to the Indian characters in question” (166). Rather than simply presupposing that the fictional Taiga tribe latently understands and achieves unmediated access to nature, Anderson wisely calls attention to a situation in which the tribe’s own sense of interconnection is threatened and increasingly diminished in the face of an encroaching modern world: “*Power*, then, is less a novel about recovering the old ways and returning to the old routes than it is a novel about how these old ways are one teenaged Indian girl away from being not only relinquished but also extinguished” (167). The novel locates power in, among other things, access to the nonhuman, but this titular power emerges as



slippery, elusive, and like the Florida panther, a distilled image of nonhuman power in the novel, endangered.

As critics Amy Greenwood Baria, Laura Virginia Castor, and Lee Schweninger each point out in separate studies of either the novel, specifically, or of Hogan's work, generally, the text juxtaposes the circumstances of an endangered animal species against those of an equally challenged and diminished tribe of indigenous Floridians: "*Power* (1998) is about the endangered Florida panther and its relationship to the survival of the fictional Taiga people" (Castor 160).<sup>54</sup> Omishto considers herself loyal to both the tribe and the species of panther. Affiliations between the two go back generations, with the panther acknowledged as an active figure in the rich mythic past of the tribe. All of the more traditional Taiga figures in the text acknowledge the idea that their fates and destinies connect to those of the panther in irreparable, significant, and causally relevant ways: "In the old way, she says, the cat is her relative. My relative, too, since we are in the same clan" (3). The tonality and story trajectory of the text further suggest that both the tribe and the panther species are encompassed within, and

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<sup>54</sup> "Through the voice of Omishto, the sixteen-year-old narrator, the Native and non-Native worlds come alive for the reader as the young protagonist makes difficult choices about which world will be her own," writes Baria, calling attention to Hogan's penchant, typical of southern writers, for thematically blending tropes of childhood development with tropes common to nature writing. "Adept at female coming-of-age fiction, Hogan goes a step beyond her second novel, *Solar Storms*, to make *Power* a statement about the loss of Native Americans as a people," she continues (7). This coming-of-age dimension of the text serves to further magnify the juxtaposition of human and nonhuman running throughout the thematic story of Hogan's ecological bildungsroman novel: "Hogan is at her best here; the young girl's dilemma finds magnification in the panther's, bringing new power to this protagonist's coming of age tale," Baria explains, elaborating further. "And, the thoughtful and wrenching comparison between human and animal has extraordinary effects; it elevates animal and human simultaneously. This subtle juxtaposition reminds the reader of the relationships humans and animals once shared in Native culture and sets *Power* apart from Hogan's previous work as well as from other Native American fiction" (Baria 70).

threatened by, the dominant Westernized culture around them.

When Ama, a relative and mentor of Omishto, kills a weakened, addled, and malnourished panther—Omishto, initially angered by the action, comes to realize that the true perpetrators reveal themselves through the destruction of entire ecosystems, not individual creatures: “Would they let me tell that sugarcane and cattle and white houses with red roofs had killed the land and the panther people . . .”; “That the cattle and houses we are passing are the beginning of this crime and that their makers remain unjudged and untried” (114). The “panther people,” meaning the Taiga, fall victim to the devastating results of the very same habitat destruction afflicting their namesake animal: “But we, us Taiga people, haven't run. Instead, silent and nearly invisible, most of us have been pushed up against the wild places, backed against them.”; “And some of them are still there, like a dark corner in the minds of the intruders” (8). The forces referred to by academics with terms like “development,” “progress,” and “modernity” force both panther and indigenous human being into a condition of hesitant and physically and psychically toxic retreat. To the human beings caught up in and propelling these forces, both entities remain unacknowledged and unaccommodated, a “dark corner” in the back of the mind (in postcolonial terms, subaltern entities).

Baria's reading of *Power* identifies this conflating of human and panther as a prescient distinguishing characteristic of the text: “This aspect alone makes *Power* a unique contribution to the Native American canon” (68). What separates the text from “others of its ilk,” by which Baria implies both Native American literature and the genre of nature writing, is “Hogan's ability to match diminishing people, animals, and ways of life against the threat of destruction,” thus bestowing “immediacy” upon the diminishment of all of the mentioned types of entities (68). All of this, in Baria's view, is intended to “reawaken” the dominant culture to its destruction not only

of natural resources but of human beings and other organisms intimately connected to those resources (68).

Castor, whose article tackles a number of Hogan's works and only passingly studies *Power*, reads the text's juxtaposition of human and panther in similar fashion, suggesting that Hogan's text "builds empathy, in terms of imagery, characterization, event, and context, for issues of direct concern to Native readers." In both Baria's and Castor's interpretations, the attitude emerges that the fate of the Taiga tribe receives intensified resonance and tonal significance—particularly for Westernized, non-indigenous readers—through its extended comparison to a specific form of animal subjectivity.

Schweninger's reading reinforces and clarifies these other two perspectives more so than it challenges them: "As the panther comes to represent the human condition and as it takes on lyrical or poetic dimensions, it begins to lose its connection to the actual Florida panther as presented in field reports" (190). Hogan's textual appropriation of the panther is, for Schweninger, more "extended metaphor" than "natural history" (190). Schweninger references research demonstrating striking differences between the actual Florida panther, as revealed through scientific analysis, and the same creature as represented in the novel.

If Hogan is not interested in fidelity to a real life-form, she is interested, all three critics suggest, in "the fusion of human and nonhuman" as conjured through "repeated references to the striking similarities" between human and panther (Schweninger Changed 190). Schweninger further argues that this extended comparison distinguishes the novel not only within the canon of Native American literature but also within nature writing and ecocritical literature: "Insofar as Hogan insists on an identity between human and panther (and the land), the eco-ego dichotomy breaks down. That is, through her narrator Omishto, Hogan seems to insist on an identity

between human and panther that nature writers in general tend to disavow” (191).

Unlike the depiction of animals emerging from more traditional ecological writing, Hogan’s animal representations do not function in the text as mere scenery; the panther is more than a static element in the background of a pastoral scene. Anderson also recognizes the panther’s role in Hogan’s eco-poetics, linking the rendering of animal consciousness to the novels overarching thematic scheme of “inaccessibility”: “Linking Florida Indians and panthers by what both have lost and by what both struggle to maintain, Hogan presents an ecocritical perspective that is largely predicated on unromanticized accounts of contestations over particular ecosystems and deeply aware of the gaping divides within as well and between particular implicated groups” (175). While Hogan draws from real knowledge of Native American tradition in conjuring the text’s close affiliation between human and panther, she carefully avoids the responsibility, just as she avoids the burden of fidelity to scientific study of the panther, of accurately depicting a real tribe: “the Seminoles really do have a panther clan, but the Taiga don’t actually exist . . .” (Anderson Native 170). Anderson further connects this particular act of fictionalization to the postcolonial trajectory of the text:

she [Hogan] removes or throws into question all the usual deceptively reliable Euro-American sources of knowledge about a given Indian culture, foregrounding the complex entanglements of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ when it comes to Indian-white and Indian-Indian relations, and thereby challenging her readers to come face to face with how much they do not and cannot know about this Indian culture. (170)

Hogan’s narrative strategies, as Anderson’s language here suggests, frustrate assumed knowledge about animals, Native American groups, places, and the concept of power itself. For Anderson, the novel’s title is an intentional act of misdirection: Readers seeking an “accessible if not instantly gratifying and exploitable” experience of the natural world, or of native cultures,

come to realize that no figure in the text “has anything like ‘full access’ to the natural and cultural power” suggested by the title (179). Like its depiction of animals and cultural groups, the novel’s depiction of the natural world defies expectation. Ecocriticism fixates upon models of interconnection and symbioses and readers as well as critics expect ecological literature to present such models in a somewhat accessible and accommodating fashion. Hogan, however, resists the typical memes and tropes of nature writing, presenting interconnection as “an uncertain possibility,” tremendously difficult to “represent let alone to explicate” (179).

Other notable readings emphasizing postcoloniality and the cultural dynamics at play in the novel include Baria’s and those by Jesse Peters and Melanie Bleck. Baria argues that the variegated “facets of power” explored in the text coalesce around the “distinct duality” of “the Native American culture versus dominant culture” (67). Though she is among the critics recognizing the “extraordinary effects” of the novel’s juxtaposition of human and animal, her language here challenges the claim that human versus nonhuman functions as the text’s central division. Baria locates the novel’s exploration of animal subjectivity within a cultural rubric: “The natural world the Taiga share with the panther” stands apart from the “outside world” of the dominant culture (70). Peters similarly emphasizes cultural division, parsed out here as “the tensions and sharp dichotomies between the traditional world of the Taiga elders and the European American world” (112). Bleck, like Anderson, links the cultural dynamics at play in *Power* into closer alignment with its exploration of place (or, perhaps more appropriately, sense of place): “Space emerges out of, and serves to legitimate, a specific worldview,” she writes, further emphasizing a correlation between the “notion of space” and “the Euroamerican destructive inclination to divide and conquer” (25). For Bleck, Hogan’s language in the novel

functions as “an act of liberation from spatial boundaries” (33).

Recent work in the field varyingly referred to as postcolonial ecology or postcolonial ecocriticism may be used to build upon these existing discussions of postcoloniality and place in *Power*. Those working in this field recognize that animals play a pivotal role in the composition of a postcolonial biosphere and suggest a close affiliation between their own work and another recently active academic discipline known as “animal studies” or “posthumanism.” Recent developments in animal studies may be similarly utilized in building upon the existing discussion of Hogan’s juxtaposition of human and panther in *Power*.

#### 4. Animal Subjectivity and the Postcolonial Condition: A Theoretical Overview

Amongst the numerous theoretical intersections whose interrogation is invited by *Power*, the collision of two key subdivisions within ecocriticism, animal studies and postcolonial ecology, ranks among the most intriguing and least explored. The study of literary representation of animals plays a key role in postcolonial ecocriticism and its interrogation of the equating of postcolonial subjects to animals for the purpose of justifying exploitation. Hogan's works re-appropriate this meme (associating postcolonial subjects with animals) for liberating purposes, challenging the instrumentalization of humans and animals both. Postcolonial literature, including but not limited to Native American texts (from the U.S. South and elsewhere) demonstrate a tendency to constructively juxtapose issues of post-colonialism against ecological topics. In many ways, Hogan's texts resemble the literary examples at the center of recent work in postcolonial ecocriticism. Both "posthumanism" and "animal studies" can be usefully applied to a wide range of animal representations in literary texts including and beyond the literary categories interrogated here. *Power* distills many key issues related to both the representation of animal subjectivity and the rights/advocacy dimensions of animal theory.<sup>55</sup>

Hogan's writing in *Power* receives acknowledgement as contributing meaningfully to so

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<sup>55</sup> To review this study's introductory explanation of the categorical distinctions and definitional parameters related to literary depiction of animal life, the "question of nonhuman subjectivity" represents a problem in philosophy and deconstruction concerning the "fundamental repression" (ethically and politically) involved in the social process of "taking it for granted that the subject is always already human"; the term "speciesism" can be identified as a terminological moniker for ontological repression of animal subjectivity (Wolfe 1). The subset of ecocritical theory concerning animal subjectivity is among the most rapidly expanding theoretical categories within the field (Garrard 203). The term "animal studies" invokes "analysis of the representation of animals in history or culture," though literary analysts working in this vein draw extensively

many divergent theories and paradigms that it is best understood not as unique within any particular discourse but as, to risk sounding clichéd, just generally unique. However, it is fair to say that *Power* is a self-aware commentary on a specific ecosystem and on inter- culture and - species interactions within that ecosystem. It is also (as Anderson constructively demonstrates) a self-aware meditation on the nature, facets, and dimensions of power, particularly in the context of varying degrees of access to ecosystems, cultures, and species. Postcolonial ecology and animal studies are referenced here not as exclusive in-roads into thematic reconciliation of the novel but as potentially underexplored and underwritten about lenses through which to view the text's manifold uniqueness. The text lends itself to, and has been productively discussed, in a number of other contexts, each demonstrating varying degrees of relevance to the contexts explored here.

Marianne Dekoven, in a fascinating article, "Why Animals Now" (2009), outlines many of the key issues involved in assessing literary representations of animal subjectivity.

Anthropomorphism is among the first terms that come to mind when discussing such issues; Dekoven loosely defines the concept as "the charge generally levelled against people who see communication, emotion, culture, or intelligence and thought in other animals," acknowledging that anthropomorphism carries taboos connotative of "strictures against sentimentality that forbid empathy for other animals" (366). Fortunately, as Dekoven hopes and suggests, such taboos increasingly loosen in the face of research attributing to animals "high intelligence," "complex culture," and "extensive means of communication," and such strictures "are also more and more

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from other movements in the humanities involving "the philosophical considerations of animal rights" (Garrard 146). The term "posthumanism," also invoked as a referent for certain works within this strain of eco-theory, refers to a philosophic and deconstructive project which "subjects both humanity and animality to simultaneous critique" (Garrard 170).



being replaced by an awareness of the intricate and massive interdependence between humans and other animals” (366). Hogan’s writing emphasizes such interdependence, illustrating that human and animal each draw sustenance from the same increasingly threatened biosphere. It is this sense of habitat destruction that connects Hogan’s work to the rights-advocacy side of animal studies; the “connection of animals with other subjects of political advocacy” emerges as a common practice in animal studies, suggesting conceptual similarity to Hogan’s mingling of animal rights and postcolonial topics (367). Hogan’s textual treatment of animal subjectivity is particularly nuanced; Dekoven argues that it is important to recognize such nuances because literary depictions of animals, like those of other identity-political categories, fail to “form a unified or even meaningful category” and can serve a variety of political and rhetorical agendas: “It is important . . . to avoid a reductive, ahistorical approach that lumps all literary animals together” (363). This study seeks to avoid such pitfalls and to carefully contextualize Hogan’s depictions of wolves, panthers, and other animals.

Donna Haraway focuses on the philosophical history and theoretical underpinnings of contemporary theory of animal subjectivity, drawing from discussions of animals in writings by Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and other thinkers. In *When Species Meet* (2009), she focuses upon encounters and collisions between species: “When species meet, the question of how to inherit histories is pressing, and how to get on together is at stake” (35). For Haraway, such encounters offer valuable insights on the question of how human beings might build a sustainable future and “get on” more effectively with the nonhuman. Like Dekoven, Haraway emphasizes the notion of interconnection, mentioning “multispecies knots” that become “tied” and “retied” through “reciprocal action” (35). In *Power*, Hogan depicts a particularly strong “multispecies knot” resulting from decades of affective entanglement between the Florida

panther and the Taiga people.

Like many of the scholars working in postcolonial ecology, Cary Wolfe, author of an intriguing and informative book, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (2003), draws a connection between repression of animal subjectivity and the institutional mistreatment of certain groups of human beings at the hands of other groups. Wolfe argues that social science paradigms examining “(hetero)sexism, classism and all otherisms that are the stock-in-trade of cultural studies” overlook or take for granted “an unexamined framework of speciesism”; “This framework, like its cognates, involves systematic discrimination against an “other” based solely on a generic characteristic” (1). This represents a tragically disastrous oversight, Wolfe further maintains, because the discourse of species operates as an insidious, underlying and encouraging agent for other forms of subjugation: “as long as it is institutionally taken for granted that it is all right to systematically exploit and kill nonhuman animals simply because of their species, then the humanist discourse of species will always be available for use by some humans against other humans as well, to countenance violence against the social other of whatever species. . .” (7). Hogan suggests a similar outlook in *Power*, positing causes underlying the plight of the panther and the cultural and environmental endangerment of the Taiga tribe that are staunchly similar in nature and clearly intended to resonate against one another.

Postcolonial ecology similarly targets multiple discourses of marginalization simultaneously: “Our hope . . . is to outline a broader, more complex genealogy for thinking through our ecocritical futures,” Deloughry and Handley write, emphasizing the need to “imagine something beyond the confines of our human story” (25). They further encourage “a turn to a more nuanced discourse about the representation of alterity,” hoping for the

development of “a theorization of difference that postcolonialists, ecofeminists, and environmental activists have long considered in terms of our normative representations of nature, human and otherwise” (9). Deloughrey and Handley encourage the interrogation of anthropocentrism and speciesism and—much like Wolfe, Hogan, and a variety of other thinkers concerned with animal subjectivity—argue persuasively that such pursuits might pay dividends in terms of rectifying problems in social justice: “the ecocritical interrogation of anthropocentrism offers the persistent reminder that human political and social inequalities cannot be successfully and sustainably resolved without some engagement with the more-than-human world, . . .” (225). “More-than-human” functions as a useful description of both the language Hogan grasps for in *Dwellings* and the complex worlding she performs in *Power*.

