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# The End of Everything: The Physical and Figurative Impacts of Landscape on American Ideology

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# The Physical and Figurative Impacts of Landscape on American Ideology

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This project is dedicated to Sophia Lawder, who I want to travel the world with.

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# Introduction

Last summer, struck with a desire to explore the country, and perhaps fueled by the romantic prattles of one too many country song, I left New York state to work at a dude ranch in southwest Colorado. A dude ranch, for the unaware, is a ranch specialized towards tourism. They are found all over the country but especially in the Midwest, and at minimum offer horseback rides, but most every dude ranch goes far beyond this, instead providing full-blown imaginations of antiquated Western living. Employees are often expected to dress in full cowboy regalia (I was no exception), and common activities include fishing, trap shooting, campfires, and line dancing (again, tragically, no exception). The promise seems to be to transport one to as close to a nineteenth century homestead as they could possibly hope to reach in 2023. I was a wrangler, meaning my responsibility was to lead guests on horseback trail rides through the Colorado wilderness. These trips would last a few hours, leaving ample time for conversation, and over the hundred-odd rides I took I made an attempt to gauge the kind of person who would choose Western themed dude ranch as their vacation destination. For whom was this fantasy constructed?

Bankers, software developers and doctors were common answers; many would shrug aside the question of what do they do for a living with an "it's kind of hard to explain." Families was another recurring theme, oftentimes three generations worth, the youngest with legs barely long enough to reach into the stirrups. City people was perhaps the most common connecting thread, the word "dude" itself originating as a semi-derogatory term for those unfamiliar with the ranching lifestyle, or "A man who wore store-bought clothes, a white collar and a necktie."[1] I mean no disrespect here. I, Portland raised until I left for Bard college, certainly am in no place

[1] Heicher, Kathy. Eagle "County Characters: Historic Tales of a Colorado Mountain Valley."

to criticize city-slickers. I only intend to point out that this ranch offered guests a romanticized version of a life that was quite foreign to their everyday experience. Such is the nature of a tourist destination, you may rightly say, but all these guests, or at least whichever of them was footing the bill, seemed to share one final similarity, one which really piqued my interest. This was a shared belief in a set of social values: a love of freedom, a yearning for independence, a belief in hard work and a nostalgia for simplicity. This set of ethics may ring familiar as traditional, if not stereotypical, American values, ones that have intertwined and caused divide among lines of race, class, cultural background and spirituality. Certainly, the United States of America has been posited as both "the land of the free," and "the land of opportunity," and by no means are these ideals sequestered away to one ranch in Colorado. However, given the way in which traditionally American morals were advertised as part of the vacation experience, I came to believe that guests of the ranch may not have felt as though they could find such morals elsewhere.

My curiosity then turned towards the land. Not from a developed perspective, considering the makeup of nearby towns or cities, but rather the land itself. Southwest Colorado is truly beautiful. Lush aspen forests and mountainscapes meet with swaths of plains and desert dunes, meaning sometimes the eye can see for miles, while other times it is quickly interrupted by walls of white, green, or snowy gray. Nature was a predominant draw of the ranch vacation, and it seemed that rather than acting as a backdrop to the antiquated Western experience being offered, the land was an active participant itself. Moreover, it seemed as though this land itself somehow promoted a longing for freedom and greater independence. What was it about the Midwest landscape that had caused it to become intertwined with these ideals?

This has become a driving question in the development of my project. Succinctly put, what kind of role does landscape play in the development of American ideology and culture? One can begin to answer this question quite quickly by turning to the frontier. American historian Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," suggests that the movement of individuals westward onto the growing American frontier created a cultural personality that holds unique esteem towards one's ability to fend for themselves:

> That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom–these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.[2]

Turner believed that the traits he notes stemmed from the conditions necessitated by frontier living, specifically the need for self-sustainability and upward mobility through individual work. The "masterful grasp of material things" he describes stems from an agricultural system in which one's worth becomes directly tied to what they can build out of raw materials, ideally realizing a form of natural aristocracy, in which humans can be categorically distinguished, not by means of wealth or social standing, but rather ability or virtue. Failure was common on the frontier: crops would die, families would go hungry, harsh winters would trap settlers on their homesteads for months at a time. It's no wonder then that those who thrived would feel an individualist sense of control over their own life.

So, the connection between the Midwest and American values begins to reveal itself. Of course this is not the full breadth of that discussion, and I continue to pursue this train of thought

[2] Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 9.

later, but I felt that the question must also be asked in another way. Turner's thesis begins to reveal the ways in which working the land might breed certain values, but what role does the physical form of the land itself play? If one views landscape as an active agent, disregarding its utility towards humankind, what kind of influence is it capable of creating?

The answer to this question is not as easily surmised, and I will not attempt to tackle it fully right now, but I also view it as essential, especially in answering the final main question that I intend to explore: What happens when the values birthed upon this land threaten to consume it? The frontier values are no longer confined to the frontier; in 1928 presidential candidate Herbert Hoover delivered a final campaign speech that gave life to the term "rugged individualism", a phrase that propelled frontier values into the world of economics. No longer did self-reliance mean one's ability to provide themselves and their family with food, shelter and comfort, but rather it referred to the ability to navigate and ascend within a capitalist system. Beyond the evolution of frontier ideology, the kind of mass industrialization that would become so loathed by those who yearn for agricultural simplicity is merely the final phase of Western development, now that the other end of the frontier has been reached.

Put together, these three questions boil down to one larger discussion: What we want from the land, and what the land wants from us. I have tried to reckon with this through an account of both historical events, as well as artistic responses to the anxiety caused by these questions. The sources I use, like the land they discuss, are often sprawling in nature. As this discussion is based on a continually evolving tension, it is not centered in any one era, but instead travels from the early 1800s into the twentieth century. I do my best to keep this movement chronological, but sometimes it does jump back and forth, I hope not too jarringly.

In terms of materials used, I found myself uncomfortable offering a literary analysis without a historical background, so each chapter provides what I hope to be the necessary context for the ideas I wish to discuss. However, given that this is first and foremost a literary project, not a historical one, the real life events I include, while discussed in an accurate fashion, are summations, only covered briefly, and I encourage anyone who may be interested to further explore them.

After fretting over an understanding of history I also realized that, given my project's tendency to toe the line between metaphorical and literal landscapes, I needed to have a deeper understanding of the ways in which space has been considered philosophically. This resulted in an exploration of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. While this may seem out of place in a project otherwise entirely concerned with American sources, I found the ways in which Bachelard considers space and subconscious to resonate heavily with the artists I observe. That is not to suggest that they were scholars of Bachelard, but rather that what he gets at in his work could be a shared experience reflected in the literature I observe. While we are discussing philosophy, now might be a good point to explain my use of the word America, versus something like the United States, for example. When referring to the United States as land or as a country, I will not use America, as that is obviously not geographically accurate. However, when considering the cultural or philosophical ideology of those living in the United States, I believe that the term America is more representative, perhaps in part by way of its over-encompassment, and so choose to use this language, but I do not mean to suggest that the ideas I discuss span into the whole of North America or the Americas.

Finally, the literary sources themselves come from an array of eras and mediums. Perhaps the primary work I focus on are the novels of early twentieth century author Willa Cather. Her

novels, which primarily take place in the Midwest or Southwest, are famous for their depictions and considerations of American landscapes, and were an obvious first step for this project. The title of this thesis, "The End of Everything," stems from an account she gave of her first impressions of the Nebraskan landscape, as it is clear that near everything she has written was touched by those initial glimpses. If I were to say this project had an artist that it is about, it would be Willa Cather. I will note, however, that while I certainly find the language Cather uses in describing her environments to be striking, for the purposes of this project I am less interested in her actual, written depictions of landscape, and more so wish to explore the ways in which the world surrounding her influenced her perspective as an author. Cather has numerous, beautiful descriptions of the natural world, and I highly recommend that anyone interested look deeper into her works, but here I intend to focus more on what surrounds these descriptions, and place them into perspective.

Cather is not the only author I am interested in, and works by Edward Abbey, Cormac McCarthy, and Tillie Olsen, among others, make appearances as well. Other, unwritten, forms of literature are also considered, and film and music, and the unique perspectives they provide, come into play. I believe that the rise of the country music industry is in many ways analogous to the history I trace within my project, and while such a theme may deserve a paper of its own, I briefly delve into one subgenre of country that I believe most aligned itself with the anxieties I attempt to explore.

Taking these various sources, I have separated this project into three chapters, each dealing with different facets of these problems, and each using a different landscape as backdrop to the artist's, and individual's, struggle with their role on the land. With each artist I explored, several others emerged, each with their own equally promising entryway into the tensions I wish

to discuss. While it pains me to leave any of them out, in the end I chose artists who I believe offer particularly unique or complicated perspectives, and provide a balanced and multifaceted picture.

In chapter one, The Prairie, I look at the ways in which the Louisiana Purchase, and the Homeowners Act of 1864 opened up the Midwest to homesteaders and brought about the ideals of rugged individualism. Through examination of these significant events, which took place at federal level in the United States, I attempt to elucidate the paradoxical nature of searching for freedom in land which has been purchased and quartered by governmental bodies, and the self-destructive prophecy that occurs when those seeking independence develop land that increases the expanse of the United States as a whole. I mainly explore the works of Willa Cather, whose experiences growing up on the plains of Nebraska shaped the entirety of her body of work. Cather dedicated her life to a search for artistic beauty, which she eventually came to see most in simplistic agricultural living. This is portrayed in her "Prairie Trilogy" a series of three works made in the middle of her career, the first and final especially depicting the connection between human and land, and the internal fulfillment that arises from this lifestyle. However, as time progressed, Cather, a woman extremely resistant to change, found herself becoming more and more embittered by the progression of the United States, especially in regards to mass industrialization and urbanization, and the movement of currency towards the pinnacle of necessity, rather than a byproduct of personal labor. I detail her relationship with the prairie as her life progressed, but also make note of the ways in which the values that she saw as tied to simple living were already in her writing foreshadowing the arrival of the American culture that she would come to resent.

I begin chapter two, “The Desert,” by considering how industrialization has allowed monetary economy to replace natural resource as the definitive source of value. Instead of taking to the wild for land and space, one searches for valuables to bring back to the city and exchange for wealth. I give a history of the California gold rush, beginning in 1848, and explain the dramatic, and often harmful ways it altered the West Coast. Countless Americans jumped on the gold rush, leaving cities and farms empty in hopes of striking it rich, but when the resources ran low, independent miners were replaced by large corporations, and mining colonies became ghost towns. All that was left behind were devastated rivers and forests, and an Indigenous population that had suffered extraordinarily from American violence. From here, I link this theme of over-extraction to American environmentalist Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*, which, using his time as a park ranger in Utah’s Arches National Park, grimly reflects on the world of eco-tourism, and the attempts made by humanity to settle in spaces in which they do not belong. I make note of the way in which he also utilizes a packaged set of ideals, through the rugged alter-ego Cactus Ed, to attempt to connect with Americans on a romantic, primitive level, one that is not necessarily conducive to any viable modern standard of living. I also compare Abbey’s reflections on the desert to English-American poet W. H. Auden's collection of lectures, *The Enchafed Flood*. I note parallels between the two author’s conceptions of water as a source of vitality and natural power, as well as their individual depictions of deserts as outside of societal spaces. Finally I view the ways in which Abbey and Cather, as well as historical figures from the nineteenth century, viewed Indigenous American cultures and lifestyles, and the grim significance this may have for the American future.

The final chapter, “The Underground,” I view as a consideration of the ways in which artists have acknowledged the tensions created by the previous chapters, and attempted to fend

against them. I begin with an account of the Bisbee Deportation of 1917, in which striking miners in Arizona were illegally deported at gunpoint from their mining camp and loaded onto trains heading to New Mexico. I use this as an example of the ways in which the alleged American value of free agency, especially in regards to labor, falls apart when moved into a capitalist construct, the kind that the original bearers of "frontier values" assisted in creating. Then, using the mine as a thematic foothold, I move into a consideration by artists of the underground as a form of ancient sanctuary, in which the primitive form of humankind comes to reckon with its present day self. I explore three different depictions of the underground in literature: twentieth century human rights activist and author Tillie Olsen's mining town in *Yonnondio*, Willa Cather's sacred cave in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and contemporary author Cormac McCarthy's serial killer hideout in *Child of God*. Each of these examples attribute an ancient energy to the underground, one that seems to be in active resistance to the progression of modern day. Exploring this theme further, I analyze French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, which, using the structure of a house as a philosophical analogy, posits the cellar as the space of hidden anxiety. Finally, I observe the figure of the American outlaw as a dweller of underground spaces. Bearing Bachelard in mind, I consider the outlaw as a counterculture figure, and pair this with an examination of Outlaw Country, a movement of the early 1970's that sought to rebel against the country mainstream, and existed within the musical "underground."

In these three chapters, which attempt to address various forms of history and media, I hope to lay clear, if not fully answer, the questions that have troubled both myself and the artists which I write about. Of course anxieties towards over-industrialization and movements away from self-sustainability are not uniquely American problems, but I believe that the ways in which

they have been embodied culturally reflect a unique history that traces its roots to the frontier development of the United States. Furthermore, as tensions continue to rise in regards to climate, economy and political structure in the United States, and the divide between urban and rural grows, I find it increasingly necessary to understand the motivations behind societal desires, and the ways in which romantic ideals are used to push counterintuitive agendas. It is common to speak of a foray into nature as a cleansing moment to "get away from it all," but there is always a return to society, the "it all" that we have constructed and determined to be best for us. It may be that what we have created truly is preferred, and I am aware that many, or perhaps even the majority, are uninterested in relinquishing a metropolitan lifestyle, but I would argue that the way in which a connection to landscape has become entwined with a sense of the past is dangerous to our societal health as we progress into the future.

Finally, I want to understand a feeling I have had that I hope will be relatable: Standing on some overlook–a mountain or a canyon or a skyscraper–I look at the land that spreads out beneath, seeing miles into the distance, and alongside any sense of wonder I might feel there lies a deeper urge. Sometimes this is an urge to possess the land, utilizing its resources and constructing something of my own within it. Other times this feeling is more akin to a desire to be part of the land, camouflaging into its stillness as one hopes they might return to the soil when they pass. In both cases there is an unmet need to make more of the land than I currently am, as though some invisible barrier between the natural world and us need be lifted. Perhaps I am alone in this thought, in which case please disregard, but such feelings have been a driving force behind my curiosity into this subject, and if I have any one goal in this project, it is to try and better understand what it is I am looking for.

# Chapter One: The Prairie

Willa Cather, American Homesteads, and the Frontier's Fight with the City

*Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.* – Thomas Jefferson

*On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.* – Willa Cather

## Introduction.

Considering the extraordinary variation in geography that graces the United States, it may seem extreme to devote an entire chapter to a landscape that can essentially be surmised in one word: flat. This is not a summation I intend to push back on very aggressively, for while this description may lack some color, it does not stray far from the truth. As the Rocky Mountains in North America developed and grew, they began to create a rain shadow–an area in which, due to obstruction caused by mountain ranges, rainfall seldom occurs–on the eastern side of the mountains. Because of this, trees are a rare sight on the prairie, and instead swaths of grass or wheat stretch for miles in all directions. Variation can occur in the biological composition of a prairie, and several different types of grasses or grain are found depending on where the prairie is located geographically, but these changes are minimal to the overall aesthetic of the landscape. The soil may be wetter, the grass taller or more verdant, but the view remains flat. Flat, and endless, oftentimes the sole interruptions being roads, telephone poles, and cattle.

What, then, makes the prairie worthy of discussion when considering the impacts that landscapes have made on American thinking? Perhaps primarily it stems from the great value that these biomes, though unassuming in view, have to offer. The flat expanses of the Midwest, and the fertile soil they possess are the cornerstone of America's food and farming economy. According to the National Geographic Society: "Of the 2 million acres of North American prairie, less than one percent is not used for agricultural development."[3] The promise offered by this soil, a promise of security, comfort and flourishment, should one be willing to work the land, ushered in the beginning of Westward expansion. Moreover, it began to cement the United States' image as "The land of the free." The nineteenth century saw an influx of immigrants to America, many searching for escape from economic or social turmoil and hoping to find it within the seemingly endless plots of land available within the States. Both born citizens and immigrants alike turned to the frontier in search of a prosperity allegedly limited only by one's own ability to work for it.

For many living in the Eastern states, movement west seemed like a way to embrace the desire for independence that had urged generations before them to North America in the first place. As Turner remarks in his Frontier Thesis,

> Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them. He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased.[4]

[3] "Prairie." National Geographic Society.
[4] Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 9.

Turner's characterization of "expansive" American life seems not to limit itself to the United States broadly as a country, but rather an ideal that courses through the veins of individual Americans. However, Turner also notes an aversion to society in the American frontiersman, saying "As has been indicated, the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control." In this antisocial tendency a complexity arises. The call to the frontier is one built upon notions of freedom and the ability to escape from larger society, but to develop the frontier is to inevitably invite the creep of the expansive nature that Turner also categorizes as American. When this comes to fruition, the outcome is that the individualist ethic, the value of hard work and self-sufficiency remains, but the agency that comes with the initial frontier dissipates.

**Owning the Land: The Louisiana Purchase and the Homestead Act.**

In the introduction to his 1827 novel *The Prairie*, American Novelist James Fenimore Cooper writes,

> As the English succeeded the French, and found a peculiarity of nature, differing from all they had yet seen on the continent, already distinguished by a word that did not express any thing in their own language, they left these natural meadows in possession of their title of convention. In this manner has the word "Prairie" been adopted into the English tongue."[5]

Fenimore is describing the first forays of Americans into what is now the Midwest, and that the initial action should be to ascribe a foreign land with a new name seems prophetic of what would be to come. When the United States came to own the Midwest it was extraordinarily significant

[5] Cooper, James Fenimore. "The Prairie." Novel. In The Leatherstocking Tales: Volume 1, 883–84.

to the country's ability to grow, but equally as important was the barriers it put up against external forces. It seems impossible that Americans could have understood the sheer amount of land they had come into, but they knew that they didn't want to share it. So the first order of business, Cooper suggests, was to rename the landscape and create the prairie.

To best understand the tensions wrought by a rugged individualist mindset as played out on the prairie, it is necessary to have a brief understanding of the events that first had to occur before this land could even be settled. The United States first lay claim to the majority of middle America in 1803, when 530,000,000 acres of North American land were acquired from France in the Louisiana Purchase, Louisiana, at the time, referring to the full acreage of this land, not just the current state. Prior to this agreement, Napoleon Bonaparte had plans to expand the French empire into North America, beginning by attempting to overthrow the newly liberated Haiti (then known as St. Domingue), and using New Orleans as a focal point of operations. Due to international tensions, and less than desirable conditions for his soldiers in St Domingue, Napoleon eventually gave up on this plan, and instead sold the land to the United States for $15,000,000. There was one small rub in this trade, namely the fact that nowhere in the Constitution was it written that foreign land could be purchased by the United States. Jefferson was well aware of this fact, and proposed an amendment to the Constitution that he hoped would rectify the issue before the trade went through, but, largely due to fears that France would renege on the deal if it was not quickly carried out, he eventually determined, as written in a letter to James Madison, "The less we say about the constitutional difficulties respecting Louisiana the better, and that what is necessary for surmounting them must be done sub-silentio."[6]

This was an extremely out of character move for Jefferson, the eponym of Jeffersonianism, a political ideology that emphasized the importance of individual state's rights,

[6] "To James Madison from Thomas Jefferson, 18 August 1803."

political power in the hands of the common people, and, most ironically, a staunch and unwavering adherence to the word of the Constitution. Federalists, the political counterpoint to Jeffersonians who believed in a strong central source of governmental control, were quick to point this out, but Jefferson claimed, in a letter to John Beckenridge, "it is the case of a guardian, investing the money of his ward in purchasing an important adjacent territory; & saying to him when of age, I did this for your good."[7] Jefferson may have been truthful about this; additional land is no doubt highly beneficial to a society based on the kind of agrarian values he wished to promote, and the fact that the Federalists were so opposed to the purchase suggested that the massive increase in American land would ultimately weaken federal power over individuals. Because of this, Jefferson's actions were largely supported by the American populace, but nonetheless the language he uses in both quoted letters carries an unsettling notion that federal power is ultimately overruling. The Louisiana purchase began the movement of Americans westward, pushing forth the values of rugged individualism, but it also proved to be emblematic of the powers held by higher authorities.

Before any of this, between 1762 and 1801, Louisiana was actually controlled by Spain, though the country's hold over the territory was tenuous. Prior to 1762, it was again France that owned the land, being its "initial discoverers." The point of providing this history is to illustrate the fact that, while a settler might have felt they were beyond any stretch of civilization when traversing through the American frontier, the very land under their feet had already been named, fought over, strategically considered, bought and sold, and owned. Land which no Frenchman, Spaniard or American had ever laid eyes on was declared to belong to the government, by virtue of government proceedings (albeit, in America's case, unconstitutional ones). Despite the many ways in which movement west was directly tied to federal policy, and furthermore only extended

[7] "From Thomas Jefferson to John Breckinridge, 12 August 1803."

the reach of the American governmental system, it was still glamorized, then and now, as an escape from oversight that was seen as stifling to independence.

In May of 1862, in an effort to further populate the American Great Plains, the stretch of flatland that lies between the Mississippi river and the Rocky mountains, the U.S. Congress passed the first Homestead Act, providing the head of any family "who has never borne arms against the United States Government or given aid and comfort to its enemies,"[8] 160 acres of surveyed land in the Great Plains, with the stipulation that they live upon and cultivate the plot. The intention of this act was double fold: first it encouraged movement towards and development of the fertile land of the Midwest, increasing the strength of American economy and society. This encouragement was not only on a national level; Immigrants were supported under the Homestead Act, provided intent of citizenship was declared, and pamphlets and guides detailing how to succeed as an American homesteader were circulated by American embassies in European countries. Secondly, through its precondition that in order to receive land one must have never turned against the U.S. government (which perhaps would have gone without saying in most any other time in American history), dissent was discouraged during a particularly tumultuous period of wartime. The bill had previously been passed by congress in 1860 before being vetoed by President James Buchanan,[9] but during the Civil War the secession of many Southern legislators who had shot down previous efforts, fearing the land would be claimed by anti-slavery settlers from the North, dramatically reduced opposition.[10] Southerners weren't the only ones with qualms: Northern businessmen feared the act would drive cheap labor in Eastern states west in search of greater opportunity. The potential impacts of prairie land on American political and societal culture were so significant that it took upwards of two decades and a civil

[8] Act of May 20, 1862 (Homestead Act), Public Law 37-64 (12 STAT 392).
[9] Potter, Lee Ann and Wynell Schamel. "The Homestead Act of 1862."
[10]Anderson, Hannah L. "That Settles It: The Debate and Consequences of the Homestead Act of 1862."

war to allow citizens without economic purchase to settle within its vast swaths, and even then only within strict governmental guidelines.

A large incentive for homesteaders to make this move was the rising price of resources in Eastern states and the predatory tendencies of larger farms hindering the success of smaller ventures, but the free land was far from a promise of success. Many settlers were unaccustomed to the harshness of Midwestern climates, and their inhospitality combined with a lack of previous development made once simple tasks far more laborious. Furthermore, the land was the only thing given to these settlers, and many did not have the financial resources to buy the cattle, equipment or machinery to actually make use of the plots. Because of this, as well as a lack of management of the Land Office itself allowing for numerous legal loopholes, much of the land went to pre-existing businesses, and, "of some 500 million acres dispersed by the General Land Office between 1862 and 1904, only 80 million acres went to homesteaders."[11]

It is also important to note that this land was not owned by homesteaders, but rather was public land owned by the government on which settlers were allowed to live and farm. After six months of residency, homesteaders could purchase the land at a rate of $1.25 per acre, but until this point they were residing on federal property. Given this level of bureaucratic management, it is easy to lose sight of the absolute scale of the land that fell under the Homestead Act. The plots of land doled out to citizens were not compact and gridded, but rather sprawled out over countless miles and several states. In many places these homesteaders were not living in communities; they were truly pioneers. In 1938, Charity Crouch, a woman who took land in Nebraska in the late nineteenth century was interviewed by the Federal Writers Project. The interviewer wrote,

[11] National Archives and Records Administration. *Homestead act (1862).*

> Mrs. Couch says she scarcely dared step outside the yard because there were so many long horned cattle and there were no neighbors between their place and Ogallala except the old Searle Ranch. There was no school for a year or so as there were no children in the district, and no social gatherings at that time such as church, Sunday school, literary, or dances, as people lived too far apart. There were a few buffalo, deer, antelope and gray wolves, and also large numbers of wild fowl such as prairie chickens, grouse, geese, and ducks.[12]

American society as we know it, even in its small town form, did not yet exist on the prairie. The land was untamed and unmanaged, to move onto it was to accept significant risk, and failure was not uncommon. It was up to each individual family to avoid starvation, illness, the wrath of the elements, and whatever other hazards may occur. But despite all this, the land still existed under the umbrella of the American government, and as isolated as the land may have seemed it was constantly waiting to be enveloped by the industrial and capitalist society that shadowed the frontier. Homesteaders may have felt that they were venturing into the great unknown, but an unseeable but omnipresent hand already lay claim to all.

**Willa Cather: Searching for Value.**

But what all was there to claim? In 1877, at the age of nine, American author Willa Cather and her family moved from Back Creek, Virginia to Webster County, Nebraska, following the lead of Cather's grandparents. She later described her first impressions of the new country in an interview with "The Philadelphia Record":

We drove out from Red Cloud to my grandfather's homestead one day in April. I was sitting on the hay in the bottom of a Studebaker wagon, holding on to the side of the wagon box

[12] Federal Writers Project, and Bessie Jollensten, Interview: Charity B. Couch

to steady myself—the roads were mostly faint trails over the bunch grass in those days. The land was open range and there was almost no fencing. As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything—it was a kind of erasure of personality.[13]

Her first very first moments in the still developing state–driving to her grandfather's homestead, coming to the end of everything–would shape her writing for the next half-century. In his book *The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value*, author John H. Randall III details several influences on Cather's art, many of which would seem to share a relationship with the landscape that she grew up in. According to Randall, Cather was an avid disciple of English essayist Walter Pater, a popular figure in the aesthetic movement, and a firm believer in "art for art's sake."[14] Randall notes Cather's adherence to a "stern, monastic dedication which [Pater and Cather] each assumed was necessary to a life of art,"[15] and suggests that Cather was in many ways a romantic who, "was painfully aware of [the changes going on around her] and for the most part fiercely resented them."[16] Cather's discomfort with modernity, and her search for artistic value was largely tied to a "primitive sense of place"[17] that the prairie imbued onto her soul. She witnessed a connection between human and nature that played out on the prairie in a series of cycles, writing in *O Pioneers*, "There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before."[18]

The human stories that Cather observed, and contributed to through her own work, followed circles of life, growth, and death, many of her novels spanning decades, or even entire lifetimes. Perhaps her most famous works, Cather's "Prairie Trilogy," depict the lives of

[13] Cather, Willa. "Willa Cather Talks of Work." In Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters.
[14] Randall, John Herman. "The Landscape and The Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search For Value," 2.
[15] Randall, "The Landscape and The Looking Glass," 4.
[16] Ibid, 1.
[17] Woods, Lucia, and Bernice Slote. "Willa Cather: A Pictorial Memoir," 79.
[18] Cather, Willa. "O Pioneers!" Story. In "Early Novels and Stories," 196.