Huggan and Tiffin, who reference Wolfe and similarly minded thinkers, elucidate the manifold conceptual overlaps between ecocriticism and postcolonial studies: “in assuming a natural prioritization of humans and human interests over those of other species on earth, we are both generating and representing the racist ideologies of imperialism on a planetary scale” (6). Their work explores the numerous ways in which “anthropocentrism and Western imperialism are intrinsically interwoven” (11). Further, they argue that the correlation between these two modes of domineering thinking carries significant relevance in literary contexts: “As we insisted throughout this book, the racism/speciesism nexus is particularly important in terms of representation, with specific relation to the human/animal symbolic economy,” they write, pointing out that “it is ironic that literary critics should have been so slow to take up this connection, and more ironic still in the areas of postcolonial and eco/environmental studies” (148). This irony is magnified by the availability of texts like Hogan’s, which urge that person’s

animals, and habitats should each receive equal rights and moral consideration.

There is reason to assume that analysis of literary animals, even in texts not actively engaging other issues of advocacy, might point toward better understanding of human-upon-human repression: “Analyzing the uses of animal representation can clarify modes of human subjugation that ideology might otherwise obscure” (Dekoven 363). Readers bring political and ideological biases and preconceived opinions to depictions of marginalized persons that might be willingly or unintentionally relaxed in the case of animal representations. In the case of a work like *Power*, the use of animal representation allows Hogan to sidestep around reader biases concerning postcoloniality and native rights, emoting insights about alterity and difference carrying relevance to those contexts yet flying under the thematic radar in a slightly modified context.

Equally compelling is the potential for analysis of literary animals to teach important ecological lessons: “Once again we are in a knot of species co-shaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down, response and respect are possible only in those knots . . . it is a question of cosmopolitics, of learning to be ‘polite’ in responsible relation to always asymmetrical living and dying, and nurturing and killing” (42). The connections between textual animals and textual humans may render more visibly perceptual our real-life connections with and symbiotic dependency upon animals and other nonhuman elements. Further, a novel like *Power*, in depicting the implication of habitat loss for an animal species, reminds us that we are ourselves an animal species dependent upon a particularly constituted habitat.

The application of ecocritical methods to postcolonial texts, further, increases the likelihood that viable models of sustainability might be discovered: “These texts also suggest that since the environment stands as a nonhuman witness to the violent process of colonialism,

and engagement with alterity is a constitutive aspect of postcoloniality, addressing historical and racial violence is integral to understanding literary representations of geography . . .”

(Deloughrey and Handley 8). Further, many ecocritics suggest the need to broaden the field’s scope of inquiry beyond both Anglophone culture and the genre of traditional nature writing: “A recognition on the part of mainstream American ecocritics of the need to engage in more globally nuanced terms” increasingly emerges both within and beyond postcolonial contexts (Deloughrey and Handley 9). The pressing environmental dilemmas ecocritics and other ecologists seek to engage must be understood in the contexts of the legacy of colonialism (and the ongoing process of globalization) that said dynamics emerge within and are profoundly influenced by. The literatures of the Global South, including the indigenous voices within its vast diaspora, represent a potentially lucrative treasure trove of ideas with the potential to meaningfully diversify the field of ecocriticism: “The global South has contributed to an ecological imaginary and discourse of activism and sovereignty, that is not derivative of the Euro-American environmentalism of the 1960’s and ‘70s” (Deloughrey and Handley 8). Linda Hogan contributes powerfully to the development of a globally southern, multicultural, discourse of ecology.

5. *Power*: Animal Consciousness, Hogan's Panther, and the Postcolonial Ecology of her Fictional Florida

In *Power*, like *Dwellings*, the reader senses Hogan's fascination with predatory animals and their tendency to "reflect" the human. The author's prose conjures an equally tenuous relational dynamic existing between woman and panther to bookend the depiction of woman-wolf dynamics in her quasi-memoir. From the novel's earliest mention of the panthers, the language spells out clearly that the creatures have suffered profoundly from habitat destruction: "After that last one was hit by a car mama said they are all gone from here and the ones left are sick, but I know one finds its way through now and then" (3). Despite this tragic knowledge, Omishto is, nevertheless, frightened by the intrinsic sense of predatory power that she locates in the cat: "It makes the hair on your back and neck rise to think that there's something like that out in the dark, something that can sneak up on you in the dark but you can never see it" (3). Omishto's feelings about the panther, much like Hogan's emotional response to the wolves of the other text, cannot be easily reconciled. She understands and laments the plight of the animal's dilapidated circumstance but cannot help but experience awe and fright in the presence of the cat's mystifying internal vitality. In both the sense of its intrinsic power and that of its status of endangerment, the panther reflects the human condition as encapsulated by Hogan's portrayal of the Taiga tribe.

*Power* announces itself from its earliest pages as a work about the experiential composition of both place and the natural world: "This is the place where clouds are born and I am floating. Last night, before I fell asleep in my boat, the earth was bleeding," Omishto muses in the opening pages: "The red light that began at the edge of earth moved upward until all the sky was red. Mama calls it stormlight, and this morning as I sit back in the boat, it looks like she

is right; a storm is coming in,” she continues (1). This ecomimetic description of the precursor machinations of a storm serves as a particularly effective opening for this type of story, because storms function as well-known literary metonyms for ecological power, the earth-rending capacity of natural forces. Hogan’s language here sets the stage—utilizing eco-mimetic language to achieve an atmospheric mood of impending cataclysmic change—not only for a literal storm that will figure prominently in the story, but also for pivotal events soon to unfold in Omishto’s life: “Most days the clouds disappear in the morning. They go back to the gulf or they wander in toward land, but today they keep arriving with restless weight. . . .” (2).

In establishing Omishto’s narrative interiority, Hogan’s language illustrates that her young protagonist senses profoundly, but does not entirely understand and is occasionally frightened by, the nonhuman life-world surrounding her: “I feel it in my stomach, an animal feeling, something—or someone—dangerous, . . . I know some of the things that live in there . . . But there are things in shadows I don’t know” (2). The sense of ecological “inaccessibility” discussed by Anderson is on full display here: simply because Omishto is a Native American literary protagonist in an ecologically oriented novel, the reader would be mistaken to assume that she always feels connected to, and comprehending toward, the biosphere. The understanding of power and access emerging from the novel is slippery, fleeting, elusive, and constantly imperiled by the circumstances of the historical present.

Omishto’s terminology of “an animal feeling,” applied globally to her fuzzy sense and understanding of the landscape, sheds light on the human tendency to allow animals to embody alterity itself. As thinkers like Derrida and Deleuze suggested even before the contemporary exploration of animal subjectivity, we attribute to animals that which we do not understand about ourselves and the world at large. Omishto’s ruminations about the total biosphere come to be

interrupted when she encounters the more specific form of a snake: “A water snake, a moccasin, curls through the water,” Omishto observes, stating that “it’s too alive for me, this thin life, and I’m afraid of snakes” (2). Though she is frightened by the creature, Omishto’s language suggests something akin to the sense of intrinsic value explored by Hogan in *Dwellings*. The snake is recognized as a vibrant and transcendently alive entity. Omishto derives emotional rejuvenation, like her creator, through such encounters with nonhuman entities: “An egret stands on one thin leg at the edge of the water, and even the water, with seeds floating across it in search of other worlds is green, Insects walk on it. Spiders drift above it on threads of silk. It’s as if I am curled inside an opening leaf in this boat covered with algae, as if I am just beginning to live” (1). Omishto envisions a sort of rebirth of herself; the forms of these aquatic terrestrials endow Omishto with energy and power, rejuvenating her in a manner reminiscent of birth.

The text soon establishes that Taiga culture teaches recognition of the intrinsic vitality of nonhuman entities: “they say that to speak an animal’s name is to call out to the powers inside it. . .” (3). Animals, within such a view, contain inner power that may be threatened or possibly accessed through processes of naming and stratification. The clan’s intimate affiliation with the panther stems from this belief in the emanating power of animal life: “That’s what the old people used to say, that an animal was born when we were born, that it is our one ally in this life. It lent us its power when we needed it” (16). Omishto, though she does not believe herself to have a specifically designated animal companion, frequently embraces her ancestral belief in the sharing of powerful energy between woman and beast.

Omishto’s mother and sister emerge as much more Westernized and modernized figures than the girl and her beloved aunt Ama. Ama teaches the young protagonist to track animals and Omishto understands this activity as an extremely rewarding pursuit: “The thing I like about



tracking the animals is that it teaches me how to move. I move lean and strong in the shade of trees” (18). She sees a similar value in fishing, stating that “although you can’t eat the fish because the water is poison with the runoff of the farmers and cane growers,” the act of fishing still “teaches me to be still” (18). In suggesting that Omishto learns how to move about properly in the biosphere through her observation of animals, Hogan calls attention to the fact that animals, both real and textual, offer to humans numerous lessons in terms of how to get along in and sustain habitats.

Hogan occasionally renders the power of non-human forms through tropes and memes similar to magic realism, though neither Omishto nor the reader ever truly knows whether or not they should believe in the old magic professed by the clan’s elders: “Ama tells me, ‘I dreamed a gold panther. It came to me in a dream.’ ‘It stood up like a person and I could see its belly and eyes and it gestured at me . . . ’” (24). Perhaps “real magic” functions as a preferable term in this context; whether such power is supernatural or not, the novel explores the inner power of the earth’s observable forms (though the forms are observable, the power frequently is not). This old magic has a contemporary and material counterpart.

Though Omishto might not accept Ama’s descriptions of such magical interludes without healthy skepticism, she nevertheless believes in an enchanting, though not necessarily supernatural, power of the nonhuman. The magical encounter described by Ama is decidedly anthropomorphic in nature; the idea of a walking, talking, authoritative panther suggests that traditional Taiga belief runs somewhat counter to the Western belief that humans and animals are categorically distinct from one another. Further, it suggests a belief in the integrity of animals as moral and operative agents in their own right, echoing Dekoven’s notion that anthropomorphism helps to encourage sympathy. In several sections of narration, Omishto speculates as to the

implications of this belief (that nonhuman entities function as autonomous affective agents): “They could kill us, I think, this many birds, they could destroy us, and I wonder why it is the animals and birds show us any mercy at all. . . I wonder, too, why they stay near or help us, like the time the red wolf showed my momma how to get home. . .” (28). For Omishto, the birds represent superior moral agents to human beings, bearing no malice towards the species that poses the most significant threat to habitats and ways of life.

The pivotal event in the story is Ama’s killing of the panther, an event which follows shortly after this impending cataclysmic storm ravages the landscape. Just prior to this event, Omishto, operating under the assumption that she and Ama are tracking a deer, slowly comes to realize that her relative intends to track and kill the panther: “Ama tries to place her foot inside the track of the cat. It has large paws, it is a large cat, but Ama’s foot is larger. It is too large, and I think how delicate, how small is the footprint of the fearsome cat, the hated creature now being covered by, overshadowed by, the human” (57). This passage echoes Hogan’s discussion in *Dwellings*, of the reason human beings come to be fascinated by predatory mammals like wolves and panthers; human beings, this image of overlapping footprints reminds us, also function as predatory creatures, seeking (and feeling entitled) to “overshadow” other life forms.

Upon discovering Ama’s intention, Omishto immediately experiences a moral crisis, constitutive of a variety of powerful and conflicting emotions: “and I know what she will do and I don’t want any part of it, but I follow her. I want to split in two, so part of me can turn back, can go home to where there are radios and schoolbooks full of knowledge that will begin my life, but there is no turning back” (58). Omishto’s conflicted moral position vis-à-vis Ama’s action distills many of the issues involved in her understanding of her liminal cultural identity. Her temptation to flee back to the world of schoolbooks and radios illustrates her condition of having

one foot in two separate worlds, and in neither world do her mentor's action's make sense and seem justified: "and I am already sick by this act Ama has entered into, this act I don't yet comprehend except that it is both grace and doom, right and wrong" (62). The act itself is articulated by the young protagonist in the language of liminality; it is two things at once, operating simultaneously within two disparate spectrums of intelligibility. In pondering the complexities involved in Omishto's judgement of Ama, non-native readers get a sense of the complexities and instabilities involved in the everyday life of Native Americans and other postcolonial subjects.

In a subsequent section of the novel, involving Omishto's examination of various organisms in biology class, she again ponders her cultural situation: "Where we number the stamen and pistil of plants of paper, cut them apart to look through a microscope and identify the miracles of small things. Here, now, I am the specimen and they are all looking at me, watching my every move" (106). In a later passage from the same section of the novel, Omishto moves past her own divided consciousness, putting forth observations about the human condition in general: "Leaf, I think, what an easy thing to be," she speculates, concluding that "humans are not like leaves. We are a shambles of an animal" (107). She then considers Ama's actions in the light of this dilapidated human condition, arriving at both hopeful and tragic conclusions: "For just one day, that one day, she found a way out of that shambles, and it's this I want to find, but now she has no path back, no way to return even if she wanted to be here in this America" (107). Omishto's language here is provocative, suggesting that the limitations of one's culture take over where the limitations of one's species end. In transcending the "shambles" of the human condition, Ama accelerates and magnifies her marginal social position. The biology class interludes plays a crucial role in the novel's thematic structure, reminding the reader that both

animals and subaltern cultures frequently become the subject of an academic gaze that promotes exoticism and fetishism over sympathetic understanding.

As the story continues moving toward its terminating point, and as Omishto's understanding of Ama's actions and her own identity continue to evolve, Omishto begins to intuit a correlation between her older relative's situation and the sacred Taiga legend of "Panther Woman": "Years ago, panther walked on two feet, a woman lived in the dark swamp of the early world in those days" (110). The story continues, establishing that the mentioned woman was raised by animals (having been abandoned by her human family). In order to repair the world, Panther Woman must make a sacrifice, killing a panther as Ama did; once balance is restored, she honors the noble, sacrificing cat by transforming herself into a panther (111). Omishto, increasingly towards the end of the text, comes to view Ama's killing of the panther as a noble and compassionate act, not unlike the similar act undertaken by their celebrated ancestor. The dilapidated habitat represents the true cause of the animal's suffering and demise.

Ama faces two separate punitive proceedings as a result of killing the cat: the Western court of the laws of the nation-state (which protects endangered species) acquits her, largely because of her Native American heritage; she is convicted, however, by a tribal court and sentenced to banishment. It is only after this second event that Omishto is able to truly understand her aunt's motivations. During the meeting of the Taiga elders, Omishto deduces that Ama killed the panther in order to prevent the elders, intimately connected with the panther, from discovering the cat's deteriorated condition: "It would have cut their world in half. It would break their hearts and lives" (166).

The dominant culture, in being the culprit behind the destruction of the panther's habitat, is responsible for endangering both the panther and the Taiga elders; this is what Omishto, and

readers, are left to conclude. “The world has grown small where Sisa [sister panther] lives. It has lost its power and given way to highways and streets of towns where once there were woods and ferns and bodies of water.” One of the most telling passages in *Power* appears during Ama’s first trial at the hands of the non-tribal court. Omishto takes stock of the various white faces studying, but not comprehending, her Aunt: “the environmentalist protesting. . . On his face, I see it’s not the crime he hates, but her, and the jurors study her, a woman so unlike them as to exist in another world, another time. She is their animal” (136). The individuals described here by Omishto are oblivious to the fact that they are guiltier of the crime of panther murder than the accused. It is a crime to kill a member of an endangered species but not a crime to cause the endangerment to begin with. This is the lack of understanding typical of human beings encountering something alien and other, something animal. In the end, Ama comes to understand Ama’s act of killing the panther as itself a sort of alien, intangible thing; she may disagree with her aunt, but because of the complexities of the situation, she cannot force herself to judge. Omishto, at the end of the novel, ponders the questions of access, intangibility, and power raised by Eric Gary Anderson, postcolonial ecocriticism, and theories of animal consciousness. She, herself torn between different worlds, must accept the precariousness of her interpretative position: “She was wrong, I believe. Why she did it, whatever the reason, it was wrong. But she too is creature, animal. She is connected that close. It showed itself to her. It seemed we went against our wills, and who am I to judge, me being such a part of this other world, both of these other worlds” (143). Non-native readers experience a similar ethical conundrum and might find themselves adopting viewpoints similar to those espoused by Hogan in *Dwellings*.

**D. Chapter 3: The Filmic and Literary Bioregions of the U.S. South: An Examination of Works by Jeff Nichols and Janisse Ray**

### 1. Bioregionalism, Critical Place, and Challenges to Traditional Borders

Southern literature and art evokes the human sense of place in contexts beyond the imposed borders of nation-state logic. Place names and boundary lines frequently take a back seat to material conditions and experiential realities as the centrally evoked points of reference. The emphasis upon childhood running throughout this analysis speaks to the manner in which human psychological experience develops within ecosystems as well as communities. Both Faulkner and Hogan create worlds of childhood in which bioregions, like the big woods and the swamps of the Taiga reservation, center human experience in ways that cannot be shown on maps. Such fictions illustrate decades-old and ongoing debates concerning the operative parameters of the human sense of place.