American immigrants searching for success in the plains of the Midwest, and her later novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* shows the growth of a Catholic diocese in a newly American New Mexico. In these stories, an overarching theme of development continues to arise, as she seemed to find some ancient, primordial urge recognized in humankind's proclivity towards expansion. Cather saw the beauty she deemed essential to life emerge in the relationship between land and its cultivator, as they seemed to nourish each other in turn, and her work details the pivotal ways in which landscape and its inhabitants are inseparable notions.

**Willa Cather: Desolation, Isolation, Conformity.**

It is important to note that the beauty Cather found in the prairie landscape did not come immediately to her. The "erasure of personality" that Cather felt from her initial introduction to Nebraska was pressing upon her consciousness, and of her earlier years Cather later remarked, "I would not know how much a child's life is bound up in the woods and hills and meadows around it, if I had not been jerked away from all these and thrown out into a country as bare as a piece of sheet iron."[19] Bare, flat, untouched, empty; these words are a continuous refrain of Cather's prairie writing, and the potential for creation they invoke are constantly abutted with a melancholic anxiety. Isolation is perhaps one of the strongest factors in this anxiety, but an inability to conjure value also remains present. In one of her earliest prairie writings, a short story published in 1896 titled "On the Divide," Cather speaks far more bluntly towards the negative connotations of the prairies emptiness. The titular Divide refers to an area of Nebraska, "so called because that high tableland marks the division between two watersheds: water to the south flows into the Republican River, while water to the north flows into the Little Blue

[19]Woods, Lucia, and Bernice Slote. Willa Cather: A Pictorial Memoir 8.

River."[20] 1896 was the final year that Cather would reside in Nebraska, and by this point it was clear that the land had taken its toll on her.[21] "Insanity and suicide are very common things on the Divide," She writes,

> They come on like an epidemic in the hot wind season. Those scorching dusty winds that blow up over the bluffs from Kansas seem to dry up the blood in men's veins as they do the sap in the corn leaves… It causes no great sensation there when a Dane is found swinging to his own windmill tower, and most of the Poles after they have become too careless and discouraged to shave themselves keep their razors to cut their throats with.[22]

Feelings of disparity and suicidal tendencies are made akin to locusts or drought; another seasonal risk that plagues the agricultural industry. Moreover, a mirrored relationship is constructed between the wellbeing of a farmer and his crops, as Cather is quick to note the extreme discouragement an unsuccessful harvest can cause, a frequently occurring theme in her writing. The bodies of farmers are made into empty husks just as unfavorable conditions will dry up crops, and another man might use his own, potentially ineffective, equipment to end his life. Still, it is not just the failures caused by harsh prairie environments that threaten to be detrimental to one's well being, but the literal environment. Cather compares the prairie to the underworld itself, writing of Canute, a Norwegian immigrant who has spent 10 years on the prairie,

> He had seen it smitten by all the plagues of Egypt. He had seen it parched by drought, and sogged by rain, beaten by hail, and swept by fire, and in the grasshopper years he had

[20] Willa Cather Archive. University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
[21] The National Willa Cather Center refers to her time in Red Cloud, Nebraska during this year as "somewhat depressing."
[22] Cather, Willa. "On the Divide" 6.

> seen it eaten as bare and clean as bones that the vultures have left. After the great fires he had seen it stretch for miles and miles, black and smoking as the floor of hell.[23]

The Divide is a wasteland in Cather's mind at this point in time. Though it goes through cycles of fire, rain, snow and pestilence, the land itself remains unchanged, endless and flat. When considering the Divide spiritually, it is perhaps less a version of hell than it is a realm of limbo, in which Canute has been condemned to reside. Cather describes Canute as having an intense familiarity with the land that surrounds his cabin, even though there is seemingly nothing to know, and she seems to suggest that the nothingness of the external has pierced Canute's internal.

Beyond isolation and devastation, Cather's flat landscapes also evoke fears of conformity. Cather was a strong believer in natural aristocracy, the notion that there was a hierarchy in society, but one built off of merit and ability rather than caste or class. Through her lens as an artist, Cather believed exceptionality rose through individualism, and the monotony of the prairie was extremely stifling to this idea. This is depicted in "On the Divide" when Canute pursues a young woman in the hopes of finding happiness through marriage. Upon overhearing the woman, Lena, reject him saying, "Besides he will keep. I can have all the fun I want, and when I am old and ugly like you he can have me and take care of me"[24] Canute kidnaps her, taking him to his secluded cabin, in hopes of forcing a marriage upon her. A relationship is made between conformity and security, as Lena desires excitement, found in suitors from the city, but still resigns herself to an eventual return to a prairie lifestyle. Canute's abduction of the young woman could be seen as a hastening of the inevitable. Even in his extraordinary measures, Canute still attempts to adhere to tradition by also kidnapping a minister and asking him to marry

[23]Cather, On the Divide 3.
[24] Ibid. 14.

the two. Under duress, the minister weds Canute and Lena, and Canute begins to play house, offering to kidnap Lena's mother and father as well for company. Lena is distraught, but,

> had no inclination to run away, for she was married now, and in her eyes that was final and all rebellion was useless. She knew nothing about a license, but she knew that a preacher married folks. She consoled herself by thinking that she had always intended to marry Canute some day, any way.[25]

Cather's story is a darkly humorous, and exaggerated account of what she had seen play out time and time again on the prairie. Men grow up to work the land, and women grow up to become their wives. A latent rejection of the norm that may have been felt by many is made obvious through Cather's use of physicality to emphasize the patriarchal elements of this cycle, but the social convention is just as powerful a force in the story, as seen in Lena's begrudging acceptance of their barely legitimate marriage. When considering these fears of conformity, the title "On the Divide" begins to take more form. Cather, herself was weary of convention, adopting a masculine sense of style for much of her youth, and later taking a female lover, Edith Lewis, for nearly 40 years. The Divide may not only refer to the landscape, but also the divide between the norm and the unconventional, the beautiful and the mundane, the world of art and the world of labor.

It makes sense, then, that the one saving grace for Canute comes in the form of rare moments of asymmetry. Cather, describing a stream adjacent to Canute's cabin, writes, "If it had not been for the few stunted cottonwoods and elms that grew along its banks, Canute would have shot himself years ago."[26] It is a powerful sentence, being the story's first implication that the prairie could drive one to suicide while also suggesting that something seemingly so insignificant

[25] Ibid. 24.
[26]Ibid. 1.

as a few trees could prevent it. While Cather does not fully elaborate as to why this may be, when considering her view of the prairie as a whole, it becomes less of an inconceivable thought. The way Cather speaks of Midwest landscape is reminiscent of the sublime authority that Melville places upon the ocean, a vast plane of unknown that constantly threatens to consume. Certainly the rolling fields of the prairie have been likened to an ocean upon land, and the erasure of personality Cather experienced too resembles the loss of individuality that occurs upon Melville's Pequod. The one difference, then, seems to lie in permeability.

One strikingly succinct depiction of the sea's unnatural force comes from modernist poet Marianne Moore's "A Grave," in which she writes,

> Man looking into the sea,
> taking the view from those who have as much right to it as you have to yourself,
> it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing,
> but you cannot stand in the middle of this;[27]

You can, however, stand in the middle of the prairie. Despite its expanse, its isolation, its "erasure of personality," the prairie can be altered, allowing for the kind of relationship that grew to characterize Cather's experience with the Midwest. Trees seem to act as anchoring points, stretching to the sky and digging into the ground, suggesting the possibility of both growth and stability. They offer security too: in *My Ántonia*, the final novel in Cather's "Prairie Trilogy" Cather writes, in a section of the novel that closely mirrors her initial entrance to Nebraska, "I had never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it."[28] The lack of separation between the ground and the sky suggests a nakedness; an inability to hide that imbues the entire land with an honesty, wanted or not. Cather expressed a similar sentiment to Elizabeth Sargent in a letter,

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[27] Moore, Marianne. "A Grave."
[28] Cather, Willa. "My Ántonia." Story. In "Early Novels and Stories," 718.

saying, “There is no place to hide in Nebraska. You can’t hide under a windmill.”[29] Trees, then, may have provided Cather the rare sense of concealment, both from those outside looking in, but also the overwhelming endlessness from which it was impossible to avert her gaze.

**Willa Cather: Resilience and Ingenuity; Corruption and Downfall.**

Outside of their position as a grounding point within the landscape, the trees of the prairie also became symbolic of the traits in humankind that Cather admired. In *My Ántonia*, the protagonist, 10 year old Jim Burden, says, “Trees were so rare in that country, and they had to make such a hard fight to grow, that we used to feel anxious about them, and visit them as if they were persons.”[30] Though Cather had moved from Nebraska to New York by the time she wrote *My Ántonia*, and was at that point able to write more fondly about the prairie, she had not relinquished the significance that trees held upon the landscape. Not only that, but they are personified, even deified in the anxiety they are capable of producing within Jim. They become revered through their “hard fight to grow,” and the resilience it signifies. The trees were alongside Canute, in his lonely stagnation, and they are with Jim in his almost edenic perception of the land; through high and low they remain. This ability to endure and willingness to work is the ethic that Cather believed was embodied by the highest tier of person.

The qualities that Cather so admired were essentially the same pioneer qualities that Turner expounded in his frontier thesis, and they seem to be the byway through which Cather was able to begin to love the land she grew up on. By 1913 when Cather released the first of the “Prairie Trilogy,” *O Pioneers!*, her writing, while never losing its awareness of inhospitality and

[29] Woods, Lucia, and Bernice Slote. “Willa Cather: A Pictorial Memoir” 54.
[30] Cather, Willa. “My Ántonia,” 731.

discouragement, had begun to bestow a wondrous, magical, quality onto the prairie that has since become her signature. Where she once found suicide and hellsmoke she now saw,

> Few scenes more gratifying than a spring plowing in that country where the furrows of a single field often lie a mile in length and the brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft, deep sigh of happiness.[31]

Growth and fertility have replaced the wind and the heat that threatened decay in her earlier works. The earth itself now sighs with happiness when it is worked upon. Even the metal of the plow shines with an ethereal glow. To be sure, Cather is still quick to make note of the brutality that can occur on the plains–*My Ántonia* describes the suicide of Ántonia's father, a recent immigrant from the Czech Republic, after an unsuccessful first year left his family woefully unprepared for the Nebraskan winter–but the larger theme that replaces despondency and stagnation is that hard work and ingenuity allow one to thrive upon the prairie.

As Cather developed a more symbiotic view of human and land, an increasing wariness towards modernized culture began to emerge in her writing. This is reflected in *O Pioneers!* through the protagonist, newly arrived Swedish immigrant Alexandra Bergson's, interactions with Crazy Ivar, another immigrant who has already lived in America for several years. Crazy Ivar is so titled on account of his unorthodox views towards prairie living, as he lives in a primitive, cave-like dwelling, and is seemingly uninterested in accomplishing little more than survival. Cather writes,

> Ivar found contentment in the solitude he had sought out for himself…He best expressed his preference for his wild homestead by saying that his Bible seemed truer to him there.

[31] Cather, "O Pioneers!" 174.

> If one stood in the doorway of his cave, and looked off at the rough land, the smiling sky, the curly grass white in the hot sunlight; if one listened to the rapturous song of the lark, the drumming of the quail, the burr of the locust against that vast silence, one understood what Ivar meant.[32]

Cather links an increased spirituality to simplistic living, and suggests that, although Ivar has been held in contempt for his desire to live modestly, his values are not in fact isolated to himself. Ivar is a farmer like the rest of those that work the prairie, but his motivations are not linked to a desire for upwards mobility, but rather sustainability. Should one be willing to place themselves within his perspective, and take a moment to admire the environment without considering how it can help them achieve growth, Cather suggests that they will see the value of Ivar's way of life. Here, she does not describe the richness of the soil, nor brightness of the metal plows, but rather birdsong, insect chirps, and the splendors of untouched land.

It is through Crazy Ivar's story that one of the driving tensions of Cather's work, one that she simultaneously seemed to acknowledge and hope would not come to be relevant, begins to emerge. Cather does not write Ivar as the ideal American, but rather as an example of the kind of nonconformist thinking that would allow one to succeed in America. Ivar gives advice to Alexandra and her brothers on how to tend to their burgeoning land, namely that they should wash their pigs and give them, "only grain and feed, such as you would give horses or cattle. Hogs do not like to be filthy."[33] Her brothers laugh off the idea, but Alexandra takes it to heart, and as years pass their farm thrives while many others fail. It is of course not just the pigs that can claim this success, but they are emblematic of a willingness to take risks and listen to unconventional thought. Still, it seems Cather is less interested in the lifestyle that Ivar keeps,

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[32] Cather, 156.
[33] Ibid, 160.

and more so how his ideals can be utilized for success. Alexandra does not live in a dugout hole like Ivar, but rather in a luxurious ranch house, tended to by servants. Later in *O Pioneers!* Ivar loses his land "through mismanagement,"[34] and must be taken in by Alexandra, lest the community exile him entirely. Cather does not scold Ivar, but she seems to believe that his lack of drive is a detriment, or at least is unfit for American society.

The moral, then, of Ivar's story becomes hazy, and however romantically Cather wrote of the ways Americans worked the land, there is no denying that the purpose of such endeavors ultimately largely contributed to the kinds of change that she was so vehemently opposed to. In *The Landscape and the Looking Glass*, Randall tracks a pessimism that grew within Cather in the latter of half of her life, a belief that,

> The agrarian dream, however desirable, was rapidly becoming a thing of the past–as indeed it was–for mass-produced consumers' goods together with Hollywood culture habits had spread over rural hamlets as well as crowded cities and left little to choose between country and town.[35]

Perhaps it is the advantage of hindsight that allows one to question why Cather could not have seen this coming, as the ideals that she so strongly admired in her writing seem intrinsically attached to the future that she feared. While Cather may have witnessed a cyclicality of human story on the prairie, she erred in believing that they existed in a stasis. Each act of growth, development, and death compounded on the last, and worked towards a society that she grew to resent. However, one can not fully claim that she did not anticipate the ways in which a pioneer drive would lead to a society that would abandon a pioneer style of living, as this troubling cycle had already been in the public consciousness for decades.

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[34] Ibid, 180.
[35] Randall, "The Landscape and the Looking Glass," 154.

In fact, the escape from agriculture was written into the very materials that immigrants like the ones Cather writes about would receive upon arrival in the United States. In his frontier thesis, Turner references a work by John Mason Peck titled *A New Guide to the West*, published in 1837 and intended to help new immigrants to America with their transition. In this guide Peck makes note of three "waves" of classes that overtook Western settlements. The first was the initial pioneer, who, "With a horse, cow, and one or two breeders of swine…strikes into the woods with his family, and becomes the founder of a new county, or perhaps state."[36] Peck sees the pioneer as an entirely independent entity, who, through the sheer fact of having no one else to be beholden to (Peck disregards the notion of indigenous residents to these areas) finds themself lord of their domain, so to speak. However, this period of isolation does not last forever, and Peck claims the pioneer soon becomes claustrophobic as others move in, and his land becomes more developed. Next come farmers who make full use of the land, tilling and developing, until townships are created. While it is still rural, at this point a form of society has emerged.[37]

Next, says Peck, "The men of capital and enterprise come. The settler is ready to sell out and take the advantage of the rise in property, push farther into the interior and become, himself, a man of capital and enterprise in turn."[38] At this point the frontier has dissipated, and while this was always the intention, it nevertheless seems that what remains has no place for those who built it.

The hope Cather has that American society will remain in a space of agricultural development without becoming industrialized city seems naive, if not deliberately avoidant of reality, as Cather herself seems to note these trends in her own work. In the opening pages of *My Ántonia* we are introduced to two families, the Burdens and the Shimerdas, through whom two

[36] Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 4.
[37] Turner, 5.
[38] Ibid, 5.

different pathways of rural America can be observed. Both families farm land on the plains of Black Hawk, Nebraska, the Burdens having done so far longer than the Shimerdas who at the beginning of the novel have just immigrated to America from their home of Bohemia, now known as the Czech Republic. They are not the only new arrivals to Nebraska; Jim Burden is also seeing the state for the first time after the loss of both his parents forces Jim and his older brother to leave their home of Virginia and live on their grandparents farm. Jim arrives in Nebraska on the same train as the Shimerdas, and their daughter, the titular thirteen year-old Ántonia, and in wagons they ride down the same roads to Black Hawk, but it is clear from their arrival that their experience in the land, and what they can make of it, will not be the same. The Burdens are well established in the land. They have farmhands, crops and cattle, and a multiple storey house as opposed to the "sod houses and dugouts–comfortable, but not very roomy,"[39] that their immigrant neighbors live in. For Jim, the farmstead is temporary, a transitory space before he leaves for school and becomes a doctor or lawyer. The future is far less certain for Ántonia, who arrives in Black Hawk knowing little English beyond the town's name. Her family's first years in Nebraska are not ones of flourishment, but rather pure survival. Jim's descriptions of mid-Western charm and excitement–the frontier stories of the farmhand Otto Fuchs, the Burden's lavish and plentiful garden–are juxtaposed against depictions of the impoverished Shimerdas, garbed in rags, eating rotten food and barely contained from the harsh winter elements.

In the contrasts between the Shimerdas and the Burdens Cather begins to explore the role of rugged individualism, or frontier values in agricultural society, as well as the contradictions that can appear in these methods of thinking. She does so through Jim's relationship with Ántonia, and the ways in which he views her family. One scene depicts Ántonia and her mother, Mrs. Shimerda, paying a visit to the Burdens.

[39] Cather, "My Ántonia," 722.

> It was the first time Mrs. Shimerda had been to our house, and she ran about examining our carpets and curtains and furniture, all the while commenting upon them to her daughter in an envious tone. In the kitchen she caught up an iron pot that stood on the back of the stove and said: "You got many, Shimerdas no got." I thought it weak-minded of grandmother to give the pot to her.[40]

While it should be acknowledged that Cather writes from the perspective of a 10 year old boy whose sense of virtue may still be developing, she seems to suggest an every-man-for-himself viewpoint that emerges within this rural setting. To give something away for free is not only unbeneficial, but a sign of personal weakness. The Shimerda's on the other hand seem to come from a culture of gift-giving, one which Jim views as "reckless and extravagant."[41] The two families' opinions towards struggle differ as well, with Mrs. Shimerda seeming to insinuate that her family is stronger for the hardship that they have to endure. "You've got many things for cook," she says in the same scene, "If I got all things like you, I make much better."[42] her words could be construed as doing better off for herself and her family, if she had the resources the Burdens do, or, more harshly, her saying that she would make better use of what the Burdens have than they do. That the pridefulness of the Shimerdas centers around what they lack seems to relate to a cultural friction; to the Americans the Shimerda's poverty is seen as a personal failure, while for the Shimerdas the ability of the Americans to judge while having so many life-improving amenities seems nonsensical.

These scenes of hardship contrast with Cather's idyllic and simplistic descriptions of the Nebraska countryside, and depict how the lifestyle she romanticizes remains mired in the pressures of civilization. This is not just the case for the Shimerdas, but for other immigrants as

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[40] Cather, 771.
[41] Ibid, 729.
[42] Ibid, 771.

well. Pavel and Peter are two Russian men, referred to by Jim as "The Russians," that the Shimerdas befriend due to their ability to communicate with one another. They are hard workers but find themselves submerged in debt after taking a loan from a predatory money-lender, Wick Cutter. On the Russians' financial struggles Cather writes, "He only knew that he had first borrowed two hundred dollars, then another hundred, then fifty-that each time a bonus was added to the principal, and the debt grew faster than any crop he planted."[43] The promise of America as a land of opportunity is complicated by those who take advantage of these immigrants' unfamiliarity with the society around them, compounded by the harshness of natural elements forcing a literal need to thrive or quite possibly die, demands a harsh and calculated exterior. This is noted several times in the Shimerdas, and becomes something that Jim begins to resent about Ántonia. "Nowadays Tony could talk of nothing but the prices of things, or how much she could lift and endure. She was too proud of her strength."[44] While Jim chastises Mrs. Shimerda for being greedy and his grandmother for bending to Mrs. Shimerda, he is also frustrated by the accelerated way in which Ántonia must mature, so as to help her family.

By the end of *My* Ántonia, though she is able to navigate the mores of city society, Ántonia is eventually forced back to the prairie, when the man she is intended to marry abandons her with their child. However, unlike Lena who resigns herself to this eventual life, Ántonia has thrived, and "She only had to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting."[45] Ántonia, like Crazy Ivar, lives not luxuriously, but happily. Still, tender as this ending may be, Cather's tendency to relegate this lifestyle to side characters, and especially immigrants, suggests that she sees it as a parable of sorts, rather than a true way of navigating modern American life.

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[43] Ibid, 745.
[44] Ibid, 794.
[45] Ibid, 926.

In this, a final consideration of the prairies flatness comes to form, that being its relation to class. The goal of the Homestead Act, and the American dream in general, is a level playing field, and the prairie seems as though it would be emblematic of that. There are no barriers, no differentiations, no places to hide. All that can be found is open space, but still the development of this land suggests that equality has not yet been found. Homestead plots are bought through legal loopholes by businessmen, and instead of the irrigation furrows of a small farm, railroad tracks snake through the fertile soil. Immigrants live in dugouts, barely distinguishable from the earth, while ranch houses and silos creep towards the sky. These movements through space, both vertical and horizontal, suggest that while the land itself may be capable of breeding equality, its residents are not. This is the frontier spirit in action, and Willa Cather may not be able to find happiness in the complexities of modernity, but she does not seem able to create a world in which they are not encroaching. The question becomes, when the frontier moves further west, beyond the prairie, and perhaps reaches the limits of the United States, where does it go?

# Chapter Two: The Desert

Edward Abbey, Industrialization, and the American Sojourner's Fight Against Assimilation

*Lastly, the desert may not be barren by nature but as the consequence of a historical catastrophe. The once-fertile city has become, through the malevolence of others or its own sin, the waste land.* – W. H. Auden

*There is shadow under this red rock,*
*(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),*
*And I will show you something different from either*
*Your shadow at morning striding behind you*
*Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;*
*I will show you fear in a handful of dust.* – T.S. Eliot

## Introduction.

In Death Valley two men, one alive, one dead, are handcuffed together. The survivor has no food, no water, no means of escape. His sole possession is a bag of golden coins. All that surrounds him is miles and miles of empty sand. This is how Austrian-American director Eric Von Stroheim's 1924 film *Greed* ends. Based on Frank Norris' 1899 novel *McTeague*, *Greed* tells the story of a miner, John McTeague, and his obsession with his wife, Trina's, recently acquired fortune of $5000. His proximity to this sum of money, which Trina refuses to spend, and his comparatively poor circumstances, eventually causes him to murder the woman and flee towards the desert. He is pursued by Marcus Schoeler, Trina's cousin whom she was intended to marry, and who feels that he was robbed of the $5000. After a conflict in Death Valley, Schoeler is left murdered and handcuffed to McTeague, who will no doubt die where he stands.

*Greed* is a story of how reckless desire can lead to tragic outcomes, and the landscapes on which the movie plays out are no doubt essential, evidenced by Von Stroheim insistence on shooting onsight in Death Valley. The director used select coloring techniques, all done by hand after filming, to highlight the connection between capital and survival. The story begins in a goldmine, filmed in black in white, in which McTeague sifts through sediment, panning for flecks of gold that have been colored in and gleam amidst their surroundings. Most of the film remains black and white, save for the ending scenes in Death Valley where the entire landscape bursts with an intense golden hue. This color emphasizes the intense heat of the desert, and suggests that its force now holds a power over the characters, much as their internal greed does. The question becomes which power is stronger, as the only change in coloring occurs when McTeague, cuffed to the dead Schoeler, looks once more at the coins, the desert then fading back to black and white leaving only the money in focus. The coins are what brought McTeague here, and it was a fight over their possession that resulted in his final circumstance. Even in the desert, greed seems to rule all.

Seeing this story, I can't help but be reminded of an old Johnny Cash song from 1959. "Hank and Joe and Me" tells the story of three men searching for gold in Death Valley, and their eventual deaths as they run out of water and succumb to the elements. The final verse goes:

> My eyes were dimmed but I could see
>
> A bed of gold nuggets under me
>
> Now I know that it won't be long
>
> 'Til they decorate my bones[46]

In both stories, the central character finds their gold, but it is always too late to make any use of it, as their pursuit for value has led them to a wasteland. From this, two forms of reality emerge,

[46] Johnny Cash. *Hank and Joe and Me*.

one centered around the construct of currency, and its ability to provide a better life or sense of social success, and the other consisting of base necessities, food, shelter, comfort. A conflagration of the two seems to be operative in these texts, and a source of anxiety in America as the nineteenth century progressed, and wage labor became increasingly standard.[47] The kind of resource that one hoped to gain from the land shifted, and rather than searching for a suitable environment to call home, those venturing into the unknown instead sought items whose value lay not in practicality but economy.

This chapter focuses on physical desert landscapes, like the two portrayed above, but also is interested in less directly tangible notions of what it means to be a desert. To me, this manifests in spaces where finite materials have been extracted, often through destructive means, leaving behind empty or unnatural spaces. The materials I speak of can be physical, such as gold, silver or uranium. They can be more abstract notions, as when one creates borders, apportioning land and driving away those who are deemed to lack claim, they attempt to extract power from the earth. Perhaps the largest example of this in American history comes from the California gold rush. While gold mining did occur in the literal deserts of California, as seen in Cash's song, much of it took place in the mountains and the woods. Nonetheless, I choose to focus on this moment in American history here, in the desert chapter, as the gold rush came in like a storm, further cemented the rise of the United States as a coast-to-coast empire through its economic impacts, then left as quickly as it arrived, leaving only ghost towns, shattered environments, and a permanently altered, industrialized country.