Janice Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* serves as both autobiographical recollection and bioregional exploration of the Georgia landscape. Jeff Nichols' film, *Mud*, similarly emphasizes an ecology of childhood by depicting a young man's experience of a lifestyle dependent upon Arkansas's White River for sustenance. Both works tell stories whose narrative worlds build themselves upon biospheres rather than municipalities. Material and experiential realities linger with viewers and readers of these works; actual place-names barely receive mention and may be easily forgotten. The narrative and biographical landmarks of these narrative Souths unfold in the backdrops of actual physical landmarks. Such physical landmarks may be viewed as bioregions; the term evokes ecological boundaries which serve as alternatives to the imposed cartographies of nation-state logic. Bioregions offer alternative vantage points carrying potential solutions to conundrums emerging from the mutually determining interrogations of place represented by southern studies and its more expansive counterpart in critical regionalism. Both call for alternatives to current theories of the local / global dichotomy

and a postmodern reformulation of regionalism.

Ursula Heise ranks highly amongst those theorists working to navigate the tricky conceptual terrains of locality and globalism. In the seminal work *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), she argues that globalization discourse emerges, in the postmodern era, as a central concept in social science and the humanities. Such discursive phenomena, she further maintains, usurp the intellectual energy previously directed at earlier theories of modernity, and social organization—ideas like post-colonialism and postmodernity (Heise *Sense* 4). Academic and linguistic manifestations of economic globalism retain, according to the book’s argumentative through line, from these earlier configurations, an emphasis upon development and the temporal mandates of modernization, urbanity, and similar notions; in contrast to pre-existing rubrics, Heise distinguishes, they shift focus from cultural and aesthetic concerns to matters geopolitical and economic (Heise *Sense* 4).

In addition to globalization, *Sense* seeks to explain two other complex theoretical notions: “cosmopolitanism” and “deteritorialization”: “Environmental and ecocritical discourse in the United States . . . remains constrained in its conceptual scope by an at least partially essentialist rhetoric of place as well as by its lack of engagement with some of the cultural theories of globalization,” she writes. “Such an engagement, I would suggest, might begin with two concepts have played a central role in globalization theories. . . .” (Heise *Sense* 51). Many contemporary theorists of cosmopolitanism, Heise explains, seek to “free” the concept from its associative connotations of leisure and privilege. Conversely, such thinkers locate in cosmopolitanism a celebration of hybridity and diaspora that takes firm root in a critique of the nation-state as a local marker of place (Heise *Sense* 51). Ecocosmopolitanism comes to be



discussed by theorists as both a complementary and competitive counterpart to bioregionalism.

In addition to these, there are a variety of newly emergent models of post-nation-state existence gaining ground in contemporary philosophy and cultural theory. Ecocosmopolitanism, for Heise, stands apart from the rest, uniting research from diverse disciplines:

While a great deal of intellectual energy was invested in studies of particular borderland identities or diasporic communities, other lines of research sought to define forms of belonging that would transcend exclusive commitments to a particular nation, culture, race, or ethnicity in favor of more global modes of awareness and attachment (57).

This model of ecocosmopolitanism competes with a number of other environmentally oriented reconfigurations of the human sense of place: “dwelling,” “land ethic,” and many others. Rather than dismissing these other models and configurations, Heise suggests that each also plays an important role in the ongoing reevaluation of location. She stresses, however, that such notions fail to come to terms with the complex process referred to by theorists as deterritorialization (Heise Sense 10). 51). Throughout the book, the author describes processes of deterritorialization as imposed upon the subject from outside. The term also evokes deconstructionist projects like those conducted by Derrida and Deleuze.

Another 2008 work by Heise—the article “Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies” from *American Literary History*—argues that “a transnational turn” (characterized by “the increasing interest in approaching the study of US culture in a more international framework”) emerges as one of the “most conspicuous developments in American studies over the last decade” (381). The “theoretical projects” putting forth this “international

imperative,” Heise maintains, come in diverse forms “by no means uniform” (381).<sup>56</sup> Heise further argues that the connective thread between these “divergent projects” is a “shift in the conceptualization of the cultural subject”<sup>57</sup> manifesting in a trend toward globalized and/or planetary paradigms over localized ones:

In the 1980s and early 1990s, a great deal of work in fiction, poetry, biography, and autobiography, as well as in cultural criticism, was dedicated to the detailed exploration of family histories, places of origin, migration, inhabitation and reinhabitation, local communities, material contexts, embodied experiences, and situated forms of knowledge . . . . (Heise *Transnational* 382)

Bioregionalism, it should be noted, actually originates from this earlier era of cultural studies. A typical outgrowth of the localized emphases then common in the academic humanities, the bioregional movement emerges in a re-appropriated context as one of the theoretical reactions to the transnational turn identified by Heise.

The emergence of ecocriticism as an academic discipline, for Heise, occurs “just before the shift toward the transnational” assumes “full force” and is “initially facilitated” by the “foundational investment in local subjects” then common in many fields of cultural studies and

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<sup>56</sup> “While some scholars aim to reconceptualize American studies hemispherically by linking explorations of Anglo-American and Latin American literatures and cultures, others focus on transpacific connections around the ‘Pacific Rim,’ both orientations following a combined geographical and cultural logic,” Heise clarifies. She further adds that “Other theorists, in a somewhat different vision of internationalization, focus on diasporic communities . . . .” (Heise *Transnational* 381).

<sup>57</sup> “At an earlier stage, American studies, very broadly speaking, had focused on localized subjects who were conceived to offer privileged points of departure for sociopolitical and intellectual resistance to what was then perceived to be the mostly oppressive force of national forms of power . . . .” Heise explains (Heise *Transnational* 382). Bioregionalism serves as an example of “resistant” “departures” common to this earlier phase of the theorization of place.

criticism; the depth and breadth of ecocriticism's seminal preoccupation with the local, however, uniquely problematizes the field's ability to "take the step toward transnationalism" (382-3). The article describes ecocriticism's current engagements with globalism and international paradigms as disorganized, tension fraught and conceptually limited. These, questions, Code stresses, take on pressing resonance when theorists and activists wander into ill-defined and under-explored "discursive, geographical, and cultural" "regions" (73). Many theorists of the U.S. South similarly point toward the dangers of treading upon the untrodden theoretical ground of post-regional space.

As a response to this emerging climate of globalized social knowledge, the bioregional movement offers a pre-existing, decades-old theoretical rubric for localized and ecologically-oriented social knowledge. Important theorists of bioregionalism include James T. Parson, Dan Flores, Peter Berg, Doug Aberley, Michael Vincent McGinnis, Kirkpatrick Sale, Mitchell Thomashew, And the writing team of Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster. Aberley's "Interpreting Bioregionalism: A Story from Many Voices" published in an anthology, simply titled *Bioregionalism* (1999), edited by Michael Vincent McGinnis—defines the movement as "a body of thought and related practice that has evolved in response to the challenge of reconnecting socially-just human cultures in a sustainable manner on the region-scale ecosystems in which they are irrevocably embedded" (13). Aberley's subtitle relates to the inherent difficulty in crafting any sort of "definitive introduction" to the movement, whose adherents cling to a "defiant decentralism" and embrace "no central committee or board of

potentates” (13).<sup>58</sup> The judgements of the Taiga council in Hogan’s *Power* evoke the sort of decentralized authority suggested here.

Michael Vincent McGinnis—in two articles from the 1999 *Bioregionalism* anthology, “Bioregional Restoration: Re-Establishing an Ecology of Shared Identity” and “A Rehearsal to Bioregionalism”—also offers useful background information about the movement. He describes bioregionalism as “a performative, community-based activity based on social learning and cooperation,” one seeking to involve “inhibitory communities” in the process of “restoring landscape and place” (211). He defines a singular bioregion as “the intersection of vernacular culture, place-based behavior and community,” stressing the call to reinvigorate “the place ‘there is,’ the landscape itself, the place we inhabit and communal region we depend on” (3). In terms of identifying the conceptual targets of bioregionalism, McGinnis points toward “the ceaseless mechanization of human labor, and the general transformation of community-based economics into large-scale formal economics which support mass production and overconsumption” (3).

Kirkpatrick Sale, in the influential 1991 book *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision* (a seminal text for the movement), also puts forth a potential model for bioregional social organization: “a bioregional policy would seek the diffusion of power, the decentralization of institutions, with nothing done at a higher level than necessary, and all authority flowing upward incrementally from the smallest political unit to the largest” (94). The book positions the movement as “a natural and organic response to . . . the disintegration of the established forms

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<sup>58</sup> Aberley’s view of the movement’s mandate emerges as organizationally disparate (“learned through long participation in local and continental bioregion gatherings”), and accessible primarily through its literary manifestations, “ephemeral journals and self-published books that rarely appear in libraries or mass distribution outlets” (13).

and systems that have characterized the Western World—it's industrial economy, its mass society, its nation state—for most of the last five centuries" (152). Further, Sale outlines a fairly detailed model of bioregional social organization: the operational center of "decision-making" and "political and economic control," within this vision, would be a community defined as "the more-or-less intimate grouping either at the close-knit village scale of 1,000 people or so, or probably more often at the extended community scale of 5,000 to 10,000 so often found as the fundamental political unit. . ." (94).

Like Raymond Williams and his contemporary counterparts in eocomarxism, bioregionalism calls attention to the exploitative drive of capitalist subjugation underlying the traditional borders of socially organized place. Bioregionalism associates resistance to such exploitatively imposed borders as essential to the twin projects of insulating ecosystems against pollution while simultaneously insulating human communities against social control. These definitional texts resonate against later texts which redefine the movement for the eras of postcolonialism, late-capitalism, and globalization. Heise's discussion of ecocosmopolitanism and bioregionalism as competitive modes of thought builds upon the work of one of these later bioregionalists, Mitchell Thomashew, who fused the concepts together into a complementary vision.

In his 1999 article, "Toward a Cosmopolitan Bioregionalism," Mitchell Thomashew explores the implications of bioregional thinking, particularly in relation to current theoretical interrogations of the global/local dichotomy: "Bioregionalism emerges as a response to the formidable power relations of global political economy and the ensuing fragmentation of place" (122). Further, Thomashew's piece includes language generally spelling out the benefits of the bioregional approach to place: "More than an alternative framework for governance or a

decentralized approach to political ecology, it represents a profound cultural vision, addressing moral, aesthetic, and political concerns” (122). Thomashew’s work, particularly his general paradigm of “cosmopolitan bioregionalism,” provides a key conceptual touchstone for Ursula Heise and other more contemporary interrogators of the dissonance between regional and global paradigms of biological and economic -existences and -subjectivities. The particular strain of bioregional thinking put forth in “Toward a Cosmopolitan Bioregionalism” is one that accounts for both globalization and other decidedly non-local phenomenon. His model of place-based understanding ignores neither the overarching machinations of global political economy nor the local “matrix of affiliations and networks that constitute ecological biodiversity and multicultural and multispecies tolerance,” embracing a fluid theoretical model of locality in bioregionalism along with a polymorphic vision of globalism in contemporary cosmopolitanism (122).

The literary and artistic dimensions of bioregional thought emerge from texts emerging after the onset of ecocriticism and its similarly anachronistic fascination with the conservationist dimensions of localism and regionalism. Tom Lynch, Cheryl Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster—in the introduction to the useful anthology, *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place* (2012)—offer useful background information about bioregionalism and its potential applications to literary analysis and ecocriticism:

As part of the environmental movement during the 1970s, a school of thought emerged calling itself bioregionalism. Located primarily in Western North America, especially in California and British Columbia, this movement included thinkers such as Peter Berg, Raymond Dassman, Gary Snyder, and Stephanie Mills. Their motivation was to address matters of pressing environmental concern through a politics derived from a local sense of place, an approach they felt would effectively compliment efforts focused on the national and international levels. (2)

The three collaborators, echoing Aberley, conjure bioregionalism as a ragtag yet

dedicated network of affiliations rather than a firmly codified organization with visible central leadership, clarifying that central figures or “designated leaders” exist (3). Finally, in “Contemporary Regionalism” (from the 2003 anthology *A Companion to Regional Literatures of America*), Michael Kowalewski identifies aesthetic characteristics common to the “‘mappings’ of local environments” emerging from bioregional writings. Such mappings, he explains, “picture specific localities as complex, multilayered palimpsests of geology, meteorology, history, myth, etymology, family genealogy, agricultural practice, storytelling and regional folkways” by utilizing “metaphors of depth, layering, resonance, root systems, habitats, and interconnectedness” (17). Bioregional literature, as “informed by an ecological understanding of the interdependence, interconnectedness, and adaptation of all living systems,” stresses (Kowalewski maintains) a “multidimensional vision of identity and landscape” (17).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Rather than imagining literary place “as a conceptual index of social attitudes, or a receding backdrop for the actions of isolated selves in the foreground,” Kowalewski adds, bioregional writings conjure place “as a form of depth perception,” stressing “factors that not only connect different aspects of a place but seem to put them into motion, making them move within their own history (both human and nonhuman)” (17).

## 2.Southern Studies and Contemporary Approaches to the Global/Local Dichotomy

Ray's text serves as a traditional example of the bioregional stylistics explored by Kowalewski, Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster. Her appropriation of these stylistics emerges from a self-aware dialog with the earlier bioregional writers discussed by the *Bioregional Imagination* authors. Nichols' film, whose stylistics resemble the tradition of southern postpastoral identified by Christopher Rieger more so than the legacy of literary bioregionalism, illustrates, rather than the stylistics of bioregional nonfiction, a filmic example of a contemporary bioregional lifestyle. *Mud*'s blending of the stylistic innovations of the southern renaissance, whose renovation of southern pastoralism itself explored the South as a material ecosystem, with the sensibilities of bioregional art and theory, highlights the ideological compatibility of the two movements and eras.

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth-century, the U.S. South comes to be explored as a literary and artistic bioregion. Southern narrative, as illustrated by the juxtaposition of contemporary storytellers like Hogan, Nichols and Ray against the work of an earlier modernist like Faulkner, carries forward the legacies of both the southern eco-pastoral and the bioregional memoir. The legacies of Southern modernism and postmodernism juxtapose ecologies of childhood against the material ecologies which collectively comprise a specific, post-global biosphere. Southern Studies, as a field and intellectual pursuit, sees particularly prescient reverberations of the turn toward transnationalism identified by Heise and other regional thinkers.

Paradoxically, Southern regionalists also, in recent years, grasp for new ways of defining locality. Prominent voices in this contentious debate include Kathryn McKee, Annette Trefzer, Barbara Ladd, Jennifer Rate Greeson, Leigh Anne Duck, Martin Bone, and Hosam Aboul-Ela. In



“Global Contexts, Local Literatures: The Southern Studies,” a 2006 American Literature article, Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer comment on what they perceive to be a major paradigm shift in the constituting character and methodological trajectory of southern studies: “As we plough new fields and chart new territories, we are certain in our knowledge of the South’s metonymic relation to the nation and convinced of its centrality to American studies, but we are equally interested in the regions fascinating multiplicity and its participation in hemispheric and global contexts” (677). Their work draws a causal correlation between the changing conditions of life in the region and broader, transnational phenomenon such as “global, economic, and demographic shifts,” “transnational flows of populations, goods, and capital,” and the “new sense of spatialization” resulting from these processes and similar, related conditions. For McKee and Trefzer, this change in critical vantage point is necessary because “southern literary studies is situated in the middle of a postmodern debate concerning territory, boundaries, and sovereignty not only of its canonical but its critical undertakings” (680).<sup>60</sup>

In her 2002 piece, “Dismantling the Monolith: Southern Places—Past, Present, and Future,” Ladd explores the concepts “region” and “place,” emphasizing the idea that both

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<sup>60</sup> The titular terms “global” and “local” here refer to a “two-way process” rather than “yet another stable set of binaries”; the co-authors mean to suggest both “the importation of the world into the South” and “the exportation of the South into the world”: “As part of the global economy, the South, as a place marked by patterns of migration and immigration, imports, goods, foods, and culture from everywhere in the world while also globally exporting its own specialties, from delta blues to Faulkner” (679). This emphasis upon “global contexts” for “local literatures” seeks to explore, among other things, the region’s participation in “global networks of culture and economy,” the manner in which “the South’s culture and history have always already been global,” and “the global gestures in literary texts that were formerly interpreted as regional or national issues” (678).

concepts—if we are to “theorize place for the future” and carry forward with the “literary mapping of regions”—must be re-conceptualized in the “decentralized, multinational, hybridized era of late modernism” (55). Though scholars of the southern region typically take it as a given fact that “southern literature is grounded on a ‘sense of place’,” the “meaning and significance of place,” Ladd maintains, has grown increasingly elusive and difficult to characterize (44). She identifies the conceptual linking of “U.S. literature . . . with the idea of ‘regionalism’” as a particularly troubling contributor to this growing sense of ambiguity: “why has the sense of place been so closely linked with regionalism in U.S. literary history?” she asks (44-5).<sup>61</sup> Because transnationalism constructs place “as dramatic and fleeting, produced by encounter, contingent,” her argument proceeds, place (if it is to remain “a dynamic and vital force in literary study”) “needs to be constructed not as a stable site of tradition and history within a progressive nation but as something more provisional, more fleeting, more subversive, and likewise more creative—a locus for economic, political, discursive, and more broadly cultural transactions, a site of memory and meaning both for the past and the future” (57).