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**The California Gold Rush: Influx, Displacement, and Destruction.**

On January 24th, 1848, carpenter James W. Marshall happened upon flakes of gold in a river while building a water powered sawmill for the Swiss born Californian settler John Sutter.[48] Though Marshall attempted to keep this find to himself, word spread and so began the westward migration of more than 300,000 Americans.[49] Numerous mining towns sprouted in the deserts of California, and men from all over the country spent their savings to travel to land that claimed to boast streams "paved with gold."[50]

However, the California gold rush was not just a migration, but a displacement as well. The influx of miners into California land resulted in the forced movement, genocide, assimilation and enslavement of Indigenous Americans. According to the International Indian Treaty Council, "Over 150,000 Indigenous Peoples lived in California prior to the Gold Rush…By 1870, the Native population of California had declined to an estimated 31,000 with over 60 percent perishing from diseases introduced by the [miners]."[51] When the gold rush first began California was still just a territory, by no means prepared governmentally for the horde of Americans hungry for gold. Numerous vigilante groups organized, murdering Indigenous Americans and driving them off the land.[52] In an 1851 state of the state address, then governor of California Peter Burnett proclaimed,

> The white man, to whom time is money, and who labors hard all day to create the comforts of life, cannot sit up all night to watch his property; and after being robbed a few times, he becomes desperate, and resolves upon a war of extermination. This is the common feeling of our people who have lived upon the Indian frontier. The two races are

[48] "The California Gold Rush." American Experience.
[49] American Experience
[50] Ibid.
[51] "Gold, Greed & Genocide." International Indian Treaty Council.
[52] Castillo, Edward D. "Short Overview of California Indian History.."

> kept asunder by so many causes, and having no ties of marriage or consanguinity to unite them, they must ever remain at enmity.[53]

Burnett also claims an understanding that Indigenous Americans could claim a "right to the country acquired by long, uninterrupted, and exclusive possession,"[54] but offers this not from a place of understanding but rather as evidence that coexistence between the two groups is impossible and "that a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races until the Indian race becomes extinct must be expected."[55] Burnett uses concepts stemming from frontier values to justify this action, speaking of an intense labor made by Anglo-Americans that he sees as signifying a more civilized society than the natural simplicity through which he views Indigenous American living. That the white man "labors hard all day to create the comforts of life" seems especially pertinent, as therein lies a conceit of American society that demands one must undergo intense labor before they should be allowed to feel comfortable. Furthermore, the division between white men and Indigenous Americans that Burnett sees revolves around notions of property and ownership, rather than right to security and prosperity. He expresses contempt towards a philosophy that seeks to live off the land, rather than extract value from it, saying, "Like the people of all thinly populated but fertile countries, who are enabled to supply the simplest wants of Nature from the spontaneous productions of the earth, they are, from habit and prejudice, exceedingly adverse to manual labor."[56]

What Burnett does not acknowledge about those who grasp beyond "the spontaneous productions of the earth," is the implied finiteness of these resources. The gold boom, while enormous, was only temporary, and as gold that could easily be mined by individuals dwindled,

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[53] Burnett, Peter, "State of the State Address."
[54] Burnett, "State of the State Address."
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

many gave up on the dream of striking it rich. Mining towns were quickly abandoned, turned to ghost towns, and gold mining evolved into an industrialized, wage-labor job, one which offered no promise of immense wealth to the working man.[57] The methods used by larger corporations were extraordinarily hazardous to the environment, and an estimated 7,600 tons of mercury, used to extract gold from ore, seeped into California's rivers and lakes.[58] Even John Sutter, upon whose land the gold was first discovered, came to resent the rush, as it demolished the value of his land as an agricultural enterprise. In Sutter's diary he wrote,

> I think now from all this you can form some facts, and that you can mention how thousands and thousands made their fortunes, from this Gold Discovery produced through my industry and energy…. but for me it has turned out a folly, then without having discovered the Gold, I would have become the richest wealthiest man on the Pacific Shore.[59]

Sutter's regret is another example of the self destructive tendencies of frontier ideology. He clearly takes pride in the labor and effort he put forth in his contribution to the gold rush, but it was effort placed towards extracting a superficial, and diminishing value. While mining is different from settling, the timeline that occurs at Sutter's mill is reminiscent of that predicted by Peck in his guide to the West. Sutter's land began as wild but as value began to emerge individuals searching for prosperity arrived, shortly followed by the men of capital and enterprise. The only difference is that Sutter did not get to sell out to these men, but was rather pushed to the wayside. One should not feel bad for him, though, as he too was one of these men of capital, evidenced by his enslavement of Indigenous Americans and use of them to improve his land. In examples such as John Sutter and the California gold rush the self-reliant and

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[57] "The California Gold Rush." American Experience.
[58] "Gold, Greed & Genocide." International Indian Treaty Council.
[59] Sutter, John Augustus, and Douglas S Watson. "The diary of Johann August Sutter," 57.

expansion prone values of frontier thinking reveal a cutthroat and predatory nature, one that becomes further tied to capital and currency as industry and city life progressed into the twentieth century.

## ***Desert Solitaire*: Edward Abbey's Fight Against Industrialization.**

In 1928, largely due to a campaign speech by presidential candidate Herbert Hoover, the frontier was officially embroiled in modern society. In his speech, titled "Principles and Ideals of the United States Government," but perhaps better known as the "rugged individualism" campaign speech, Hoover warns against government control over societal affairs, especially economically speaking, and lauds what he views as a uniquely American system of personal liberty. "By adherence to the principles of decentralized self-government, ordered liberty, equal opportunity, and freedom to the individual," he says, "Our American experiment in human welfare has yielded a degree of well-being unparalleled in the world."[60] Though he only says the phrase once in the speech, the notion of "rugged individualism" was highly compelling to Americans at the time who found themselves in an era of economic flourishment, and, due to booms in the stock market, seemingly had more access to highly rewarding economic opportunities than ever before. It feels important to consider the use of the word rugged within this context: while the consideration of liberty was now in an economic context, there was still a desire to relate it to the type of work the early pioneers were undertaking. Much as their worth and survival was tied to their ability to thrive in untouched land, the worth of those living in twentieth century America, and their ability to survive in said society was tied to how well they could manage in the free market. The use of "rugged" placed them as a new pioneer, only navigating a different sort of landscape. Furthermore, this way of thinking allowed for the

[60] Hoover, Herbert. "Principles and Ideals of the United States Government."

concept of pioneer to not simply be relegated to individuals, but businesses and industries as well.

When ruggedness takes on a denaturalized meaning, one must wonder what to make of actual rugged landscapes. The gold rush was severely detrimental to the Western environment, but it cemented the West Coast's position as an economic and metropolitan hub. Then, as deserts become populated, filled with highways and roads and cities that rely on import to sustain, is the kind of personal connection and relationship with land that Willa Cather so strongly praised, and rued the downfall of, still possible? To answer this we will turn to American author and environmental activist Edward Abbey, and his novel *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*.

*Desert Solitaire* is a harsh book. Half journal, accounting the time Abbey spent as a ranger in Utah's Arches national park, half manifesto, denouncing the increasing urbanization and commodification of America's great outdoors, Abbey's novel is rife with dangers. Dehydration, starvation, wild animals, perilous cliffs and crags, forces of nature, even quicksand–all of these hazards play out underneath the burning desert sun, and all contribute to what Abbey refers to in the book's opening lines as "The most beautiful place on earth."[61] First publishing *Desert Solitaire* in 1968, Abbey wrote his novel as a love letter to the Southwest desert, claiming it is impossible to depict it properly in word, and instead attempting to evoke its atmosphere through the literal construction of the text itself. His language is sparse and straightforward. He is not flowery in his poetry, but his simple yet detailed descriptions of the land he finds himself immersed within are still capable of evoking awe, simply through the scale of size and time they suggest. Isolation, too, is essential to Abbey's text. Though he shares his

[61] Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness,* 1.

stories and experiences with the reader, he makes no pretensions that he is anywhere near capable of evoking the power of the emotions felt in his first hand account.

In fact, Abbey claims just the opposite; that the experiences he underwent in Arches will never again be had. The introduction to *Desert Solitaire* ends:

> Finally a word of caution:
>
> Do not jump into your automobile next June and rush out to the Canyon country hoping to see some of that which I have attempted to evoke in these pages… most of what I write about in this book is already gone or going under fast. This is not a travel guide but an elegy. A memorial. You're holding a tombstone in your hands. A bloody rock.[62]

Here, the true discomfort of the novel comes forth. Far harsher than the sandstorms, snake bites, and hunger pangs that Abbey experienced in his time as a ranger is the reality that the untouched and challenging landscape he writes of has since been developed and paved, in the name of what Abbey refers to as "Industrial Tourism," or "The National Money-Mint." Now, concrete roads wind through the canyons, and campsites and rest stops litter what was once untouched rock. These creature comforts allow and motivate far more people to visit these landscapes, but Abbey argues their presence is meaningless if they are merely viewing canyons through a car window. It could be seen as a controversial take: Who is Abbey to say that one's experience with nature is not genuine or full based merely on the way in which they perceive it? It limits a true understanding of nature to those who have the time, freedom, and physical ability to fully immerse themselves within an isolated experience. Abbey recognizes this, and openly describes his books as, "coarse, rude, bad-tempered, violently prejudiced, unconstructive–even frankly antisocial in its point of view,"[63] but he might counter that it is exactly this inability to find time

[62]Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, xii.
[63] Abbey, x.

and freedom within the conditions of modern day society that makes the kind of experience he writes of so completely unique. “The love of wilderness,” he writes,

> Is more than a hunger for what is always beyond reach; it is also an expression of loyalty to the earth, the earth which bore us and sustains us, the only home we shall ever know, the only paradise we ever need–if only we had the eyes to see. Original sin, the true original sin, is the blind destruction for the sake of greed of this natural paradise which lies all around us–if only we were worthy of it.[64]

Abbey is clear in this paragraph as to where he views value in landscape. Like Cather he views a sustaining relationship between land and humanity, though his perspective may differ through being cynically one-way. Rather than tending to the land, and reaping the benefits, Abbey places a parasitic nature on humans, bemoaning their tendency to drain an environment of all value before moving to the next.

**Water In the Desert: Abbey and Auden.**

The difference between Cather and Abbey’s perspectives may also be reflected in the landscapes that they discuss; the prairie versus the desert. Abbey begins one chapter of *Desert Solitaire*, simply titled “Water,” with a conversation between him and a visitor to Arches from Cleveland Ohio who claims, “This would be good country… if only you had some water.”

“If we had water here,” Abbey says,

> This country would not be what it is. It would be like Ohio, wet and humid and hydrological, all covered with cabbage farms and golf courses. Instead of this lovely

[64] Ibid, 190

> barren desert we would have only another blooming garden state, like New Jersey. You see what I mean?[65]

Here, Abbey begins to touch on a facet of the desert landscape that separates it from its prairie counterpart: water, and more specifically what water symbolizes as a resource. The land that Abbey describes rejects civilization, perhaps no better seen than in its absolute aridity. Not only is water scarce in the desert (and what can be found runs the risk of being poisonous, as Abbey points out),[66] but the extreme heat threatens to sap the body of the liquids it already lays claim to: "If you have what is called a survival problem," Abbey writes, "and try to dig for this water during the heat of the day the effort may cost you more in sweat than you will find to drink."[67] Water is of course not the only resource that the desert is lacking in, and the flora and fauna that lives within full time must adapt to this scarcity, and lack of nourishment. Humans naturally are not adapted to this environment, and what one hopes to gain from existing in its plane is a focal point of Abbey's work.

One scholar of Abbey describes his writing in *Desert Solitaire* as "an arch-romantic trying desperately not to be a romantic."[68] While Abbey certainly writes with an edge that could be seen as off-putting by his earlier counterparts (and perhaps somewhat more of a resignation towards an anti-romantic future), the ideology he puts forth in *Desert Solitaire* is heavily in line with the romantic movement. His description, for example, of dying of thirst and being consumed by buzzards as soaring, "on motionless wings high over the ruck and rack of human suffering,"[69] is a grim yet poetic echo of the escapism through embrace of nature that permeates romantic writing. The relationship Abbey creates between the desert and the water that resides,

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[65] Ibid, 129
[66] Ibid, 134.
[67] Ibid131.
[68] Ibid 105.
[69] Ibid 135.

and hides, within is also reflective of a longer romantic tradition. In 1950 English-American poet W. H. Auden published *The Enchafèd Flood*, a collection of three lectures, originally given at the University of Virginia in 1949, in which Auden attempts to "understand the nature of Romanticism through an examination of its treatment of a single theme, the sea."[70] The first lecture in the series makes particular note of the symbolistic intertwinement of the desert and the sea. Auden uses ancient texts and myths to create a base understanding of what these two bodies culturally and socially represent. Of the sea, Auden claims that it,

> Is that state of barbaric vagueness and disorder out of which civilization has emerged and into which, unless saved by the effort of gods and men, it is always liable to relapse. It is so little of a friendly symbol that the first thing which the author of the Book of Revelation notices in his vision of the new heaven and earth at the end of time is that "*there was no more sea.*"[71]

In the very same chapter, a few verses later, the Book of Revelation makes use of the phrase "The water of life," saying, "To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."[72] Together, these quotes create a multifaceted and juxtaposed symbolism of water as nourishment and vitality, but also an unknown and inhuman power. Though water is the substance from which life is borne, and from both a theological and more literal biological point of view is a prerequisite to human flourishing, it is by no means in tandem with human life. Should it disappear entirely it will take life with it, but it also poses the threat of submersion, as with the flood in Genesis.

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[70] Auden, W. H. "The Enchafèd Flood." Essay. In Prose III, 7.
[71] Auden, W. H. "The Enchafèd Flood," 10.
[72] Revelation 21:6 NRSV

Auden considers the metaphor of society as a ship, and claims that it "ought not to be out of harbor."[73] To be a ship fully surrounded by water is to be amidst uncertainty, even chaos. He claims that "The sea is no place to be if you can help it, and to try to cross it betrays a rashness bordering on hubris."[74] The recognition of this hubris is prominent in romantic literature, and authors were well aware of the sea's destructive potential. Marianne Moore said, "the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave,"[75] Frankenstein's monster drifts away to his death at the end of Shelley's novel, and Melville writes of a castaway in *Moby Dick*, "The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul."[76] For each author, however, the sea alone is not enough to conjure this calamitous force. Rather, it is what occurs when humankind does not leave the sea be, but rather strays too deep within its waters, disturbing the delicate balance put into play.

Abbey, too, sees this destruction, but for him it comes in the form of "another blooming garden state." In *Desert Solitaire*'s "Water" Abbey writes,

> There is no shortage of water in the desert, but exactly the right amount, a perfect ratio of water to rock, of water to sand, insuring that wide, free, open, generous spacing among plants and animals, homes and towns and cities, which makes the arid West so different from any other part of the nation. There is no lack of water here, unless you try to establish a city where no city should be.[77]

Abbey's description of the desert in this paragraph, and role humans have within, is Auden's ship within a harbor. The introduction of larger society to the desert creates an imbalance that can only be rectified through an artificial importation of water. This could be seen, in Auden's terms,

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[73] Auden, W. H. "The Enchafèd Flood," 10.

[74] Auden, W. H. "The Enchafèd Flood," 11.
[75] Moore, Marianne. "A Grave," line 5.
[76] Melville, Herman, *Moby Dick or The Whale*, 631
[77] Abbey, Desert Solitaire, 148.

as trying to cross the sea, a staunch declaration of pride in human advancement; creating life where it has no right to be. In "Water," Abbey decries an American fixation on expansion, claiming that "growth for the sake of growth is a cancerous madness," and that, "an economic system which can only expand or expire must be false to all that is human."[78] Just as Abbey warns that one will expend more energy digging for water underneath the sand than they will gain from drinking it, so too does he find diverting and channeling water to the driest parts of the desert equally unsustainable. Beyond unsustainable, he also finds it unavoidable; Abbey writes, "The pattern is fixed and protest alone will not halt the iron glacier moving upon us."[79]

**Cactus Ed the American Sojourner.**

From this we can see that Abbey shares another trait with the Romantics, that being a rejection of laissez-faire ideology. While the initial interpretation of laissez-faire as a system in which groups and individuals operate without interference from higher powers may seem quite aligned with Abbey and the Romantics, Auden argues that

> "They did not feel like this because they disbelieved in individual freedom but precisely because, passionately believing in it, they saw urban democracy as they knew it, destroying the heroic individual and turning him into a cypher of the crowd, or a mechanical cogwheel in an impersonal machine."[80]

The notion of the "heroic individual" falls well in line with the belief in fulfillment gained through personal experience that *Desert Solitaire* is such a proponent of. In fact, despite being based in real events, the narrator of the novel is, self-admittedly, not Edward Abbey the writer, but rather a hyperbolic, stylized version of himself; one who eschews his more timid, scholarly,

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[78] Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 145.

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[80] Auden, W. H. "The Enchafèd Flood," 22.

and prim characteristics in favor of a more rugged everyman personality. This character, often referred to by scholars as Cactus Ed, is crafted from literary tropes, most notably that of the American Sojourner, defined by John S. Farnsworth in his essay "What Does the Desert Say?: A Rhetorical Analysis of *Desert Solitaire*" as, "a solitary male who encounters "wilderness" alone as part of a philosophical project."[81] In his essay, Farnsworth notes several places in which Abbey the author deviates from Cactus Ed, including the claim that the book was near directly lifted from journals he kept during his time in Arches, and the complete omission of the presence of Abbey's wife and child during his second season in the park. Farnsworth argues that these acts of aggrandizement are not done egotistically, but rather tactically; an attempt by Abbey to better relate to his intended audience, and further explicate the direness of his message. Farnsworth writes, "Abbey sought out a new ethos. The saint would be replaced by the anarchist, the gentleman naturalist would be replaced by the inhumanist, the transcendentalist would be replaced by the nontheist, and the scholar would be replaced by a Yale dropout who would support himself via seasonal work with the National Park Service"[82]

Given this understanding of Abbey's project, and viewing the sort of character he creates in Cactus Ed, it becomes abundantly clear that notions of masculinity, and numerous tropes associated with this masculinity are deeply embedded within rugged landscapes such as the desert. The American Sojourner archetype, both in the examples that Abbey takes as inspiration and the ones that would follow *Desert Solitaire*, has almost exclusively been a man, often with isolationist and unemotional tendencies that could be ascribed to masculinity. These comparisons don't even stop short of the biblical "first man"; Abbey describes wilderness as "the only paradise we ever need," and when the twentieth survivalist Joseph Knowles walked naked and

[81] Farnsworth, John S. "What Does the Desert Say?: A Rhetorical Analysis of 'Desert Solitaire,'" 3.
[82]Farnsworth, "What Does the Desert Say?" 8.

alone into the woods of Northeastern Main for a two month trial, it was reported that he intended to live, "as Adam lived."[83] These comparisons of nature to Eden conjure up notions of man as inheritor of Earth, and while the message the American Sojourner professes is one of separation from established society, it is incorrect to believe that he is not mired in social structures of his own. Though Abbey's exact motivations behind the omission of his wife and child from his novel are unknown, it is not hard to imagine that, especially considering the near complete dearth of female characters in the work, he did not believe their presence would align itself with the image he wished to put forth.

The irony of Abbey's polemic, and the challenge of the central appeal of the American Sojourner in general, is that it is in many ways derived from the same set of values that created the system it becomes critical of, or, as Turner said, "The American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves."[84] The American culture that Turner sees as having evolved from a development of frontier wilderness is one deeply imbued with a restless desire for independent mobility. When the promise of a limitless frontier is shattered by the barriers of the West Coast, and one can no longer begin their own farm on undeveloped land, perhaps that development moved into economical terms. Freedom is sought in the form of rugged individualism and laissez-faire economics, a modernized way of "roughing-it" for oneself. Industrialism grows, and, as Abbey bemoans, even the most unfit land becomes claimed. Eventually this way of life may become overbearing, especially for those who have not had the materials or opportunity to pull themselves up, as it were, and one may nostalgically look towards the vision suggested by Abbey even if it is the progenitor of their modern day woes.

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[83] Nash, Roderick Frazier, *Wilderness & the American Mind*, 141.
[84] Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 6.

It should be noted that Abbey is not ignorant of this fact. Like the warning that precedes the beginning of the novel suggests, Abbey by no means suggests that society should, or could, revert to a more isolated, frontier-like structure. In one chapter, "Cowboys and Indians Part II," Abbey, describing the clouded space between indigenous and anglo-American cultures that Navajo people, and other Southwest indigenous tribes exist within, wryly comments, "Among these people a liberal hospitality is taken for granted and selfishness regarded with horror. Shackled by such primitive attitudes, is it any wonder that the Navajos have not yet been able to get in step with the rest of us?"[85] This moment, and the use of sarcasm that still aligns Abbey with the "us," seems to in part acknowledge Abbey's own selfish or anti-social tendencies.

Moreover, Abbey highlights the impossibility of finding freedom in nature in a society that is so quick to section off and place ownership on land through an examination of the repopulation of the Navajo nation. He writes,

> "In the case of the Navajo the effects of uncontrollable population growth are vividly apparent. The population, though ten times greater than a century ago, must still exist on a reservation no bigger now than it was then. In a pastoral economy based on sheep, goats and horses the inevitable result, as any child could have foreseen, was severe overgrazing and the transformation of the range–poor enough to start with–from a semiarid grassland to an eroded waste of blowsand and nettles."[86]

Abbey suggests that the lifestyle familiar to Navajo culture is unsustainable within the confines of American territorial and plot based notions of land. The displacement and confinement of the Navajo to reservations is directly responsible for the creation of a desert, as a purely agricultural way of life can no longer support itself. Growth, from the perspective of a population and a

[85] Abbey, *Desert Solitaire,* 122.
[86] Abbey, 118.

cultural, is not made possible with what is offered, and the only alternative is assimilation, as Abbey describes Navajos, “Today doing the best they can as laborers, gas station attendants, motel maids and dependents of the public welfare system.”[87]

Assimilation was not a notion new to Abbey’s time. In 1830, as Anglo-Americans were lauding the freedom offered by the still new and unexplored Midwest, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act into law. This act allowed Jackson to grant land west of the Mississippi river to Indigenous Americans, in exchange for land they already had in preexisting states and territories.[88] Jackson saw this as a positive for both the United States and Indigenous Americans, saying in a message to Congress, December 6th, 1830,

> Can it be cruel in this Government when, by events which it can not control, the Indian is made discontented in his ancient home to purchase his lands, to give him a new and extensive territory, to pay the expense of his removal, and support him a year in his new abode? How many thousands of our own people would gladly embrace the opportunity of removing to the West on such conditions! If the offers made to the Indians were extended to them, they would be hailed with gratitude and joy.[89]

Jackson’s words, beyond neglecting to consider the mass slaughter of Indigenous people up to that point and continuing far into the future, demonstrates the ways in which American considerations of independence and pioneer living were already deeply intertwined with notions of property and economy. He views himself as granting Indigenous tribes land through the notion of the United States having purchased the Midwest from France, nevermind who may have previously existed within it. The tribes that agreed to these treaties found themselves forced into

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[87] Ibid, 118.
[88] CH 148 – 21st Congress (1829-1831).
[89] President Andrew Jackson's Message to Congress "On Indian Removal"; 12/6/1830.

the constraints of the American legal system, while those that did not were inevitably forcibly, and violently removed from their original homes.

Jackson's insistence that Anglo-Americans would happily take this deal speaks to the restless frontier spirit that Turner defined Americans by, but the lens through which he considers migration places expansion and ownership at the forefront of the mind. Later in the nineteenth century boarding schools intended to assimilate Indigenous tribes, especially newer generations of children, into American culture[90] showed that the American pattern of consumption was not solely limited to land, but to thought as well. Both Jackson and Burnett take a patronizing stance on Indigenous culture with respect to labor, as they view a lifestyle built around sustenance rather than improvement as lazy and unambitious.

It should not be thought that this frontier style expansionist mindset in regards to nature intrinsically demands a hatred of Indigenous Americans, but rather it speaks to an entirely different understanding of what can be taken from one's environment. Briefly returning to Cather as an example, in a section of her 1925 novel *The Professor's House* titled "Tom Outland's Story" she details the discovery by Tom Outland, a worker for a cattle company, of an ancient city in the cliffs of New Mexico, referred to as cliff city. Cather's writing is respectful of the unknown tribe that used to reside here, but she makes great note of the structural architecture of the city in a manner that reflects the industrial mindset used to push Jackson and Burnett's agendas. Cather describes a large tower that stands in the center of the now abandoned city: "I had been to the Acoma and the Hopi Villages," she writes[91], "But I'd never seen a tower like that one. It seemed to me to mark a difference. I felt that only a strong and aspiring people would

[90] National Museum of the American Indian, "Chapter 3: Boarding Schools: Native Words, Native Warriors."
[91] While the voice being used is that of Tom Outland, the way in which environment and architecture is discussed so closely mirrors that of Cather's other works that I feel comfortable ascribing the beliefs behind the language to the author herself.

have built it, and a people with a feeling for design."[92] It may seem harsh to group this far less demeaning language with the directly violent thought expressed by Jackson and Burnett, but given that Cather's interest in property designation and architecture spans several novels, as well as her continued belief in "exceptional individuals" it seems reasonable to assert that Cather intends to evoke a particular importance to this tribes ability to produce something vast and concrete.

John Randall offers a different viewing of Tom Outland's admiration for the cliff city, instead suggesting that Cather, "Recalls Frank Lloyd Wright's idea of organic architecture, in which the best style of building is regarded as that which is best adapted to its surroundings, and seems to grow out of the land scape."[93] This is certainly the case in cliff city, in which the architecture goes inward, carved into mountain faces, rather than jut out, save for the central focal point of the tower. Rather than an ability to create, it is a sense of tradition, one that is in tune with the natural world, that makes the tower so remarkable. While this certainly could be accurate, I would argue that Cather's insistence upon finding the presence of the human within landscape speaks to ideals inherited through an American tradition. She writes, "The tower was the fine thing that held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something."[94] Cather's desperate search for value continues in this sentence, and insists that the tower must mean something. Cather admires the sense of cultural unity exuded from this structure, as though it is a tether for the community that once surrounded it. While there is nothing wrong with this sentiment–it is actually quite touching–it still insists that strength and aspiration are tied to a necessity to leave a presence. While the rest of the city blends into the landscape, this tower sticks out, and thereby becomes remarkable. Just as Abbey feels he must embody the American

[92] Cather, Willa. *The Professor's House*, 182.
[93] Randall, *The Landscape and the Looking Glass*, 207.
[94] Cather, *The Professor's House*, 180.