In *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (2010), Greeson puts forth the claim that “A concept of the South is essential to national identity in the United States of American”: in the national narrative, she maintains, the South functions as “an internal

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<sup>61</sup> “It is especially odd when one considers that the sense of place suggests something that ‘centers,’” Ladd explains, clarifying the sentiments behind the question; “whereas regionalism evokes ideas of the periphery, so that the literatures of the periphery are often said to be ‘centered’ in that famous ‘sense of place’ whereas those literatures of the center are presumably unplaced” (44-5). Additionally, she identifies a number of paradigmatic alternatives to this regionalist mentality of center and periphery: “The places of literature and literary criticism are more viable and interesting when they are conceptualized in ways that are also fundamentally aesthetic, rhetorical, historical, ideological, and cultural” (46).

other for the nation, an intrinsic part of the national body that nonetheless is differentiated and held back from the whole” (1). Within this formulation, the region’s particularized role within the national mythology serves to unmoor and obfuscate southern identity: “This South we hold collectively in our minds is not—could not possibly be—a fixed or real place”; “It both exceeds and flattens place: It is a term of the imagination, a site of national fantasy” (1).<sup>62</sup>

Duck—in her book, *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (2009)—identifies “efforts of southern modernists to think their way through the purported temporal divide between the South and the larger nation during a period when understandings of each were unstable—when the nation, in intellectual and popular discourse, attested to its need for a sustaining culture, and the region, in economic and political struggle, confirmed a need for change” (3). According to Duck, the “temporal divide” reacted against by southern modernist writers, grows out of the purported struggles between “southern conservatism and national democracy” and the manner in which “national discourse” rhetorically assesses said conflict: “when national discourse has acknowledged the conflict. . . it has typically done so in ways that localize this conflict—a ‘backward South’ and a modern or ‘enlightened nation’; such models fail to incorporate a conceptual structure for assessing an ongoing conflict between

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<sup>62</sup> Because of this status as “internal other,” an entity occupying an unclear and uncanny position “simultaneously inside and outside the national imaginary constructed in U.S. literatures,” Greeson identifies, in literary representation of the South, “an unparalleled site of connection between ‘The United States’ and what lies outside it—a connection to the larger world, to western history, to a guilty colonial past and a desired and feared imperial future” (3). Her work and advocacy operate as part of a vast, newly emergent movement to push beyond the national frame in interpreting the South, thus challenging the region’s assumed role within the American national narrative: “To grasp the workings of the South in a broader culture of the United States requires the opposite of a parochial approach”; “This project demands a comparative, transnational geographic frame” (3).

prominent cultural and political models of national affiliation” (3).

Bone’s *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (2005) applies a “historical-geographical materialist approach” to “the capitalist production and literary representation of ‘place’” in contemporary southern literature; the study is contextualized by a “lengthy backward glance at the agrarians,” through which Bone maintains that “the agrarians and their neo-agrarian literary critical acolytes defined— . . . invented—southern literary place” (vii). His method of “historical-geographical materialism” is justified as a response to “capitalism’s tremendous impact upon the material production of place in our time”; in this context, Bone examines texts that, in his view, “try to represent the sociospatial reality of the post-South” (46). Despite this emphasis upon capitalism’s role in shaping the representational South, the analysis put forth in the book challenges the claim that “postsouthern geographies exhibit no sense of place”: “at important points in most of these novels, we witness characters undertaking the active and hopeful (if necessarily contingent) reconstruction of a spatialized ontology, a revised sense of place, that allows them to live within their respective postsouthern worlds” (51-2).<sup>63</sup> Bone’s work, like Rieger’s, documents southern literature’s tendencies toward the appropriation of material and experiential conditions as antidotes to the social construction of space.

Finally—in the 2006 article “Global South, Local South: The New Postnationalism is U.S. Southern Studies”—Aboul-Ela explores the influence of globalization discourse upon both academia, generally, and, more specifically, studies of the U.S. South. His argument positions

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<sup>63</sup> The author tempers his awareness of postmodern hyperreality with a focus upon representational depiction of social reality, arguing that one ought neither view “postsouthern literature a “hermetically sealed in some hyperreal hall of self-reflective nonrepresentations” nor “have recourse to some outdated . . . notion of mimetic ‘realism’” (46).

globalization's "invasion" of academic rhetoric as a unique scholarly phenomenon, suggesting that—unlike more prototypical scholarly trends, such as "new historicism" and "various critical feminisms"—globalization discourse is not anchored to "roots in activist movements"; conversely, it's infiltration of the academy stems from "the halls of governmental power" and has, consequently, "led to some interesting, provocative, and idiosyncratic directions in its development": "Academic discussion of the phenomenon of globalization—and its extreme trendiness as a term in academic writing—emerged almost simultaneously with the post-Cold war attempt by the Clinton Administration to articulate a new direction in U.S. policy" (847).

The article's exploration of the unusual, and potentially troublesome or problematic, scholarly reverberations and machinations of globalization discourse, proceeds as a reading of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Globalities: Terror and its Consequences" (2004)—positioned here as a "brilliant" work, one representative of "an important moment of perspective in globalization theory"—against "three contributive collections of essays," understood by Aboul-Ela as having recently "initiated the process of incorporating globalization theory into the disciplines of U.S. Southern Studies, engaging in different ways and to different extents with the institutional history of globalization discourse as an outgrowth of Clintonomics (with its rhetorical politics sketched out by Spivak)": "Taken together, these books demonstrate that the U.S. South as a subject represents a matter that was already strikingly, indeed surprisingly, predisposed to adapt the new critical language of globalization" (848-9).

"Global South, Local South" locates, in both Spivak's essay and the southernist anthologies, a more refined, less totalizing paradigm for global existence. Writing about "Globalities," specifically, Aboul-Ela locates the value of this new global paradigm in the manner in which Spivak, counterintuitively yet persuasively, "manages to acknowledge the

actually existing globalization processes . . .without succumbing to the gravitational force of progressivist or celebratory narratives that see the nineties and the new millennium as the culmination of historical evolution toward an end of history, or as an epoch of new global trade and culture” (849).<sup>64</sup> As scholars like Aboul-Ela and Spivak increasingly point toward the failure of globalizations discourse to resonate against projects of emancipation, the subversive, or resistance, the legacy of artistic regionalism (particularly in the diasporic 20<sup>th</sup> century South) renovates the anachronistic genre of southern postpastoralism into an emancipatory project calibrated precisely as a challenge to the forces of homogeneity that emerge as modernity in Faulkner’s South, development in Ray’s, postcolonial late-capitalism in Hogan’s, and globalizing urbanization in Nichols’. The forces of deterritorialization discussed by Ursula Heise have taken many forms in the U.S. South. Artistic resistances to such modes of thought and praxis come in equally diverse manifestations. Southern bioregions come to be literally reterritorialized by writers and artists of the early modern period, through the late-twentieth century prominence of both postmodernity and mainstream environmentalism, and into the very future anachronistic

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<sup>64</sup> In keeping with this celebration of Spivak’s discursive innovations, the article positions the South, particularly as representationally conjured in these three anthologized discussions of the so-called global South, as a primed and pre-existing testing ground for the vision of disparate yet mutually determining “globalities” offered by Spivak as a replacement (or, perhaps more appropriately, an update) of the monological vision of globalization as a monolith of process, a unifying and all-encompassing force: “The ultimate discursive disintegration of this antiquated South of the Mind that represented the region as stable, clearly defined, well-known, and easily knowable is all the more definitive in the way these essays extract a globalization discourse out of the always already evident matter of U.S. Southern studies”; “In short, there should be very little left of the old paradigm of the U.S. South now that its tropes have come into contact with the discourses of globalization” (857). The line of argument pursued in Aboul-Ela’s sophisticated dialogical analysis, and in the work of other scholars, calls attention to the fact that both “the global” and “the southern” terminologically demarcate spaces of temporal myopia. The former’s tethering to predictive futurism is as conceptually blinding as the latter’s association with the conceptual lingering of a mythic past.

visions of the south purportedly reject.

### 3. Review of Existing Criticism: *Mud*

Southern literature and film responds to both the decades-old concerns mentioned by the pioneers of bioregionalism and the more contemporary conundrums raised by the global south debate. Jeff Nichols' *Mud* has been widely discussed as an exploration of southern localism. The story's characters embrace a river as their primary demarcation of home. They resist town life yet recognize that their way of life becomes endangered by the forces of modernity. Many critics identify an ecological sensibility in the film's presentation of this bioregional lifestyle. Others invoke the legacy of Southern pastoral art.<sup>65</sup> Though the film has failed to receive, thus far, extensive academic attention, popular publications discussed it extensively upon release. Many of the published discussions of the film support the claim that Nichols film-making embracing a bioregional ethos, focuses upon connections between human and non-human, in keeping with a sort of bioregional ethos. Such works include writings by Godfrey Cheshire, Mary Corliss, Chris Knight, Jim Emerson, Andrew Pulver, and Melena Ryzik. In "A Very Personal Tale: Writing and Directing *Mud*" (2013), a DVD special feature, Nichols, who narrates, discusses the film's personal importance to his career, stating "It's the film that has been with me the longest. And because of that it holds a special significance for me." He further explains that his ideas for the project begin to germinate when—in the Little Rock public library, while he was in college—he discovered *The Last River*, a photographic essay collection about river life.

The feature also includes short interviews with actors Matthew McConaughey and Reese

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<sup>65</sup> In a review (2012) for *Variety*, Peter Debruges calls back to the pastoral tradition, referring to Nichols' craftsmanship as "born of the same rustic sensibility that fueled everyone from Andrew Wyeth to Terrence Malick." Further, Debruges classifies *Mud* as a "pressure cooker pastoral" that "conjures a wily figure of endangered Southern chivalry."



Witherspoon, both of whom speak highly of Nichols' vision for the project: the former mentions being impressed by how "clear" the director was in his ideas; the latter mentions the fact that there are very few southern film-makers, emphasizing Nichols' ability to replicate intricacies and details of southern life. This background material demonstrates that Nichols has long been interested in lifestyles illustrative of the dimensions of place emphasized by bioregionalism, embracing watershed-based designations of lifestyles. In his study of *The Last River*, he embraces rivers as characteristic of certain modes of human experience. The clarity of vision and attention to detail emphasized by the film's performers originates in a bioregional view of space.

A separate DVD special feature, "Southern Authenticity: Showing the Real Arkansas," also discusses the film's visual and thematic approach to setting. Nichols discusses his excitement toward the rural Arkansas areas where production took place: "It looks different here. The trees are different. It feels different"; "It was really important to me that we shoot this here." He further describes the film as "a poem to this part of the world and to these people" and mentions his having "fought really hard to get this film in Arkansas." His fascination, as he describes it, extends beyond the nonhuman landscape and into the flavor and characteristics of the human society: "I felt like this was a subculture that we needed to capture on film as quickly as possible." Additionally, Nichols describes the banks of the Mississippi as "a legendary place" where he "wanted to see a modern day story told."

While watching "Southern Authenticity," one gets a clear sense of the difficulties inherent to filming in such a place: many of the locations were difficult to reach, involving lengthy drives on primitive roads; while scouting locations, the crew encountered numerous abandoned structures (offering evidence that the river lifestyle emphasized by the film sees a very real threat). One also senses that Nichols tolerates such pitfalls because of his deep passion

for setting: “Location to me, it defines everything”; “It defines socio-economic levels, also it defines how people dress, how they walk, how they talk, where they live. So something as important as location, it is something you cannot separate from a story like this.”

Nichols locates in such rural sites, a potential for representational challenges to monological views of space as merely social designation. Location, he suggests, cannot be separated from human characterizations. This approach puts forth a view of human experience as shaped by, as much as shaping, the nonhuman dimensions of space. The film's performers approach characterization in a similar fashion. In yet a third DVD special feature, “The Arkansas Ensemble: The Distinctive characters and cast of *Mud*,” actor Ray McKinnon, who plays “senior” (father of the young protagonist), describes his character as “a guy who, just, is kinda rooted in a place and a belief system.” He further emphasizes the notion of a sense of place, pointing towards entanglements between landscape and identity.

A number of critics have called attention the film's preoccupation with the nonhuman dimensions of place and their connections to human behavior and experience. Corliss's piece—“*Mud*: Matthew McConaughey as an Outlaw in Love” (2013), published in *Time*—discusses the film's subject matter as “a water community both nurtured and imperiled by the mighty Mississippi River.” Corliss emphasizes the visual landscape, mentioning a number of the film's textual flourishes, noting specifically the “antideluvian dignity” of the river shacks and eco-mimetically rendering (in her own language) the “island refuge” depicted in the film: “Sunlight flares through the branches, insects chorus over his whispered secrets . . .” Other critics emphasizing genre relationships in the film's visual approach to setting, and generally praising the look and feel of *Mud*, include Chris Knight, Jim Emerson, Andrew Pulver and Melena Ryzik.

Cheshire mentions a sense of “rootedness” in discussion of the film's evocation of

setting; simultaneously, literary references come to be evoked: “If Southern lit is known for being rooted in a ‘sense of place,’ the locale evoked by Nichols couldn’t be more specific . . .”—the critic writes in “Why ‘Mud’ is the Best Southern Film in Years” (2013), a piece for *Indiewire*. Cheshire praises this connection with literary history, arguing that the film offers “attractions on every possible level of meaning—from the mundane to the mythic”: “As always in Southern lit., this place isn’t just geographic or anthropological fact; because it connotes ‘home’ and ‘identity’, it is suffused with history and feeling.” The piece additionally praises (somewhat echoing Reese Witherspoon) the film’s ability to present “aspects of Southern culture that southerners recognize as true and meaningful.” Cheshire identifies the film’s “particular poetry” as one stemming from “things along the plot’s edges,” such as “the textures of the human and physical” and “the mercurial moods of the river in changing light.”

Knight’s review (2013), for the *National Post*, praises the film’s cinematic landscape, mentioning specifically “a languorous pace,” “beautiful scenery,” and “naturalistic setting,” all of which, in his view “make this a film best enjoyed slowly.” Emerson’s review (2013), published at *Rogerebert.com*, mentions Mr. Nichols’ “feel for the characters and landscapes, going so far as to describe the film’s setting as “so vivid you feel like you could get bit by a mosquito or water moccasin if you’re not careful.”<sup>66</sup> In a piece for *The Guardian*, Andrew Pulver (who also includes interview material) tells the story of Nichols’ discovery of *The Last River* and the book’s role in inspiring the film; “I was just struck with the idea of a man hiding out on an island,” Nichols states. The review, like many writings about the film and the director’s general body of

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<sup>66</sup> Like a number of other critics, he also mentions the film’s saturation with “undercurrents from American movies and literatures.” Emerson carefully qualifies that he reads this pastiche element as a great strength to the film, rather than a weakness, arguing that “the picture never comes unmoored from reality or drifts off into lazy abstraction and cliché.”

work, makes mention of well-known auteur Terrence Malick, establishing that “the people marketing his work have not shied away from” comparisons. It should be noted that Malick is known for vibrant depictions of the natural world.<sup>67</sup>

Ryzik’s piece on Nichols, for the *New York Times*, likewise mentions both *The Last River: Life Along Arkansas’s Lower White* and the purported influence of Terrence Malick. She describes the book discovered by Nichols as “a photo book documenting houseboat communities, mussel fisherman, pecan sellers and other vanishing Southern breeds.” According to the piece, the director, after exploring the book, “discovered a relative had a houseboat in Dewitt, Ark”; he subsequently, so the story goes, went out on the river with the relative in a small boat (Ryzik). Concerning Malick’s role, the article mentions that the two directors share “several producers”; more generally, she describes “the tight-knit Austin creative scene,” which also includes director David Gordon Green, described as “a producer and frequent sounding board” for Nichols (Ryzik).<sup>68</sup>

Cheshire mentions a sense of “rootedness” in discussion of the film’s evocation of setting; simultaneously, literary references come to be evoked: “If Southern lit is known for being rooted in a ‘sense of place,’ the locale evoked by Nichols couldn’t be more specific . . .”—the critic writes in “Why ‘Mud’ is the Best Southern Film in Years” (2013), a piece for

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<sup>67</sup> The director, for his part, minimizes the significance of the relationship: “I’ve met him briefly twice but I don’t know him. But Malick is a wholly unique film-maker. There is no one like him. He’s like an impressionist painter. . . ,” he states (Pulver).

<sup>68</sup> The young director’s interest in southern literature also receives mention, somewhat justifying the language of many critics; specifically his “quick” tendency to “quote Mark Twain” receives emphasis.

*Indiewire*. Cheshire praises this connection with literary history, arguing that the film offers “attractions on every possible level of meaning—from the mundane to the mythic”: “As always in Southern lit., this place isn’t just geographic or anthropological fact; because it connotes ‘home’ and ‘identity’, it is suffused with history and feeling.”<sup>69</sup>

Finally, Thompson’s piece—for *The New Republic*, intriguingly titled “The Return of the Country: A Rural Reaissance in American Cinema” (2013)—expresses mixed feelings<sup>70</sup> about the film yet exuberantly praises, like Debruges and others, its depicted landscape and evoked sense of place: “*Mud* is not simply rural . . .”; “It is a fable, as seen and felt by country children, from a time when their world was enclosed by immediate horizons” (49). The film’s thematic commingling of nature and childhood echoes similar narrative approaches utilized not only by Faulkner, Hogan, and other southern writers but also other recent films from or about the region by Debra Granik, Ben Zeitlin, Malick himself, and other directors.