Sojourner to reach his audience, Cather puts forth a need for exceptional individualism to achieve greatness. To leave no trace is not an option.

Abbey seems to recognize this fact of American culture, and cynically views antithetical values as ones that must be shirked to ensure survival in America, saying of the Navajo, "They will have to forget or at least learn to be ashamed of these old things and to bring them out only for the amusement of tourists."[95] One could critique Abbey of being hypocritical in this passage, as he in his rugged persona of the American Sojourner is bringing out the lost culture of the Navajo and other tribes for the dismay, if not amusement, of the tourists reading his book. Certainly Indigenous Americans have been time and time again relegated to a space of noble primitiveness, in which they are forced to represent some form of parable of a purer life, much as the societally untethered immigrants of Cather's stories do. Abbey may be using such a parable, but he is at least genuine in his acknowledgement of Indigenous Americans as having deep cultural histories from which they pull, while still being able to adapt to an anglicized society, if need be.

It is not just the culture of Indigenous tribes that Abbey laments the loss of either, and, as he puts it, "Well…the cowboys have their troubles too."[96] These troubles lie in the mechanization and automation of the cattle industry removing the possibility of ranching as an independent way of life. Instead romanticism has taken its place and Abbey laments that, "Cowboyism as a cult grows in direct ratio to the disappearance of cattle-herding as an occupation."[97] This cannot be mourned as greatly, for if I have made anything clear thus far I hope it would be that this is the only predictable end of such an occupation. Most every job that would earn one the moniker of "cowboy" is one that invites a culture that threatens to end it. The kind of lifestyle and

[95] Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 125.
[96] Abbey, 125.
[97] Ibid, 126.

relationship that Abbey admires is one unsustainable by the culture he writes for, and in the end he finds only one, ironic, way in which society has successfully intertwined with the natural: "Who am I to pity the degradation and misery of my fellow citizens? I, too, must leave the canyon country, only for a season, and rejoin for the winter that miscegenated mesalliance of human and rodent called the rat race (*Rattus urbanus*)."[98] The words Abbey puts forth in his introduction are echoed in *Desert Solitaire*'s final pages, and while Abbey warns the reader that they should not attempt to recreate his novel, for fear of disappointment, it may also be that he himself did not truly experience what he wrote of. Abbey refers to his novel as an elegy, which it most certainly is, but maybe not of anything he experienced. Rather, it seems to be an elegy for a life that, while standing in the rock and desert heat, he came to understand existed at some time, but was never in reach for him.

[98] Ibid, 298.

# Chapter Three: What Lies Beneath

Outlaws, Outsiders, and Undergrounds

*I'm runnin' this shovel way down in a ditch*

*When you're down in a ditch it's a son of gun* - Joe Diffie

## Introduction.

While the problems extrapolated upon thus far hint to roots deeply inseparable from American culture, I would hope not to suggest that there is no way to resist. This chapter moves away from nostalgia and romanticization into the realm of anxiety and dissatisfaction. As the last two chapters have displayed an America that constantly seeks to build upwards, this chapter instead aims to travel below. The best way to do this is to start with a story of miners.

In 1917 America needed copper. The nation had officially entered the first World War in April, and copper at the time was vital to numerous facets of warfare, from weaponry to machinery to fortifications. The value of the metal surged in this time period, and demand for laborers in the industry was at an all time high. So, when encouraged by the socialist union group Industrial Workers of the World (often referred to as the Wobblies), copper miners in Bisbee, Arizona went on strike in June 1917, the halt in production was not taken lightly. The reasons for the strike were multifaceted: health and safety restrictions were scarce, worker's paychecks were severely deducted due to charges accrued through living in the mining towns, and the disparity in pay between under-ground work (which was seen as a white job due to the perceived need of English speakers in the more dangerous subterranean conditions) and above-ground work (an

occupation far more easily acquired by American immigrants, but often less than half as lucrative) was massive. Leading up to 1917, mining towns in the Southwest had already become a hotbed of strikes and unionist activities, especially for Mexican Americans who desired a level playing field, economically and socially, with their white counterparts, and, though they were hard fought battles, some victories had been achieved. However, perhaps due to the increasing pressure, as well as heightened demand for patriotism, caused by being in a state of war-time, it was determined by members of the mining industry that the strike of summer 1917 was not simply inconvenient for copper manufacturers, but entirely un-American, and even dangerous to the stability of American social welfare.

On July 12, 1917, a group of more than 2000 anti-unionizers, headed by Sheriff Harry Wheeler, stormed Bisbee and rounded up over 1000 men, both unionized miners but also many who were not directly involved in the strikes, and loaded them onto trains headed to New Mexico. In her book *Borderline Americans: Racial Division and Labor War in the Arizona Borderlands*, history professor Katherine Benton-Cohen says of the forced deportation: "Ninety percent were immigrants. Altogether they included men of thirty-four nationalities, but half came from Mexico or the Slavic regions of Eastern Europe…Some stayed there as long as three months. Almost none of them ever returned to Bisbee."[99] Though the deportation was in no way sanctioned by the United States government, nearly all efforts to punish those responsible were unsuccessful. The closest thing to justice any of the Bisbee deportees received were damage settlements of "$1,250 for married men with children, $1,000 for childless married men, and $500 for single men,"[100] and even these were only received by a small number of workers. The reason this act of vigilante violence was met with so few consequences was that a large portion

[99] Benton-Cohen, Katherine. *Borderline Americans: Racial division and Labor War in the Arizona Borderlands*, 3.
[100] Benton-Cohen, Katherine. *Borderline Americans* 234.

of America believed it was done with the public interest in mind. The act of striking during war-time was viewed as unpatriotic, and the attempts to equalize immigrants and non-white Americans, or even just Americans who were not part of a family unit, was viewed as dangerous to familial and cultural values. Furthermore, the IWW, and its socialist, staunchly anti-war ideals, was thought to be a provoker of instability and (ironically) vigilantism within the country. The act was done in the name of preventing anti-patriotism in a time of war, but served as a clear demonstration of the influence that both governmental powers and the large industries had over a supposedly democratic process.

That the demands of the strikers in Bisbee were not only met with refusal but active violence served as a blow to the notion that working class Americans, and Americans that fell outside the traditional image of white, born in-country, and family focused, stood on even democratic footing. Mining unions in the Midwest collapsed after the events in Bisbee,[101] and the drama and notoriety caused by the deportation made most residents of the town, and larger Cochise county, extremely weary of union activity. Mining continued to be a dangerous working-class job, emblematic of class, race, and social imbalances within America.

The miner, in its position as a physically and mentally taxing, high-risk profession, and given the clear imbalance between the wages of workers and the value of resources extracted, has often served as a representation of the struggles found in the American labor system. Tillie Olsen, an American author, socialist activist and proponent of worker's rights depicted these struggles in her novel *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, written in the 1930s but not published until 1974. Born in 1912 to first generation Russian Jewish immigrants, and subsequently spending much of her life working various low paying jobs, Olsen was deeply familiar with the difficulties of surviving in working-class America. Like the striking miners of Bisbee, Olsen also found

[101] Ibid, 234.

herself punished for her attempts to disrupt what she viewed to be an unfair economic and social system. In 1932 she spent five months in jail for leafleting, and in 1934 she was arrested twice more; once for organizing a packinghouse worker's union, and the second time in San Francisco during the West Coast Waterfront strike. She began to write *Yonnondio* in 1932, "while recovering from pleurisy and tuberculosis contracted as a result of factory conditions and weeks in jail,"[102] but due to her activism, and need to maintain a living, she could only work on the novel sparsely, writing her thoughts "on tiny slips of paper, 'capturing voices, words, thoughts' in the small moments she could."[103]

**Caves as Ancient Spaces.**

In *Yonnondio* Olsen depicts a white, American family unit, the kind that the IWW and strikers in Bisbee were accused of attempting to destroy, and, through a movement between several occupations and American environments (Midwest miner, prairie settler, urban slaughterhouse worker) shines a light on the deep dysfunctions present in such a society. However, it is not merely the social systems themselves that Olsen wishes to explore; she also captures the sensory aspects of each landscape in such a way that intertwines them inseparably from the actions of those living within them. The heat emanating from the underground mines, the serene silence of the isolated farmstead, the claustrophobic stench of the city slum; all of these scents sights and sounds pierce the interior of Olsen's characters, and connect their emotions and ways of living to the ground they operate upon. The first landscape portrayed in *Yonnondio* is the mine, and it becomes clear that, in Olsen's perspective, it is not merely the occupation of miner that carries the image of working-class disenfranchisement, but rather the

[102] "About Tillie," http://www.tillieolsen.net/life.php.
[103] "About Tillie."

mine itself holds within it a deep anxiety towards American progression and industrialization, a warning that we may stray too far from the natural world.

Deriving its name from a Walt Whitman poem that serves as the novels forward (though Yonnondio is originally an Iroquois term roughly translating to lament for the lost), *Yonnondio* follows the Holbrooks, an impoverished family in 1920s America that migrates through several landscapes in search of a stable source of livelihood. The novel is written through the perspective of several members of the Holbrook family: Jim Holbrook is the often violent patriarch of the family whose inability to properly provide for his family fuels his alcoholism and anger, often taken out on Anne, Jim's wife. Anne spends her time tending to her several children as well as overseeing the Holbrook's financial standings, while also managing her husband's erratic behavior. Other sequences are told through the eyes of Maize, the Holbrook's five year old daughter whose perspective of the grim realities surrounding her family are filtered through a childish understanding of the world. The initial chapters of *Yonnondio* take place in a Wyoming mining town, and immediately make clear the brutal standard of life that the Holbrooks endure. "The whistles always woke Mazie," the novel begins,

> They pierced into her sleep like some guttural-voiced metal beast, tearing at her; breathing a terror. During the day if the whistle blew, she knew it meant death–somebody's poppa or brother, perhaps her own–in that fearsome place below the ground, the mine.[104]

*Yonnondio* quickly makes a distinction between above ground and below; they are treated as two separate realities. The whistles that call the miners into the caverns every morning, and signify their deaths, are both animated and denaturalized in their description as a "guttural-voiced metal beast." They are depicted as some sort of fantasy creature, not of this Earth, and later they are

[104]Olsen, Tillie. *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, 9.

even described, in the mind of the child Maize, as the laughter of malevolent ghosts, assaulting the miners who penetrate Earth's surface.[105] Olsen's depiction of the underground as a haunted domain merges with a consideration of its ancientness, as the phrase "Bowels of the Earth" is frequently used to describe the mines.[106] In one scene, Maize is nearly thrown down a mineshaft by Sheen McEvoy, a miner who goes insane after his face is permanently disfigured by a fire in the mines. McEvoy believes that the mine is a living being, one that demands a child sacrifice. As he carries Maize to the shaft he says, "The mine is calling for her baby. Men'll die–unless she gets a baby."[107] Here, the underground begins to be established as a unique landscape, one that simultaneously harkens to a primitive era, represented as a natural, living being, while also being a space not meant to be explored by man, or at least by the modern man. The infringement of modern, industrialized America seems to awaken something dark in the underground.

The tension between "modern" man and a primitive past is echoed in other underground literary landscapes. In Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, written in 1927, nine years after the last of her "Prairie Trilogy," her landscapes move from the open prairies of Nebraska to the desert expanses of the Southwest. The protagonist, Bishop Jean Marie Latour, is struck by several elements of the New Mexican landscape, especially the numerous red hills, "so exactly like one another that he seemed to be wandering in some geometrical nightmare,"[108] through which Cather imbues a similar sense of nakedness to that seen in the Midwest. However, one particularly intense interaction with nature for the Bishop occurs not on this arid and sparse soil, but rather deep below its surface. On one of his travels Latour, and his guide, Jacinto, "A young Indian from the Pecos pueblo,"[109] become trapped within a snowstorm. Fearing death otherwise,

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[105] Olsen, *Yonnondio*, 12.
[106] Olsen 12.
[107] Olsen 21.
[108] Cather, Willa, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 30.
[109]Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 118.

Jacinto leads the Bishop into an underground cavern, not intended to be seen by those outside of his tribe. Though Latour immediately feels an “extreme distaste” towards the dark and frigid cave, as he warms up by a freshly built fire he is able to forget these thoughts until he notices a low but persevering humming echo throughout the space. Jacinto, upon being questioned about the noise, leads Latour deeper into the cave, to a fissure in the floor:

> Father Latour lay with his ear to this crack for a long while, despite the cold that arose from it. He told himself he was listening to one of the oldest voices of the earth. What he heard was the sound of a great underground river, flowing through a resounding cavern. The water was far, far below, perhaps as deep as the foot of the mountain, a flood moving in utter blackness under ribs of antediluvian rock. It was not a rushing noise, but the sound of a great flood moving with majesty and power.
>
> "It is terrible," he said at last, as he rose.[110]

The terribleness that Latour prescribes onto the sound of the hidden river seems to stem from a feeling of ancientness imbued within the water. Cather has described the plot of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as “the experiences of two Catholic Missionaries who were sent [to New Mexico] to bring order out of the mixture of Indian and Spanish Mexican superstitions,”[111] but here Latour is confronted by an ancient force that, “Moving with majesty and power,” seems to defy his ability to do so. The water speaks to those who resided in the land far before Latour did, and the cave's cultural significance to Jacinto and his tribe creates a landscape that the Bishop is not able to alter, or even comprehend. The rock that the river lies below is described as “antediluvian”, suggesting that this water is from before even the earliest biblical events.