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<sup>69</sup> The piece additionally praises (somewhat echoing Reese Witherspoon) the film’s ability to present “aspects of Southern culture that Southerners recognize as true and meaningful.” Cheshire identifies the film’s “particular poetry” as one stemming from “things along the plot’s edges,” such as “the textures of the human and physical” and “the mercurial moods of the river in changing light.”

<sup>70</sup> The critic’s objections have to do with a “miscalculated” ending that, in his view, “settles for violent set-pieces and then a conclusion that seems too tidily aimed at the box office” (50).

#### 4. Critical Reading: *Mud*

The opening shots focus upon several items in Ellis's room: a bulldog with a bobble head, a set of toy six shooters and other items associated with boyhood. We see Ellis, barely visible through shadows, crouching on his bed. He receives an incoming communication on a radio and then climbs out the window. He now stands on the porch of a row of homes, in a sort of houseboat style, floating adjacent to the river bank. In the interior, his parents talk. The boy watches through the window, careful not to be seen, and then continues sneaking away.

The film does very little, in this introductory sequence and elsewhere to establish the geographical location depicted in national or regional terms. These bear, in truth, little relevance to the story. The material conditions of Ellis's environment take precedence. Nichol's, in contrast, establishes quickly and efficiently that the story unfolding concerns a young boy, living in a houseboat community situation on the banks of a river. These represent the basic facts of place, as deemed necessary, by the director, to understanding both Ellis's experience of locality and the story to unfold. Watersheds and physical structures, in keeping with bioregional paradigms, emerge as the basic spatial touchstones at play. The title credits, furthering this emphasis upon the watershed, transpose across an image of the river.

Ellis encounters Neckbone, his very animated friend, and climbs on the back of a dirt bike with him. The two boys then travel to a small boat, with the trolling motor on the back. They travel along the river. The boys exchange a few words, indicating that they are on a tight schedule and must be careful to avoid this adventure being discovered by their parents. "There it is," Neckbone suddenly exclaims to Ellis. He points the boat toward an island, and soon the boys are docking and traveling on foot: the camera treats us to a few natural images: grass blades, tree lines, a spider crawling across a mushroom. Neckbone points out a cluster of water moccasins

and a mudhole; “little shits,” he exclaims as the boys hurry away. Eventually the boys stop “There it is,” Neckbone states; “Yeah, there it is” Ellis responds. The camera reveals what they have been searching for, a boat that has somehow (the area has been flooded recently, dialog between the boys establishes) come to be stranded high in the branches of a large tree.

The boys excitedly climb the tree and enter the boat. Further dialogue between the boys establishes that virtually no one else knows about this boat; Ellis suggests that the two of them claim it as their own. “Holy shit,” Neckbone exclaims, discovering a stash of pornographic magazines. Ellis discovers a bag of bread and other sundries; he points out to his friend that someone else must know about this place and is possibly staying there. At this point Neckbone’s watch alarm goes off, indicating that the boys must begin their return home, lest the expedition be discovered.

They climb down the tree and hurry on foot back to the boat. Back at the boat, Ellis discovers a boot print that resembles one he had previously seen in the treehouse boat. The prints, curiously, have the imprint of a cross in the center. Wondering where this mysterious person has gone off to, the boys, seemingly out of nowhere, discover a man (standing by their boat) fishing along the shore. In this fashion, Mathew McConaughey's *Mud*, the title character, enters the film. He emerges subtly into focus, as though he were a detail of the landscape not immediate to perception. The river upon which he fishes functions as the fundamental unit of his circumstance as well.

The man, smoking a cigarette, waves at the boys. The ensuing conversation calls back to the treehouse boat and its potential, established previously in the conversation between the two boys, as a private space, a getaway from human society. The man, smoking a cigarette, waves at the boys. “Shit, you know that guy,” Neckbone asks. “I’ve never seen him before,” responds his

friend. The man approaches the boys. “Shit,” Neckbone exclaims. “What’d you say, boy,” the man responds. He Pauses, continuing: “It’s a hell of a thing ain’t it.” “What’s that?,” Ellis, baffled, utters. “Boat in a tree. Hell of a thing.” Suddenly, the boy's vision of escape and solitude, at this point, comes to be endangered: “You talkin’ about our boat?,” Ellis asks; “talkin’ about my boat,” Mud asserts in response; “we found it,” Neckbone retaliates. “Yeah you found it with me living in it. Possession is nine tenths of the law,” Mud weighs in, concluding this bit of verbal sparring. Different paradigms of designated space come into conflict here, prefiguring events later in the film.

The tree-embedded boat, in many ways, serves as a thematic microcosm for southern space itself, a similarly contested zone. The image of a boat embedded in a tree, in its bizarre commingling of natural and man-made elements, encapsulates both the hybrid, non-static views of regional place asserted by scholars working to renovate southern studies, and the commingling of human and non-human explored by bioregional scholars and ecocritics. After a brief discussion, which establishes that Mud, having encountered Native Americans in his travels, embraces a somewhat mystical view of the cosmos, introductions are offered between Mud and the pair of youths.<sup>71</sup> The interlude pertains to Mud's boots, which have cross-shaped nails embedded in the bottom, and his embrace of them as storied, mythic, magical objects.<sup>72</sup> The

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<sup>71</sup> You got crosses on your heels, Ellis asks. “Nails. Shaped like crosses,” Mud specifies. “What for,” Ellis asks, bewildered. Mud, unphased, responds: “Ward off evil spirits. Bought 'em from a man I called an Indian, but he was a Mexican, said they were seven league boots, worn by the seventh son of the seventh son.”

<sup>72</sup> “Told me they'd turn me into a werewolf, that's a lie. I know nothin' about that. They just good luck boots. As you can see, they aint working out too well so far,” Mud states.



introductions, along with the dialog prompted by them establish that, though Mud has traveled broadly, he and the boys share a similar regional history.<sup>73</sup> As the dialog continues, it is established that the man is familiar with the area where Ellis and his parents live. Further, he used to know a man named Tom Blankenshift, who lived there. Ellis informs him that Tom, his neighbor, still resides in the same place. Mud uses this information as an-roud into common ground, proposing an arrangement.<sup>74</sup>

The man explains that he has money, but as he is waiting for someone and, for the present time, tied to his current location, he needs the boys to retrieve him groceries. The boys, reluctantly, agree to an arrangement whereby they furnish food products and, in return, when the man departs from the boat the boys will then take possession of it. The boys, running late, get in the boat and head home. In the boat, the boys have an exchange wherein they realize that they failed to catch the man's name, established later. The central action of the plot begins with the boy's encounter with the strange figure of Mud. Arriving back at the houseboats, Ellis encounters his father, who reprimands him for being late to help out with the day's tasks. Ellis climbs into the back of his father's pickup truck. The two drive around, in a sequence set to folksy music. As the DeWitt area is canvassed by the truck, which stops periodically at residences, Ellis retrieves

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<sup>73</sup> After learning that the boys live near DeWitt, Arkansas, Mud expresses relief, "Arkansas boys. Y'all had me worried for a second." Ellis, unimpressed, responds, "We supposed to know you?" Mud, still unphased, answers, "I doubt it. I grew up around here but I've been gone a while." Ellis presses further; "Where at around here?," he asks, prompting a somewhat elusive response from Mud, "Different places. Spent a lot of time up near the White."

<sup>74</sup> "Now, I like you two boys. You remind me of," he pauses, "me. Seein' how as you're from Arkansas and we know some of the same people, and we grew up in some of the same places, I reckon we can make a deal for somethin'." Ellis remains coldly inquisitive; "A deal for what?," he asks.

bags of fish and other river foods, delivering them door-to-door. Senior comes across as a bit strict, but the family experiences a hardscrabble existence requiring hard work. Ray McKinnon describes this character quite accurately as “rooted” in a particular lifestyle. His work ethic stems from pride in a particular way of life.

Neckbone sits on the porch at the home of his uncle Galen, who seems to be his primary guardian. Ellis arrives to retrieve a book about motorcycles. His friend explains that he will have to wait. Galen is inside with a girl; music plays inside. Neckbone jokes briefly about his uncle. The two talk about the man they encountered, who Neckbone thinks is crazy. It is established that neither has spoken to anyone else about the encounter. “I don’t know. I think he just needed a little help,” Ellis exclaims, suggesting that he might return back to the island, providing the mysterious man with the requested food. Inside, Neckbone warns his friend against returning to the island alone, explicitly stating “I don’t trust that guy.” These opposing reactions are curious. Ellis seems to be immediately drawn to Mud while Neckbone remains hesitantly skeptical.

Outside, on the porch of the houseboat across from the floating row of apartments that includes the home of Ellis and his mother, Tom Blankenship cranks, in a later sequence, the air pressure mechanism of a pellet gun. He shoots at water moccasins. Across the water channel, inside the other residence, Ellis asks his father about Tom. The older man’s response indicates, to both Ellis and the viewer, telling information about the lifestyles and culture existing along the river. “Some people move to this river to work on it, and some people move here to be left alone,” he states. Senior’s comments about Tom are suggestive of a bioregional lifestyle resistant to urbanity, civilization, and traditional demarcations of place.

Eventually, Neckbone and Ellis again visit Mud. When the boys, who follow after the man as he walks from place to place on the island, performing various tasks, he says he is

waiting for his old girlfriend, Juniper (Reese Witherspoon), whom he describes as beautiful with bird tattoos on her hands. The birds, he says, are nightingales, which he describes as good luck birds. Mud has strange ideas about animal life. The three encounter a water moccasin and have an exchange about it. "I hate snakes," Neckbone states. "That's because God put 'em here for us to fear," the older man responds. "We knew to be afraid of snakes long before we ever even got into this world. The Cherokee would wrap their pregnant women's bellies in snake skin. Induce labor, scare the child out." Mud tosses neckbone a rope, instructing him that snakes won't cross a braided rope. Through Mud's musings, the film explores posthumanism, animal modality, and non-traditional views of nature.

Soon after his return from the island, Ellis learns from his father that his parents are heading for divorce. This threatens their old river houseboat. Once no longer used as a residence by the owner, it will be removed. This is established by a conversation, in their residence, between Ellis and his father. As the home was inherited from the family of Ellis's mother, he and his father may not reside there upon her desire to leave. This familial conflict parallels disturbances in habitat and land use. As in many narratives of southern place, forces of modernity threaten pre-modern means of subsistence.

Later, as Ellis and his mother ride to Wal-Mart, she tries to explain this cataclysmic decision to her son, stating, "I need a change." The plot propels forward as the pair arrive at a police roadblock. Through dialog with the police, Ellis learns that Mud is a fugitive whose encounters with outside society forced him to exile himself upon the island. After Ellis and Neckbone return to the island, Mud explains that he killed a man who had gotten Juniper pregnant and pushed her down a flight of stairs, resulting in the loss of the child. When Mud explains his intention to take the boat down the Mississippi river and into the gulf of Mexico, the

pair agree to help him carry out the plan. Through the characterization of Mud's experience, the film commits to neither a positive or negative view of the society existing beyond the White River and the town of De Witt. As the forces of modernity and mainstream society come to be associated with both his endangerment and his means of escape, they represent (within the symbolic economy of the story) both hope and despair. In its execution of this thematic mediation, the film's political ideology comes to parallel Thomashew's vision of cosmopolitan bioregionalism.

As the plan goes predictably awry, men arrive in town seeking to hunt down and kill Mud. After getting caught stealing supplies for Mud's scheme, Ellis realizes that he and Neckbone have been taken advantage of and endangered. After returning to the island and raging at Mud, Ellis angrily runs away; in his agitated state, he falls into a pit of water moccasins and is bitten. The plot winds to a conclusion as Mud saves Ellis, faces off against his enemies, and is presumed dead. In a closing reveal, however, the viewer discovers that Mud, surprisingly, managed to make his escape, taking the boat into Mexico. Again the forces of nationalism and transnationalism represent both Mud's potential destruction and his salvation. The film's final word on the global/local dichotomy keeps the narrative structure in line with Thomashew's blending of ecocosmopolitan and bioregional sensibilities. Ellis's fate similarly connotes cataclysm and hope simultaneously. After his parents separate, the houseboat comes to be demolished. His father acquires a normalized job in a far-away community. As Ellis and his mother move to an apartment in town, the closing scenes suggest that Ellis has a future and will move past the loss of his cherished lifestyle along the river banks.

### 5. Critical Reading: *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*

Ray's work, in stricter accordance with the traditions of bioregional narrative, takes a bit of a stronger stance against the forces of modernity and development. In several key passages, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* reads like elegiac mourning for a dearly departed landscape. In this sense, the tonality parallels the mood associated with Ike McCaslin's final appearance in *GDM*. Ray's writing clearly implies that clearcutting, pollution, and similar forces of so-called progress, have stripped the southern landscape of qualities that can never be reacquired. The loss of habitat, as in *Power* and *Dwellings*, is permanent and irreparable. In addition to its elegiac ethos of conservationism, the text also emotes a celebratory spirit which embraces the commingling of childhood and ecology common to so many southern texts.

Ray constructs both a memoir and a legitimate, meticulously detailed, biologically aware documentation of bioregional history. Further, the text functions as an ethnography, detailing the history of the crackers, a tenacious group of Appalachian poor whites. As in Hogan's works, ecological concerns come to be explored alongside humanistic ones. Personal history overlaps with environmental history which, in turn, overlaps with societal history. The textual analysis performed here will examine, first, the conservationist dimensions of the text and then move on to, respectively, the personal, bioregional, and ethnographic histories emerging from its various sections and thematic preoccupations.

In the sections of the text emoting an ethos of elegiac conservationism, Ray's writing hints at the tenuous fragility of southern ecosystems.<sup>75</sup> These ecological ethics, like Hogan's,

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<sup>75</sup> "As southern forests are logged, these species of flora and fauna, as varied as their curious adaptations to life in the southeastern plains, suffer. All face loss of place," she writes. Her language captures the tenuous fragility of a precisely calibrated ecosystem.

emerge from a prescient awareness of the increasingly problematic nature of late-capitalism's appropriation of nature:

In the midst of new uncertainties in the world, including global economics and a frenzy of technology, we look around and see that the landscape that defined us no longer exists or that it's form is altered so dramatically that we no longer recognize it as our own"  
(271)

Compromised ecosystems, Rae establishes powerfully, contribute to an equally compromised human sense of place.<sup>76</sup> She characterizes the various peoples of the South as "patient . . . for generations" and "willing to fight . . . to be of a place in all ways, for all time" (272).

In her personal memoir of childhood, Ray reminisces upon experiences occurring not only in her cherished pine forests, but also on the junkyard property owned and operated by her family.<sup>77</sup> She, like Jane Bennett's similar observation of seemingly attenuated agglomerations of junk, applies an ecological "logic" to environments constructed out of human artifacts.<sup>78</sup> Her writing, in fact, draws an extended comparison between the ecology of the junkyard and the ecology of the forest: "In one as in the other you expect to see the creativity of the random, how

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<sup>76</sup> "We southerners are a people fighting again for our country, defending the last remaining stands of real forest," she writes, indicating that habitat loss proves devastating to the human sense of identity.

<sup>77</sup> "Although I was this junkyard daughter, it was easy for me to identify with the country, its beauty, its normalcy," she recalls, suggesting a strong predilection to enjoy both realms.

<sup>78</sup> "Walk through a junkyard and you'll see some of the schemes a wilderness takes . . . so a brief logic of ecology can be found," she explains. Bennett applies a similar logic in her narrative observations of Cold Springs Lane.

the twisted metal protrudes like limbs, the cars dumped at acute, right, and obtuse angles, how the driveways are creeks and rivers” (269). Ray’s familial history extends, textually, into an ethnography of the cracker people.<sup>79</sup> This ethnography speaks, in chilling terms, of the impact of habitat loss upon the human psyche: “More than anything else, what happened to the longleaf speaks for us; these are my people, our legacy is ruination” (87). These personal and cultural histories unfold against an equally detailed history of ecology.<sup>80</sup> She renders the Georgia biosphere as a fragile if predictable ecosystem reminiscent of theoretical ecology’s networked model: “It is a land of routine, of cycle, and of constancy” (3).

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<sup>79</sup> “My kin lumbered across the landscape like tortoises. Like raccoons we fought and with equal fervor we frolicked . . . Accustomed to poverty, we made use of assets at hand and we did not think much of property . . . we remained a people apart,” she establishes in evocative detail (87).

<sup>80</sup> “A clan of animals is bound to the community of longleaf pine. They have evolved there, filling in niches in the trees, under the trees, in the grasses, in the bark, underground,” she writes, describing the evolutionary development of interconnection and symbiosis. “They have adapted to sand, fire, a lengthy growing season, and up to sixty inches of rain per year. Over the millennia, the lives of animals wove together” (141).

**E. Conclusion: *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Bioregionalism, Southern Hybridity, and the Future of Eco-Cinematic Regionalism**



## 1. Introduction to the Film and Overview of Filmic Ecology

The emerging field of filmic ecology (or eco-cinema) involves a number of topics of relevance to the study of regional film-making. Doris Balthruschat, Pat Brereton, and the writing team of Sydney Dobrin and Sean Morey each explore the concept of media ecologies.<sup>81 82</sup> Dobrin and Morey—editors of *Ecosee: Image, Rhetoric, Nature* (2009), a text analyzing all forms of visual media—offer important background information regarding the role of moving images in representation of ecological ideas, outlining the basic tenets of their titular critical methodology in the anthology’s introduction, “Ecosee: A First Glimpse,” wherein the term “Ecosee” is explained to reference “the study and the production of the visual (re)presentation of space, environment, ecology, and nature in photographs, paintings, television, film, video games, computer media, and other forms of image-based media” (2).<sup>83</sup> In accordance with this conceptual approach, *Ecosee* regards the contemporary ecological conundrum as “a dilemma of representation... of rhetorical and visual choices” rather than “just a political /ecological crisis”

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<sup>81</sup> In keeping with its exploration of these media ecologies, Balthruschat’s study applies the concept of “network analysis” (already prevalent in theoretical ecology and textual ecocriticism), which is operationally defined here as a “tool for mapping links between media and cultural agents and their interdependencies . . .” (Balthruschat 24).

<sup>82</sup> Brereton’s book maintains that discussion of ecology in film, is overwhelmingly colored by “the predominantly negative ideological critique of Hollywood film” and, as a consequence, minimal scholarly scrutiny “is given over to understanding and appreciating rather than dismissing the utopian spatial aesthetic that permeates Hollywood film” (Brereton 12).

<sup>83</sup> *Ecosee*, the editors maintain, “considers the role of visual rhetoric, picture theory, semiotics, and other image-based studies in understanding the construction of space, place, nature, environment, and ecology” (2). *Ecosee* works toward these ends, further, by functioning as “an analysis of existing images,” “a work toward making theories that put forward ways of thinking about the relationship between image and environment,” and “a theory . . . of visual design for those who make images” (2).

(3).

The film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012),) offers an illuminating and illustrative example of a media generated ecology, one actively addressing the “representational dilemma” identified by the *Ecosee* writers. Wide arrays of images reflect and refract one another, each holding a place within director Ben Zeitlin and crew’s metonymy of environmental snapshots. Few current films—from the U.S. South, the Global South, or any other identifiable region—offer such bountiful and panoramic exploration of the conceptual and perceptual connectivity between image, both static and moving, and the human sense of place.

*Beasts* is the tale of a young girl and her experience of a unique community and biosphere. Hushpuppy, the young narrator and central character, lives with her father in the bathtub, a community not found on maps. It exists outside the levees of New Orleans, in a precarious zone subject to rapid environmental change. The members of the bathtub community resist the trappings of industrial society and live in ramshackle, hybrid architectures, blending natural and man-made elements, all scavenged and arranged into a visual and functional harmony with the landscape. Despite this post-capital, low-fi approach, a rich culture abides, including a musical tradition and a functional system of education.

In an early scene, Hushpuppy (holding a net) sits in a boat, atop a large body of water, with Wink, her father. As the camera lingers upon the boat, the structure reveals itself to be a typically hybrid assemblage predominantly composed by an abandoned truck bed and numerous re-appropriated oil drums. The lens pans out to reveal that the boat shares the horizon with an expansive, smoke-emitting, mechanized, offshore oil drilling installation. Here, Zeitlin’s pictorial-representational choices highlight contrasting human-made components to, and controlling influences upon, the landscape and bio-sphere. The waters adjacent to and

surrounding the bathtub contain both the mechanical masses of industrial capitalism and the ramshackle, un-repairable technological appliance furnished by these central characters. Late-capitalism, along with its eyesores and pollutants, stand contrasted against the more benign, more celebrated human constituency represented by the bathtub community participated in by Wink and Hushpuppy. Variegated, disparate, and seemingly contradictory affective elements merge together, through carefully selected and arranged images, into a unified climatology of audiovisual place.

Networking and interconnection, common tropes in textual ecocriticism, take on filmic resonance in both *Beasts* and cinematic analyses by Baltruschat, Sean Cubitt, Stephen Rust, Salma Monami, and Adrian J. Ivakhiv. These tropes, as they do in ecological writing and virtually all forms of environmental visual art, become recurring and particularized imagistic preoccupations within the media ecology engendered by the film. The pieces by Brereton and Cubitt, specifically, each analyze the tripartite thematic interconnection of utopia, dystopia, and post-apocalypse (yet again, common tropes in environmental literary studies) in ecologically oriented film. Cubitt's 2014 article, "Affect and Emotion in Two Artists Films and a Video," explores the idea of "connectedness" underlying mainstream environmentalism, which is, to use his language, "premised on . . . a call to efficient management of resources in a closed system" (251). To "understand the cultural appeal of eco-apocalypse, . . . we need to understand and deploy a primal, affective connection with the world," he explains, positioning filmic art, "the audiovisual moving image as the art of time par excellence," as an illustration of such "primal"

connectivity (251).<sup>84</sup> *Beasts*, as a specific cinematic work, offers telling examples of both filmic deployment of the tropes of ecological networking and imagistic representation of the sense of primal connectivity identified here by Cubitt.

In the 2013 book, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature*, Ivakhiv tackles the succinct question of “how images move us”: “It [his study] is not particularly concerned with distinguishing between images and the supposedly ‘real things’ represented, signified, or perhaps masked by those images,” he writes, in explanation of his project (vii). Within this cinematic ecophilosophy, the “socio-ecological potentials of . . . Film” relate to the art form’s “capacity to speak to, shape, and challenge the sets of relations organizing the fields of materiality, sociality, and perception . . . making up the world.” Such fields, he further explains, must be understood “as being connected, open-ended, and dynamically in process, with ourselves implicated in the processes by which they are formed” (13).<sup>85</sup>

Hushpuppy, in a different sequence, has hung a tank top—presumably, once possessed by her mother—upon the wall. Additionally, she has painted a face above the neck-hole, rendering the profile of an adult woman. As the film’s young narrator cobbles together various food items

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<sup>84</sup> Addressing the films he writes about, he continues to state that “there are thematic threads in . . . these films that can help us understand the role of affect in cinema, the specificity of time as the native dimension of affect, and the relation between affect and environment which the moving image . . . is uniquely fitted to express” (251). Film, further, presents the viewer with a unique “awareness of time” through which “the perilously rapid passage of affect can be experienced” (263).

<sup>85</sup> Ivakhiv refers to the critical methodology employed in *Ecologies of the Moving Image* as “an ecophilosophy of the cinema” whose stated goal is “to think through the ecological implications of the moving images—films, videos, animations, and motion pictures of all kinds—that have proliferated in our world since the late nineteenth century”; The term cinema, as defined and employed here, “refers to one form of the moving image, a form that consists of structured sequences viewed by audience and that emerged in . . . (industrial-era Europe and North America) and has captured the world over in the course of the past twelve decades” (vii).

(including cat food), dropping them into a pot with indiscriminate abandon, she experiences a strange vision, possibly a hallucination, of her long absent mother speaking to her in a kind and loving fashion. Immediately afterward, Hushpuppy turns her attention to the stovetop and begins stirring a very hot pot. She then proceeds to light the stove with a blow-torch. Though the scene plays as mildly comedic, the viewer nevertheless senses the young girl's condition of endangerment, cringing at the site of a small child operating, unsupervised, a highly dangerous appliance. Soon she overhears Wink, returning, either running into or stumbling over a pet: "Get out of my way you fat animal," he exclaims.

Hushpuppy rushes to greet him and discovers, promptly, that he wears a hospital gown, which indicates he has ventured across the levee for medical care. Wink begins walking away, his back turned to his daughter, who follows after him. "I learned lots of things while you was gone," she exclaims. She continues speaking, simultaneously drinking from the pot: "If I drink all this here, I can burp like a man." At this point, Hushpuppy inquires to her father about his hospital gown, worrying about why he needed medical care. "Leave me alone man," he responds, as she continues to follow behind him. Growing angry at his silence, the girl lashes out at her father: "I hope you die. And when you die and after you die, I'll go to your grave and eat birthday cake all by myself." Suddenly, a mysterious series of causes and reactions unfolds. Hushpuppy, enraged, slams her father hard in the chest with her fist; immediately after, accompanied by a loud clap of thunder, Wink falls to the ground and begins to shake and spasm in a manner suggestive of seizure. As he continues to shake, several more loud bursts of thunder reverberate above. Hushpuppy, at this point, experiences another strange vision, sound-tracked by the booming noise of thunder, this time of chunks of glacial ice breaking apart into an avalanche. As she runs, animate visions of cataclysmic glacial shattering and movement,

paralleling the rapturous thunder present in her local environment, continue to pass through her mind. At one point she stops, yelling “Momma, I think I broke something.”

This series of filmic events illustrates the claim, conveyed by Cubitt, Ivakhiv, and others, that moving images carry the capacity to mark and trace both time and affect. The delicate entanglement suggested by the tropes of interconnection posited by the network model of contemporary ecology find filmic manifestation in this sequence, lending credence to the claims of ecofilm and ecocinema scholars regarding the capacity for filmic representation to visually simulate—through carefully arranged eco-mimetic scenes, sequences and snapshots—the senses of entanglement, mutual dependency, and interconnected destiny common to contemporary ecology and its assessments of bioregions, habitats, and other non-filmic systems.

Wink’s collapse, as depicted, seems to result from a reverberating system of causes and effects, one encompassing the melting of ice-caps (in this film, a structural-symbolic motif associated with environmental apocalypse, failure of global networks, and other cataclysms of place), the violent touch of his daughter (whose own capacity to act as an affective agent within networked systems comes to be highlighted by the reverberations and repercussion associated, both operatically and pictorially, with the powerful blow she delivers to her father, his subsequent collapse, and the narrative stratification of these causal operations as occurring within larger systems), and both the local climate and biosphere (suggested by the thunder) and their phenomenal counterparts on a global scale. In worrying that she “broke” something, Hushpuppy senses the tenuous fragility intrinsic to the fractal circuits, domino reactions, feedback systems, ping-pong causalities, and affective entanglements that function as the harbingers and calling cards of theoretical ecology and its network model.

In “Cuts to Dissolves: Defining and Situating Ecocinema Studies”—the introduction to

the 2013 anthology *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*—two of the volume’s editors, Rust and Monami, similarly argue that film ought be interpretatively situated as existing and participating within “an ecology of connections,” one composed by “the whole habitat which encircles us, the physical world entangled with the cultural” (1). Cinematic affect and filmic representation of space, touched upon in writings by Cubitt, Alexa Weik Von Mossner, David Ingram, and Dobrin and Morey, emerge as common focal points in eco-cinematic studies.

In the film, *Hushpuppy*, operating as a subjective stand-in for the position of the audience, participates herself in cinematic negotiation of the environmental systems around her. Her mysterious visions situate her actions and affective capacities within larger and encompassing frames, these attenuated by violent, disruptive processes both local and global in scope. In *Beasts*, the childhood-education structure of the bathtub community opts to juxtapose humanistic and scientific structures of knowledge, all attenuated within similar temporal and affective frames. The schoolteacher, Bathsheba, stresses the practical skills and strengths necessary to navigate the bathtub’s social structures of rugged, natural simplicity and staunch anti-commercialism. At the same time, she contextualizes the children’s experience, and the general experience of life in the bathtub, demonstrating practical awareness of both conditions of life existing during the planet’s prehistory and the foreboding realities of present day environmental dynamics, planetary phenomenon, and their potentially calamitous implications. After her father’s collapse, *Hushpuppy*, tellingly, rushes to find and consult with this teacher.

“Emotion and Affect in Eco-Films: Cognitive and Phenomenological Approaches,” published by Ingram in *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology, and Film* (2014), puts forth what the author terms “a theoretical framework for analyzing eco-films in terms of the cognitive, emotional, and affective responses they elicit in viewers” (23). Specifically, he

advocates “a combination of cognitive and phenomenological approaches” as the proper conceptual rubric for a project intended to “articulate the aesthetic means by which films work as eco-films” (23). In the context of analysis of “the complex ways in which eco-films work on their audience,” he maintains, “scientific” and “humanist” methodologies ought “be considered complimentary, rather than antagonistic, forms of knowledge” (25).

“Eco-critical Film Studies and the Effects of Affect, Emotion, and Cognition,” Von Mossner’s editorial introduction to the anthology, *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, and Film* (2014), explores the topics of “affect and emotion and their relevance to human experience of and attitude toward nonhuman nature” (2). Von Mossner defends her filmic application of “theories of affect and emotion,” which she elaborates upon at length, on the grounds that they “understand film viewing as an embodied experience and emphasize full-fledged corporeal rather than purely intellectual or visual engagement with film” (6-7). The media ecology engendered by *Beasts* functions as a ripe testing ground for intellectual engagement with affective theories of all kinds, particularly those which, like the film, emphasize corporeality. The bodily image of Hushpuppy stands at the center of a swirling, multifaceted, ecological network, one inclusive of components both local and planetary.

General representational distinctions between environmental image, environmental language, and environmental reality come to be addressed in works by Dobrin and Morey, Ivakhiv, Von Mossner, and Scott McDonald. Additionally, Pietari Kaapa, Tommy Gustaffson, Robin L. Murray, and Joseph K. Heumann, working in a slightly more specific vein, each analyze human impact upon place, landscape, and ecology, as depicted on film. In “Afterword: Towards a Transnational Understanding of the Anthropocene,” the editors of the book *Transnational Eco-cinema: Film Culture in an Era of Ecological Transformation* (2003),



Gustafsson and Kaapa, close out that volume with a final meditation on the collection's general topic, "the transnational component in ecocinema studies," examining international approaches to study of the geologic epoch during which humans exert significant influence upon the global environment and its conditions; such "transnational approaches to the Anthropocene" function, for the authors, "as an important reminder at this late stage of our collection to both diversify our vocabulary and expand our range of analysis" (210). The central argumentative through line of "Towards a Transnational Understanding of the Anthropocene" emerges clearly and carefully: the "transnational component of eco-cinema," in its "attempt to create an understanding that does not shy from cultural differences and the often wide gap between the local and the global," puts forth the "solution to this ecological conundrum," that solution being recognition that "there is no easy solution other than to create awareness and understanding of the world that includes as many spheres of activities as possible" (210).<sup>86</sup>

Global/local dichotomies, as encapsulated within both distinctions between regional and planetary ecosystems and the cultural dynamics characterizing both regional/local landscape and human sense of place, also emerge as central ideas in critical works by Brereton and Andrew Hageman. Hageman's "Ecocinema and Ideology: Do Ecocritics Dream of a Clockwork Green?"—published in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (2010), a useful primer text (edited by Rust, Monani, and Cubitt) on the conceptual connections between ecocriticism and film studies—attends to three central topical concerns: "to demonstrate a dialectical ideological method of reading films; to demonstrate the utility of this method for ongoing self-criticism. . . ; and, thus to argue for dialectical ideological critique as a necessary apparatus for the field of

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<sup>86</sup> As examples of such "spheres of activities," Gustafsson and Kaapa list "economic, political, environmental, geographical, education, entertainment, and so on" (210).

ecocinema studies” (63-4). The Phillip K. Dick/Anthony Burgess inspired title “invokes,” in the author’s language, “a cinema used to remedy social crisis.” Hageman, in accordance with this notion, emphasizes “the prospects for, and limitations of, cinema as an aesthetic means to shaping ecological perceptions and actions” (63-4). “Ecocinema and Ideology” warns against the ignoring of ideological factors as conditions of the viewer’s evaluation of, and intellectual engagement with, environmentally-themed cinema: “When I watch an ecologically engaged film that affectively. . . moves me, my initial reaction is to fantasize that it has occupied a position of ecological purity, outside of ideology”; “But such fantasies must be checked, for the operative concept of ideology here is not of the variety that posits a false consciousness that can ultimately be pierced or removed as scales from the eyes” (64).

Murray and Heumann, in their book, *Ecology and Popular Film: Cinema on the Edge* (2009), seek to study “representations of nature in mainstream film,” “broaden definitions of nature writing to include film,” and, finally, interpret “a selection of films embracing a variety of themes” (11). The mandate to incorporate film within the definitional lexicon of “nature writing” receives justification, the co-authors maintain, on several grounds: first, “Films with hidden environmental messages. . . receive short thrift in ecological film festivals or awards contests”; second, “discussions about the film industry itself and its impact on the environment are all but erased in explorations of environmental films” (1).

In response to the latter of the two problems, Murray and Heumann propose an “eco-critical approach” of interpreting “movies in relation to themes” and, additionally, of exploring “each film’s context in a localized and aesthetic way” (11). Such a methodology, they maintain, avoids “erasing or obscuring the technology behind. . . films,” operating, instead, “on the belief that . . . the film industry both uses and critiques technologies that potentially abuse nature”:

“this text offers a space to explore what happens when nature serves as the center of an analysis of a medium (film) that has traditionally been aligned with nature’s opposite, technology” (17).

The film’s opening presentation of the bathtub illustrates Zeitlin’s congruent commingling of image and language. The camera hovers widely above the area in (appropriately) aerial view: the viewer encounters a small enclave, nestled along the shoreline, with no roads connecting to it from any direction; clearly, the viewer takes in, he or she is looking at an insular, self-contained community with ocean on one side and an expanse of undeveloped grassland on the other. As the aerial shot slowly pans in on the community, currently engaged in a parade, Hushpuppy’s narration highlights linguistically what is already apparent visually: “They think we all gonna drown down here but we aint going nowhere.” The sequence concludes with a shot of Hushpuppy enthusiastically walking along in the parade.

Consider the sequence in which Wink and Hushpuppy float in their curiously constructed boat, standing visually adjacent to offshore oil rigs. In typical fashion, Zeitlin adds auditory elements to his visual composition. As the two stare at these distant mechanical apparatuses, Wink exclaims to his daughter, “ain’t that ugly over there; we got the prettiest place on earth.” Subsequently, Hushpuppy also weighs in, through the medium of voiceover narration, “Daddy says, up above the levee, they’re afraid of the water like a bunch of babies. They built the wall which cuts us off.” These characters understand, only in loose terms, the transnational, monetary dynamics underlying the presence of these structures. Wink evaluates them in purely aesthetic terms, labelling them as simply “ugly.” His language, however cryptic, conveys the categorical separation of life in the bathtub from participation in the unsightly machinations of the world outside. Curiously, the film constructs its own depicted ecology through a “localized and aesthetic” rubric reminiscent of the critical framework through which Murray and Heumann

would evaluate such a film.

The film's tendency toward expression of posthumanist ideas comes across through a number and variety of sequences. In a style reminiscent of Terrence Malick's body of work, also discussed as an expression of environmental posthumanism or similar paradigms, narration (dialog, in voice-over recording, from Hushpuppy) transposes over visual image. Near the end of the montage of environmental images composing the film's opening sequence, the viewer hears her state, through such narration, that "all the time, everywhere, everything's heart's a beating and squirtin', and talking to each other in the ways I can't understand. Most of the time they probably sayin' 'I'm hungry' or 'I gotta poop,' but sometimes they be talking in codes." The young girl, eerily agile within and attenuated to her environment, understands the machinations of animal life, sensing expressions beyond her own understanding and interpretative capacity, on a much deeper level than a child, or any person, adjusted to a traditional household and socially organized place. The assorted scenes in which she listens to the heartbeats of various animals, including her dying father, indicate her vibrant attachment to nonhuman forms of life. The film's very title suggests a story about the beastly (non- or more-than- human elements) lingering in the southern wilderness. Zeitlin's narrative certainly makes good on this suggestion, incorporating a visual array of animal life, including living specimens in addition to the imaginary aurochs.

In a much discussed scene, wherein a socializing group of bathtub residents congregate inside of a houseboat, a man identifying himself as 'Uncle John' calls Hushpuppy over to the table and begins demonstrating for her how to eat a lobster. Wink angrily and loudly interrupts, yelling "No Hushpuppy." He instructs her to "Beast it"; Wink and the others chant "Beast it" as the girl bites directly into the creature with her teeth. The adults cheer her on enthusiastically. The bathtub residents, as established here and elsewhere in the film, understand humanity to be

itself an animal form, drawing little categorical distinction between various modalities of life.

Wink encourages his daughter to eat beasts in a beast-like manner.

In the community's schoolhouse, Bathsheba expresses a similar ethos, emphasizing animalism as a reason for the children to be as cautious within their surroundings as any other creature might be. In an early scene, she lectures to the children as they peer into a trough full of slimy creatures: "Meat. Meat. Meat (indicating the trough). Every animal is made out of meat. I'm meat; yall asses meat. Everything is part of the buffet of the universe." The children look around at various caged animals in the room; the teacher lifts her leg, hikes her skirt and shows the children a tattoo, depicting an aurochs in a primal scene, reminiscent of cave drawings, with men and spears. Rather than commercial interpolation, the ways of the marketplace, these children receive an education in natural selection emphasizing the perils implicit to their potential roles within the food-chain. When the saltwater influx kills necessary flora and fauna, disrupting the food-chain and forces the bathtub's human occupants to flee, the necessity of this educational lesson becomes startlingly immediate.

These and other issues of materialism and phenomenology, as applied to cinematic representation, also emerge as touchstone concepts in the work of Ingram, McDonald, Morey, von Mossner, Cubitt, Gustaffson, Kaapa, and Ivakhiv. Additionally, Hageman, Ivakhiv, Gustafson, Kaapa, Murray, Heumann, and Ingram each address, in a filmic context, the human/nonhuman boundary (clearly also a central issue in the thematic structure of *Beasts*). McDonald's "The Ecocinema Experience," anthologized in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (2013), argues that cinema connects to planetary and local environments in material as well as representational terms: "Celluloid, the base on which the emulsion is layered, is made from cellulose. That is, the 'life' we see moving on the screen is a kind of re-animation of plant and

animal life within the mechanical/chemical apparatus of traditional cinema” (18). In the film, Hushpuppy’s visions function for her as a similar “re-animation,” with the viewer sensing a causal connection between the melting ice caps in her mind and the disastrous storm in her reality.

Morey’s “A Rhetorical Look at *Ecosee*,” anthologized in *Ecosee*, discusses the representational distinctions between language and image in terms of their respective abilities to both denote and mimetically render the natural world: “A system of nature influences our words for that nature, but these words then create what we see”; “That is, nature and language are too intertwined to be taken out of the system to understand what they ‘mean,’ even though they might have meanings that influence ‘physical’ reality”; “But just as nature is ‘real’ and operates outside of language use, we do not acknowledge that images also operate outside of the apparatus of literacy, where words fail to make sense” (25). The film deploys a staunchly similar representational dynamic (a sort of interpretative feedback system), juxtaposing Hushpuppy’s own language (rather than that of an anonymous narrator) in voiceovers that overlap with visual images and sequences. *Beasts* manages to render its young protagonist’s experience in linguistic, visual, and (through her internal visions) cinematic terms.

Kaapa, writing alone in “Transnational Approaches to Econcinema: Charting an expansive field” (2013), argues that the project of understanding “how synergizing ecocritical thinking and transnational film studies can advance both fields” requires a prior “interrogation” of the vexing question of “how the ecological work of Hollywood cinema can be seen in globalist ways”: “It would not be overstating the case to suggest that Hollywood cinema conceives of nature as the property of humanity, relying on anthro-pocentric conceptualizations that colonize the environment for human consumption . . . “ (22). Kaapa’s argumentation

suggests that a globalist approach is essential because “processes of location and dislocation are still often done according to the central logic of the nation state framework”: “By taking a transnational approach . . . we challenge the centrality of nations in ecological thinking while we also acknowledge that nations persist not only in ecopolitics but also in ecocinema,” he writes; “we can start to work toward addressing the inherently anthropocentric logic of film production” (26). *Beasts* functions as a telling example of a film situating itself within a globalist frame and posing challenges to the “nation state framework.” Transnational ecocinema, as explained by these theorists and operatically illustrated in the film, finds itself poised to make a unique and invaluable contribution to the wider field of ecocriticism, Kaapa further suggests, because “oscillation between the specificities of place and the ambiguities of the planetary” functions as an indicative hint at “the ways in which transnational cinema studies can contribute new perspectives to ecocritical writing”: “By deprioritizing place but still maintaining its organizing presence, transnational ecofilms can overcome . . . limitations of the binary between globalized and national forms of ecocinema” (37).

Kaapa and Gastafsson—also writing collaboratively in “Transnational Eco-cinema in an Age of Ecological Transformation,” the introduction to the similarly titled *Transnational Eco-cinema: Film Culture in an Era of Ecological Transformation* (2013)—identify problems inherent to the status of “eco-cinema” as an outgrowth of literary analysis: “Currently, much of eco-critical work on the cinema is too reliant upon ideological-political readings of texts, which is a mode of analysis originating clearly from literature-based ecocriticism” (6). Cinematic analysis, they argue, must be pushed beyond this literary/textual frame; “cinema needs to be considered in a much wider context beyond analytical readings” (6). The co-authors advocate expansion of ecocinema’s targets of analysis, scopes of subject matter, and tenets of

methodology: “Thus we move away from the conception of transnational films and film culture as only concerning difficult or marginal films and, instead, see it as comprising a range of approaches that share the theme of cross border collaboration and concerns with imbalances and inequalities of power in global society” (19).

Though the bathtub inhabitants display awareness of global and transnational phenomenon, their action, as opposed to thinking, operates within a staunchly local frame. When the refugees congregate in the hospital, the language of Hushpuppy’s voiceovers hints at stagnant decay ensuing from the cultural and experiential homogenization accompanying the phenomena of transnational globalism: “When an animal gets sick here, they plug it into the wall.” She goes on to explain Wink’s desire to be burned on a floating pyre rather than meet a similar fate. The refugees, all generally ill at ease within this environment, create a distraction and escape from the hospital. The society outside of the bathtub overwhelmingly represents, within the symbolic economy of the film, the more contemporary, geopolitical and economic understanding of globalism: the bathtub residents actively resist the processes of urbanization and cultural modernity they (along with the viewer and the current trajectory of academic understanding) associate with the post-local environment surrounding their safe-haven of rustic simplicity. Wink actively resists entering this outside society, even at the risk of his and his daughter’s safety. “Daddy says that brave men don’t run away from their homes,” Hushpuppy’s narration establishes. When he and a group of neighbors blow a hole in the levee, the viewer senses the lengths to which he is willing to go to in order to preserve a way of life that is the only means of existence he knows.

The culture of the bathtub represents a deterritorialized zone; its inhabitants live unencumbered by borders both literal and figurative. The spheres of social intercourse occurring



therein operate in a manner staunchly detached from the social organization of place; no townships, demarcated properties, or even road signs name the region anything other than the bathtub, a moniker referencing, as far as its inhabitants are concerned, a watershed of resources rather than a politically delineated territory. The language of Hushpuppy's voiceovers—early in the film, as the bathtub bioregion comes to be introduced and visually explained to the viewer, suggest that the bathtub lifestyle might survive even if the region is destroyed in decimating fashion: “One day the storm's gonna blow, the ground's gonna seep, and the water's gonna rise up so hight they aint going to be no bathtub, just a whole bunch of water”; “But me and my daddy, We's stay right here. We's who the Earth is for.” The bathtub culture, and the specific lifestyle practiced by Wink and Hushpuppy, it becomes apparent, receives its definitional influences not from the biological space it operates within but, rather, through resistance to the socially organized space it lingers, determinedly, outside of.

## 2. *Beasts of the Southern Wild*: Review of Existing Criticism

A number of commentators and resources explore the film's approach to setting. These include Rachel Arons, Andrew Lapin, Roger Ebert, Peter Travers, Scott Marks, Todd McCarthy, Thomas Kette, Nick Pinkerton, Jake T. Bart, and Bell Hooks. Rachel Arons *New York Times* piece on the film, "A Mythical Bayou's All-Too-Real Peril" (2012), provides an nicely informative discussion of the film's general approach to location—in addition to the specific sense of setting rendered by the film, described here as "a mythologized bayou area" and "a harsh utopia that is cut off from civilization by an imposing levee but pulsating with natural beauty and the raucous, defiant spirit of its inhabitants." The article details the real life locations functioning as integral informational touchstones in the process of immersion undertaken by director Ben Zeitlin and his crew; the "bayou fishing towns of Terrebonne Parish" provided, the piece details, a key research site and functioned as the crucial informational influence upon the film's fictional location, the bathtub.<sup>87</sup> Using a "limited budget" and "nonprofessional actors," she explains, the team "worked out of an abandoned gas station in the Terrebonne town of Montegut," constructing the bathtub's sets and filming locales "by hand with found artifacts and rusted out equipment from the surrounding areas" in a manner illustrative of "the spirit of self-

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<sup>87</sup> According to Arons, the area remained "mercifully unscathed by Katrina" but failed to avoid devastation in the wakes of "Hurricane Rita the same summer" and "Hurricanes Gustav and Ike in 2008"; despite these events, the area remains, to use her language, "a region with a vibrant culture that extends to the very edge of the Delta's vanishing wetlands." The author explicates, in informative detail, the "immersive, grass roots approach to filmmaking" deployed by Zeitlin and his "small army of artists and filmmakers from across the country."

sufficiency and resourcefulness that characterizes rural southern Louisiana.”<sup>88</sup>

In a piece—“The Real Bathtub: Back in the bayou with ‘Beasts of the Southern Wild,’” published by *Indiewire*—Andrew Lapin offers information about the area where the crew and production team behind *Beasts* set up shop: “For five months in 2010, Zeitlin and the members of his New Orleans based film-makers collective, court 13, lived and worked in the bayou, making their movie with a cast and crew comprised almost entirely of Louisiana natives.” The article details these events in great detail, explaining the precise geographic location as the “town of Montegut,” about a “90-minute drive Southwest of New Orleans”; it is a place where, in Lapin’s picturesque language, “slivers of land snake until they run up against the Gulf . . .” Viewers of the film recognize the bioregion’s recent history (“The isle, which is gradually sinking into the Gulf . . . is in-habited by a few dozen families . . .”) in the film’s portrayal of the bathtub: “its residents refuse to uproot—a theme of defiance echoed in *Beasts* . . .”<sup>89</sup> The bioregional sensibility engendered by the film has real-life counterparts in southern Louisiana.

Roger Ebert’s language, in the review available through *Rogerebert.com*, praises the film’s approach to setting and location: “the bathtub is a desolate wilderness of poverty where a small community struggles to survive.” The late critic further praises the film’s depiction of “a self-reliant community without the safety nets of the industrialized world.” He, in fact, claims to

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<sup>88</sup> Additionally, the article offers interesting background information on Zeitlin: “the son of folklorists . . . the filmmaker . . . inherited his parent’s passion for finding art and poetry in the stories and interstices of modern life . . .”

<sup>89</sup> According to the article, the explosion of “BP’s Deepwater Horizon drilling rig” happened “on the first day of shooting”: “representatives from the oil giant descended on the land, pushing the ‘Beasts’ team out,” he explains, describing the crew, who “reworked their schedules and ultimately still claimed the footage they needed,” and its reaction to these chaotic events (Lapin).

have been so seduced by the film's authentic regional vibe that he did not realize that he was looking at a representation of contemporary American: "Only gradually did I understand that the Bathtub is offshore from New Orleans, existing self-contained on its own terms." His review conjures a society "already post-apocalyptic, with the people cobbling together discarded items of civilization." The distant petroleum industry installations, in Ebert's view, "might as well be prehistoric artifacts." He rightly identifies the post-nation-state dimensions of the sense of place conjured by the film.

A DVD special feature, simply titled "The Making of Beasts of the Southern Wild," establishes that the grassroots casting effort took 9 months and involved over 4,000 auditions. Dwight Henry (Wink, father of Hushpuppy, the young protagonist) was discovered in a bakery across the street from the studio offices. The feature describes the manner in which the sets and locations were meticulously arranged and constructed with local materials, many incorporating abandoned junk matter found nearby. Wink's house, for example, was built from an abandoned school-bus (Making). The narrator describes the procedural approach employed in constructing the bathtub.<sup>90</sup>

In an interview (2012) with Scott Marks of the *San Diego Reader*, actor Dwight Henry makes a number of interesting remarks about his experience working on the film: "They contemplated bringing in professional actors from New York or California to do my roll, but they wouldn't have brought the same passion to the film as someone who went through this on a

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<sup>90</sup> "For months, the ever-growing family worked in the Louisiana Sun: scavenging for materials, building sets on location, and filling every inch of this world with detail" (Making) The short bit of film explains that the script was written at least partially "in collaboration with the people who would bring the bathtub to life onscreen" (Making).

regular basis. I was in Hurricane Rita in neck-high water” (Marks). He also offers an anecdote concerning the circumstances in which he came to meet the filmmaking team: “They used to come over and have lunch or breakfast in the morning. After a few months we kind of developed a relationship.” The film is rooted in authentic human relations to the land. Todd McCarthy of the *Hollywood Reporter* champions the film as “a poetic evocation of an endangered way of life and a surging paean to human resilience and self-reliance,” boldly proclaiming that *Beasts* ranks among the “most striking films ever to premiere at the Sundance film festival.” Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* praises the film on similar grounds, calling it “a game-changer that gets you excited about the movies.”<sup>91</sup>

Bart’s “Once Upon a Time in Louisiana: The Complex Ideology of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*” (2014), published by the electronic journal *Cinesthesia*, claims that the film resists capitalist ideology, though hesitantly: “Through its eccentric aesthetic and subversive subtext, the film rebukes certain tenets of dominant cultural ideology, presenting a world largely incompatible with American capitalism, while implicitly supporting gender roles within that same system” (1). Though *Beasts* “subtly critiques some dominant values,” presenting “lively, odd aesthetics and notions,” it nevertheless, Bart equivocates, bears “traces of the dominant ideology in which it was created” (6-7). The article also discusses the film’s thematic treatment of so-called nature: “the film rebukes the assumption that nature is something to be tamed,” the author maintains; “Instead, nature and civilization are commingling, a relationship established in

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<sup>91</sup> Further, he argues that the film presents “a tribute to the people who stay rooted to home against flood and forced evacuation,” and creates “a world to get lost in, a world of beauty, terror and mythic wonder.” Travers also calls attention to a “shimmer of magic realism,” which, in his view, “pervades” throughout the narrative.

the opening shots” (4).<sup>92</sup>

Nick Pinkerton of *Sight and Sound* contributes one of the film’s least positive evaluations, labeling it “the worst movie of the year.” He quickly rebuffs the idea that the film represents a milestone for American cinema: “Zeitlin’s elixir, a cure for the ailing US indie, tastes an awful lot like snake oil.” Pinkerton, despite his objections, finds a slight modicum of celebratory language to attach to the film, referring to *Beasts* as “a proudly handmade magic realist fable celebrating the spirit of unbreakable communal self-reliance”; the problem, he contends, is that the self-reliance presented in the film “is foolhardy to the point of suicide.”

The most scathing and frequently cited criticism of the film comes from Hooks in her piece, “No Love in the Wild,” for the electronic publication *NewBlackMan(inExile)*, expressing her “deeply disturbed and militantly outraged” reaction, which describes the film as “a crude pornography of violence”; “Clearly the camera toys with the child’s body pornographically eroticizing the image.” In her view, Zeitlin’s film takes as its subject “the continuous physical and emotional violation of the body and being of a small six year old black girl.” The centerpiece of Hooks’ argument revolves around the idea that the film’s portrayal of Hushpuppy embraces and reifies racist stereotypes: “She is indeed a miniature version of the ‘strong black female matriarch,’ racist and sexist representations have depicted from slavery on into the present day”; “in the mindset of white supremacy black children no matter their age are always seen as miniature adults.” Based upon these and other arguments, “No Love in the Wild” castigates the

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<sup>92</sup> Within Bart’s reading, the film calls attention to “nature as communication,” depicting “communion between animal and human that is uncommon in the increasingly urbanized 21st century” (4-5). In support of this claim regarding the film’s resistance to “capitalist ideology,” the piece calls attention to the bathtub residents abilities to “live off the land with no apparent need for money” (5).

film as the expression of a “conservative agenda,” one rooted in “age-old politics of domination.”

Hooks is aware of the fact that the film’s depiction of nature resonates with many viewers (“Nature is the most compelling force in the world of the bathtub. . .”) and accounts for this issue within her negative review: Instead of an “us-against-them mentality regarding the human-nature dichotomy,” the film, she maintains, presents “an intimate merger,” involving the bathtub’s residents “complete celebration” of their “collective feral animal nature.” Her argument positions the story of the bathtub residents and their plight as a “survivalist narrative” similar to contemporary television shows focusing upon “humans struggling against harsh unnatural circumstances”: “It is the survivalist narrative that seems most enchanting to viewers of this film, allowing them to overlook violence, eroticization of children, and all manner of dirt and filth”; “Of course the message that only the strong survive remains an age old argument for politics of domination, . . .” The film’s “mythic focus” upon the natural world, the piece further contends, “deflects attention away from egregious sub-textual narratives present in the film,” thus functioning as a subtly coercive component which, through thematic coding, functions to perpetuate the problematic identity-politics at play.

Thomas Kette’s article, “With an Eye on a Set of New Eyes: *Beasts of the Southern Wild*” (2013), published in *The Journal of Religion and Film*, presents a meditative, critical interpretation of the film, one highlighting its “mythological nature,” particularly a focus upon some of the “mythological structures operating in contemporary American society”: “ancient myths, legends, heroes and prehistoric references are recalled in total isolation from current social and political discourse” (1). Further, he praises the “mysterious” “cultural, political, and historical dynamics” characterizing the film’s fictional community; the bathtub inhabitants, to

use the articles language, “express social customs and constructions, collective pride, cultural rituals and festivals that are alien to . . . the United States”; “the inhabitants also imagine themselves and their place both in the United States and the world relative to what they reject from the mainland” (2).

Kette’s piece focuses at great length upon the task of debunking critiques, like that put forth by Bell Hooks, that label the film as “racist,” “sexist,” and “elitist”: such evaluations of the film, he claims, unfairly malign a valuable film and tend to “distract attention away from some of its finer points and thwart its contemplative potential” (1). He dismisses such interpretations, which, in his words, position *Beasts* as “a morbid film about an animalistic, desolate, and impoverished community,” dissecting their theoretical underpinnings (102). Kette’s reading of the arguments put forth by Hooks and other detractors, revolves around the idea that, underlying the central claims, there exists the formative influence of “particular ideologies,” representing a “core conflict with the film’s mythical narrative”: “The critiques . . . concern one element of the film that changes a relatively accessible narrative into a complex and potentially contentious one . . .” (3). In the author’s view, the film, which “establishes several components that are necessary to the production of myth,” accounts for and counters such “ideological paradigms” by “suggesting they are either inadequate or failing to respond sufficiently to certain modern day anxieties”; further, *Beasts* “suggests that we have yet to reprioritize our worldview in light of scientific information, globalization and major environmental changes” (14).



### 3. Critical Reading: *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

In evaluating Hooks' arguments against those made by Kette and other defenders of the film, a number of issues must be considered. Hooks' argument, predicated as it is upon the film's treatment of the bodily presence of an African-American female, hinges upon the idea that it was insidious and problematic for Quvenzhané Wallis to be cast in the part of Hushpuppy. The film takes inspiration from a one-act play, *Juicy and Delicious* by Lucy Alibar, which, conversely, features a young male character named Hushpuppy. Hooks is rightly suspicious of the re-gendering implicit in this casting choice. Alternative explanations for the casting choice—which led to a person of color receiving the honor of becoming the youngest nominee for best actress in the history of the Academy Awards (an institution recently criticized for its reluctance to honor minorities)—must, in fairness, be evaluated.

The choice of Wallis as lead actress resulted from the same grassroots casting effort that led to the involvement of Dwight Henry and other Louisiana natives. The research surrounding the film's production suggests, overwhelmingly, that Zeitlin and his team sought performers who, regardless of race, gender, and other factors, exhibited a sense of regional authenticity. The final cast of the film, which populates the bathtub as a melting pot of southern hybridity, indeed features performers of diverse ethnicities. To anyone who has seen Wallis's Wunderkind display of talent and performative authenticity, it is difficult to imagine another performer of that age (regardless of other identity-political affiliations) who could have enriched the film to the same extent.

In response to Hooks' consideration of the film as a survivalist narrative, in keeping with a fictionalized, trivial cultural fixation, it is important to call back to the very real, very pressing environmental calamities afflicting Terrebone Parish and the real communities, rather than

artificial sets, which hosted the film's production and whose plights are dramatized by the story. The depiction of the bathtub as a post-racial community operates in keeping with the tenets of both ecocinema and bioregionalism, each emphasizing material, rather than humanistic or socially organized, dimensions of space and place. Rather than racial divisions within a human community (a central topic in Faulkner), the film emphasizes the human element functioning as but one component within a broader biosphere, whose divisions fall along the line of species rather than race. As has been amply demonstrated by the work of both postcolonial ecologists and indigeneous writers like Hogan, the embrace of correlationsim and the binary logic of the human-nonhuman boundary serve to bolster and strengthen similarly reductionist paradigms like race, which set one group of human beings apart from others.

The conversation started by Hooks circles back to Faulkner's argument in *GDM* that human communities, particularly in the South, fail to unite in defense of ecosystems because of the racial boundary line. The posthumanist tendencies underlying both ecocinema and bioregionalism, call for post-racial challenges to anthropocentric speciesism. Bathsheba's lecture on the food chain represents the educational socialization required for life in the bathtub, which requires an awareness of the harsh realities of a food chain, rather than a class system. Hooks reads the bathtub as a microcosm of the dominant culture; the bathtub actually represents a subversive minority subculture, which operates within an insular bioregion and constructs its own, equally insular ideological mandates. In constructing a lifeworld so distinct in both type and scale from mainstream culture, the film achieves a level of cognitive dissonance which mirrors the transnational impulse of ecocinema.

The posthumanist ideology behind the film resonates in its depiction of environmental calamity. The storm, in and of itself, fails to drive all of the human residents out of the bathtub.

The eventual evacuation is predicated upon a crushing reduction in animal life and biological diversity. As the schoolhouse lecture suggests, the stability of the food chain is integral to human sustenance in such a reterritorialized southern space. The storm is signaled by Hushpuppy's role in Wink's collapse and unfolds shortly thereafter. In a populous section of the bathtub, a young boy warns residences by running down the street and ringing a bell. Wink stands by the side of the road as his fellow residents secure belongings, load automobiles and drive out of town. He chastises a man for departing so abruptly, "You afraid of a little bit of water."

He talks with friends and fellow residences about their intentions regarding the storm. Though many of his compatriots are frightened, Wink intends to stay. Like Senior, Ellis's father in *Mud*, he is rooted in a bioregional lifestyle. As he encounters Hushpuppy whom he has, presumably, not seen since his collapse, he briefly admonishes her for not being at home and lifts her up, heading toward safety with his daughter on his back. The storm is visually suggested in the next cut, which presents an aerial view of the bathtub, now flooded. The camera sweeps across the landscape; the viewer takes in images of numerous abandoned homes with standing water all the way up to their doors. Ecocinema's insights regarding the use of moving images to record time and trace causality, are amply demonstrated by the visual strategies used by Zeitlin and his crew in their representation/documentation of environmental devastation.

In a scene making it clear that the bathtub community exists in conflict with the tenets of mainstream culture, authorities show up to enforce an evacuation. When Wink, Hushpuppy and fellow residents arrive at a hospital, Hushpuppy's father speaks of the place in terms which hit home the conflict of values between bathtub cosmologies and mainstream configurations of space: "It didn't look like a jail. It looked like a fishbowl with no water. They say we are here for our own good." As the film moves toward its culminating images, which juxtapose Wink's death

against an empowering show-down in which Hushpuppy overcomes her symbolic antagonist, the aurochs. Hushpuppy's voiceovers, throughout the film, highlight the tenuous fragility of bioregions and ecological systems: "The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right," she says in a scene shortly before the forced evacuation." After Wink's death, Hushpuppy's final voiceover mirrors the networked dynamics of theoretical ecology that have been laced into the southern literary tradition since *Go Down, Moses*: "I see that I'm a little piece of a great big universe. And that makes things right. When I die, the scientist of the future, they're gonna find everything. And they're gonna know that once there was a Hushpuppy and she lived with her daddy in the bathtub." Hushpuppy understands her own life as a tiny piece of bioregional and global history. Like Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (another self-aware work of southern ecocinema) the film presents an expansive cosmology whose awareness of temporality both precedes and extends beyond the Anthropocene era.

4. Global Regionalism, Planetary Localism, Fictive Demarcations, and Material Boundary Lines: The U.S. South, Ecological Art, and the Future of Borders

The global and regional histories embraced by Hushpuppy do not revolve around humanity alone. Zeitlin's South, like Faulkner's, is a networked ecology in which humanity is entangled within a confederated agency of global and regional causalities. Faulkner's use of cinematic styles, particularly movement and montage, prefigures the use of cinematic image to mark and trace changes in the southern landscape. Hushpuppy's story serves as an antidote to Ike McCaslin's tale of unrequited love for nature. By resisting the human / nonhuman boundary (acknowledging her own fleeting role in geologic, biological, global, and regional epochs) she overcomes the correlationist dualism which Faulkner's similar exploration of temporalities and tableaux warns against. Both works adopt narrative structures which call attention to both the inhabitory benefits of posthumanism and the attenuated systems of networked entanglement so common in various branches of the humanities, particularly theoretical place and eco-criticism/-cinema.

Decades after the southern renaissance and the literary environmentalism identified by Rieger, southern pastoralism (in modern and postmodern permutations) continues to evolve, expand its scope, and spur reevaluation of both regional identity and the human experience of space. The focus upon childhood running throughout southern narrative ecologies of diverse areas, time period, and artistic mediums, emphasizes the U.S. South's unique capacity for illustrating the connection between the developmental paths of human subjectivity and the intertwined developmental trajectories (both material and linguistic) of the land itself. Despite their contemporary urgency and growing academic preoccupation, posthumanism and the networked dynamics of theoretical ecology have—since Faulkner's time, at least; perhaps since

the region's earliest colonization—long-since lingered in the southern imaginary.

We southerners define childhood, the sentimental building block of personal history, against local ecologies. In the same sense that postcolonial regionalists argue that the South has always been global, I would argue that southern narrative has always been ecological, bioregional, post or more-than –human, post-nation-state, and preoccupied with a quest for natural harmony that remains undeterred by questions of accessibility, authenticity, and the global homogenization of place. Before the green movement, before awareness of climate change, before organized conservation and the national parks service, reconciliation with nature (whether euphoric, mundane, or tension-fraught) has been a part of coming of age in the South.

As long as regional narrative continues to thrive in the U.S. South, our collective regional imaginary will continue to invent characters like Ike, Omishto, Ellis, and Hushpuppy: some of these characters will arrive at metonymic dead-ends; others will achieve a level of post-linguistic harmony; all will illustrate timeless struggles and evolving complexities. As long as human bodies have occupied the southern landscape, their presence and purpose within that landscape has been questioned. The southern imaginary can't help but ground itself in places and spaces. As the limiting scopes, definitional parameters, and sentimental triggers of space and place continue to evolve, the impulse to define one's self against these elements remains constant.

As long as there has been regional culture in the South, there has been an ecological imaginary emanating from it. As posthumanism, critical place, and theoretical ecology continue to offer new tools to regional scholars, we will be able to stop speculating about what it means to be southern in a global and nationalized world and start speculating about what it means to be human in a southern biosphere. As a potent testing site for posthumanism, the South speaks to

humanity's future; our artists and writers point us away from the nativism, ghettoization, and self-imposed marginalization of the myth of anachronistic backwardness. The South has little to gain from the transnational turn, which paints regional identity into an anthropocentric corner and encourages unnecessary comparisons; such comparisons have, for generations, colonized the southern mind into nation-state logics of self-loathing, hastily assumed futility, and a misplaced jealousy for futurity which fails to weigh the costs and benefits of futurity against those of the preservationist ethics that southerners can't shake and are mistakenly ashamed of.

Nation-state-logics preternaturally castigate re-territorialized zones like the U.S. South. Why trade the borders of a backward regionalism for those an equally arbitrary, dangerously modernized and developmental, inescapably homogenizing and neo-colonial, system of national and international lines on a page? Socially constructed space socially constructs backwaters out of what could be beacons for hope and models for humanity's future. Instead of arbitrarily redrawing lines that were arbitrary to begin with, southern regionalists must begin to target the real borders of space, place, sustenance, and subjectivity: correlationism, anthropocentrism, late-capitalism, neocolonialism, arrogant claims of futurity over some other place's backwardness, lingering specters of racism, self-segregation against one's own species and regional neighbor, and the instrumental treatment of the nonhuman; these are the true borders of southern subjectivity.

In re-evaluating the meaning of regionalism, we need an adjustment of composition rather than an adjustment of scale. The unnecessary borders of nation-state logic must be replaced by the all-too-necessary borders of material reality and biological entanglement. The transnational turn is not a turn toward the global, but an entrenchment of anthropocentrism and old-world structures of power; it is a turn toward global humanity, rather than global ecology,

which is decidedly un-global in terms of planetary awareness and conceptual scope. Southern literature's decentering of the human is the true turn toward a global awareness. The model of globalized human culture championed by late capitalism actually keeps the human sense of space decidedly localized.

Anthropocentrism is a localized viewpoint whose backwardness and anachronistic limitation is an all-too-real correlation point to the fictive anachronism of the under-developed South; on a truly planetary scale, the localism of the human/nonhuman boundary inevitably buckles under the weight of an exponential globalism of potentiality. Globalization discourse localizes planetary consciousness to the flimsy metric of a single species. The connection between localized and globalized humanity is, to some extent, a fictive connection; it is a symbiosis of mutual agreement rather than evolutionary entanglement and material interconnection. Southern humanity exists in a real symbiosis with regional biospheres and the complexities of inter-species collision.

Globalized knowledge of regional ecosystems trumps localized knowledge of planetary society. The globe is an interconnected system of regional ecologies, not a constellation of place-names arbitrarily affiliated with human populations. Only through the accumulated knowledge of the global compositions of various regional biospheres can humanity arrive at a level of consciousness both global in scope and planetary in scale. Few regions have as much to contribute, and as much to benefit, from the filmic and textual decentering of the human.



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