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[110] Cather, 187.
[111] Cather, Willa. Letter to Paul Revere Reynolds. *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, 378.

In her essay "Losing Nothing, Comprehending Everything: Learning to Read Both the Old World and the New in Death Comes for the Archbishop," author Deborah Lindsey Williams writes, "The morning landscape that greets the two men when they emerge from the cave is a 'gleaming white world,' covered with 'virgin snow,' a new world, a blank. The virgin snow appears to cancel out the ancient systems of belief: the European's Virgin obliterates the stone lips of Jacinto's cave."[112] Within the cave, Latour feels a powerful sense that he is outside of his understanding of the world, but above ground the severance from this ancient energy, and the openness of the landscape allows for renewed ideas of renovation and conversion. Cather finds a tension that pulls between Latour's Christian beliefs and the ancient power that draws him underground, and seems to reconcile it by confining them to different areas of the Earth. This being said, I would push against Williams' suggestion that the snow "appears to cancel out the ancient systems of belief," as given what we have come to understand about Cather's consideration of empty and flat spaces, developing this to such an exaggerated form would suggest an entirely blank slate, rather than one operating under any specific worldviews. Perhaps Latour's experience underground will affect how he chooses to mold this landscape. Furthermore, given the intense focus on the power of water beneath the cave, to emerge into a landscape covered in snow might indicate that this force is not entirely relegated to below the surface.

This raises the question of what occurs in the opposite scenario, when these underground ancient spaces are infringed upon by modern progression. Oftentimes when the underground as a space of primitive nature or ancientness interacts with modern culture or philosophy, it can transform into a space of illness or uncertainty, a magnified version of the discomfort Father

[112] Williams, Deborah Lindsay. "Losing Nothing, Comprehending Everything: Learning to Read Both the Old World and the New in Death Comes for the Archbishop."

Latour feels upon entering Jacinto's tribal space. The cave, or the underground, has often acted as a shelter for those outside of societal norms in American literature. It is a space sequestered away from the known, whose darkness and confinement suggest a necessary confrontation with things rather left unsaid.

**Bachelard's Cellar.**

To begin to understand the social and symbolic implications of the American underground, a helpful starting point may be French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's thoughts on the role of the subterranean within the psyche. In his book *The Poetics of Space* Bachelard suggests the importance of the "oneiric house," a space that is both literal and metaphorical, consisting of memories of the childhood home, and with different physical spaces representing different spaces of imagination. Bachelard believes that "the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."[113] The house, as Bachelard sees it, is a space that is both individual and universal; its representations of shelter and security are commonly understood, but the unique elements of each house are what allow for those representations to occur. When reading a house, Bachelard says, one quickly falls away from the description given, instead returning to memories of their childhood home. Inherent in this connection to the childhood home is a strong sense of nostalgia:

> After twenty years, in spite of all the other anonymous stairways; we would recapture the reflexes of the "first stairway," we would not stumble on that rather high step. The house's entire being would open up, faithful to our own being. We would push the door

[113] Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*, 6.

> that creaks with the same gesture, we would find our way in the dark to the distant attic. The feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands.[114]

Bachelard describes a comfort in the home that is deeply ingrained in the essence of a body. A strong familiarity with this initial space, and an ability to recognize its similarities to future spaces, allows for easier navigation. The oneiric home is a place of return, but also serves as a guide into the future. The primary experiences in one's "first universe" as Bachelard puts it, shape the way they interact with their surroundings. If the house is to be viewed as a home of daydreams, one that resembles a point of origin, and a space that shelters the present and moves into the future, then a mapping of its layers is in order. Bachelard creates a dichotomy between the attic and the cellar of the oneiric house, one rooted in ideas of active consciousness and the subconscious. The contrast of spaces that he notes is similar to the different roles taken by American landscapes in the literary sphere. Much as Willa Cather's prairie is a space so sparse and harsh that one is forced into direct confrontation with themselves and their anxieties, as there is nothing to hide behind, Bachelard finds clarity in the top layers of the house, and says of the attic, "It is a pleasure to see the bare rafters of the strong framework. Here we participate in the carpenter's solid geometry."[115] The attic is an openly addressed space; that does not mean it is always a pleasant one, but it is one that is understood and acknowledged. This is in contrast to Bachelards depiction of the cellar, which he refers to as the "*dark entity*" of the house. Unlike the fears found in the attic, fears manifested as bare rafters plain to the eye, the anxieties of the cellar are not so easily addressed, and often preferred to be hidden. Bachelard brings up psychoanalyst C. G. Jung's conception of the cellar attic dichotomy, quoting Jung who says,

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[114] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 14-15.
[115] Bachelard, 18.

> Here the conscious acts like a man who, hearing a suspicious noise in the cellar, hurries to the attic and, finding no burglars there decides, consequently, that the noise was pure imagination. In reality, this prudent man did not dare venture into the cellar.[116]

This perspective of the cellar, as a place avoided at all costs, but ever present nonetheless, is reflected in the depictions of the underground seen in American literature, which often presents the cave as a fully undesirable landscape, but simultaneously a place that exists in tandem with the above world; never fully escapeable. Both Jung and Bachelard include concepts of courage in their depiction of unwillingness to interact with the cellar. It is not necessarily that the cellar should be avoided, but rather that it takes an immense amount of mental strength to interact with it in a safe manner.

This ties into the second notion of the cave, one which Bachelard addresses in his depiction of the cellar as well, as a primitive space in which one may gain access to an ancient past. Bachelard depicts this as experiencing "a house with cosmic roots,"[117] and continues to say,

> The house, the cellar, the deep earth, achieve totality through depth. The house has become a natural being whose fate is bound to that of mountains and of the waters that plough the land. The enormous stone plant it has become would not flourish if it did not have subterranean water at its base. And so our dreams attain boundless proportions.[118]

Bachelards description of depth echoes Cather's description of majestic water flowing beneath antediluvian rock. While Cather's description is rooted in Indigenous spirituality, other authors have considered the subterranean "cosmic roots" as connected to an inner primality that lays dormant within modern man. This can be seen in Cormac McCarthy's 1973 Southern gothic novel, *Child of God*, which traces the actions of serial killer Lester Ballard in 1960's Appalachia.

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[116] Ibid, 19.
[117] Ibid, 22.
[118] Ibid 23.

The novel is a reflection on the darker elements of the human mind, and this is perhaps most strongly portrayed in McCarthy's descriptions of Ballard's lair, a cavern nestled deep within the side of a mountain. McCarthy writes,

> Here the walls with their softlooking convolutions, slavered over as they were with wet and bloodred mud, had an organic look to them, like the innards of some great beast. Here in the bowels of the mountain Ballard turned his light on ledges or pallets of stone where dead people lay like saints. [119]

Just as *Death Comes for the Archbishop* speaks of "the oldest voices of the earth", the deep recesses of the cave in *Child of God* are again made animate, "like the innards of some great beast." However, this time it is not to reflect on an older, more foreign culture to the narrator, but rather it speaks to a primal nature McCarthy seems to believe lies dormant within mankind. In "Losing Nothing, Comprehending Everything" Williams makes note of a "devouring femaleness of the cavities and orifices", which is reflected in McCarthy's writing. The cave acts as an ancient womb of sorts, one which the things it has birthed have somehow forgotten. Those that return to the cave seem to have a connection with the land that, while not always coming from the same space of intention, nonetheless makes them an outsider. The ending of *Child of God* finds Ballard, at the height of his descent from modern society, lost within his cave for three days. McCarthy depicts a series of animals–small fish in his drinking water, the bones of elk and a jaguar, centipedes and spiders, the barks of hounds and the scurrying feet of mice–all seemingly to emphasize Ballard's isolation from humanity. When humans are referenced, they are simply described as "his enemies."[120] Ballard too becomes animalistic, as he is said to "scrabble like a rat,"[121] and he uses his bare hands to dig through the earth. The cave becomes

[119] McCarthy, Cormac, *Child of God*, 135.
[120] McCarthy, *Child of God*, 187.
[121] McCarthy, 188.

transformative; it is unwelcoming to those who dwell above ground, and it changes those who stay too long.

**Outlaws and Outlaw Country.**

While Ballard's separation from society is portrayed in a wholly animalistic and unsympathetic fashion, those who embody a similar form of rejection are not always so villainized. This is evidenced by American culture's embrace of the "outlaw" figure; a character who embodies the wrong, but perhaps for the right reasons. The outlaw-hero is not a distinctly American archetype, the most famous example perhaps being the English folklore tale of Robin Hood, but the development of American culture and history, and perhaps most specifically the rise of the cowboy figure, has created a unique subset of the character. In his essay "The Outlaw: A Distinctive American Folktype" author Richard E. Meyer studies a number of Western outlaw folk heroes–Jesse James, Sam Bass, Billy the Kid, and Pretty Boy Floyd–and through an observation of their actions, and the public's response via tales, ballads, and word-of-mouth, constructs a series of rules that the American outlaw-hero must abide by. These rules include: "*The American outlaw-hero is a 'man of the people'; he is closely identified with the common people, and, as such, is generally seen to stand in opposition to certain established, oppressive economic, civil and legal systems peculiar to the American historical experience*,"[122] "*The outlaw-hero steals from the rich and gives to the poor, in this and other ways functioning as one who serves to 'right wrongs*,*'*"[123] (a rule in line with, Meyer notes, the robin-hood prototype) and "*During his career the outlaw-hero is helped, supported and admired by his people*,"[124] among several others. The distinctions that Meyer makes fall in line with the notion of social banditry, illegal actions performed by a lower class, either in protest or out of necessity, that are widely

[122] Meyer, Richard E. "The Outlaw: A Distinctive American Folktype," 97.
[123] Meyer, "The Outlaw," 101.
[124] Meyer, 107.

regarded as acceptable due to the nature of their intent. Rules like these are what separate the outlaw-hero from characters such as Ballard–Both are products of American society, but the outlaw seeks to rectify rather than cause destruction.

That is not to say that the outlaw is not capable of violence, in fact they can have a great aptitude for it, but their violence is often more targeted, and manifests itself in a way that relieves it of larger social scorn. Meyer considers this through the lens of outlaw versus criminal:

> Holding up banks, trains, or Brinks armored cars is outlaw activity; it is acceptable to the folk mind, which will even go so far as to countenance an occasional homicide, providing it is clearly in what might be termed the "line of duty." But cold-blooded and calculated murder, crimes against women and children, acts of sadism and terrorism these constitute criminal activity and the supporters of outlaw-heroes would be as quick to condemn their practitioners as would any other segment of society.[125]

Just as this distinction can be made between outlaw and criminal, so too could a comparison be made between the social influence of the frontier landscape and the underground. The emptiness of the prairie, the paradox of its unlimited possibility and complete absence, and the harshness with which it can torment its residents can be contrasted with the claustrophobia of the cave, its intense connection to the primitive and its ties to social instability. Perhaps counterintuitively, the wide open spaces of the prairie seem to spurn a turn to the internal, whereas the condensed chambers of the underground beg for more external concerns. When Ántonia's Father takes his life in the harsh Nebraska winter, it is on account of an internal shame at his perceived failure as a homesteader. The outlaw, though, acts out of a more external desire for righteousness, or a hyper-awareness of the flaws of society, one that can be connected to the landscape of the cave. It seems important, however, to note Meyers' final rule of the outlaw-hero: "*the outlaw's actions*

[125] Ibid, 116.

*and deeds do not always provoke approval and admiration, but may upon occasion elicit everything from mildly stated criticisms and moral warnings to outright condemnation and refutation of any or all of the previous eleven elements*."[126] The outlaw-hero is not incapable of sin, and any pureness of intention that is behind their actions may become muddied by the methods used to enact it. Much as the cave stands as a terrain of uncertainty, so too is the outlaw a complex figure, one who may simultaneously evoke admiration and fear.

In his essay, Meyers quotes Woody Guthrie's 1944 folk song, "Pretty Boy Floyd," a romanticized account of the American bank robber, specifically the lyrics:

> Now as through this world I ramble,
> I see lots of funny men;
> Some will rob you with a six-gun,
> And some with a fountain pen.
>
> But as through your life you travel,
> As through your life you roam,
> You won't never see an outlaw
> Drive a family from their home.[127]

Alongside "Pretty Boy Floyd's" considerations of societal injustices–the references to robbery occurring by means of legal or financial disenfranchisement via the fountain pen, and the sympathizing relation of the outlaw to the common man, depicting them as standing on even footing–are characterizations of Floyds more graphic crimes, blurring the line between hero and villain, or perhaps suggesting the circumstances that would engender such crime. The IWW too had their own songs, compiled in a mass produced pamphlet known as *The Little Red Book*, and while many simply praised the merits of unionizing, others suggested their own forms of banditry. Take, for example, *The Blackleg Miner*, first appearing in the 36th edition of *The Little*

[126]Ibid, 111.
[127] Ibid, 98.

*Red Book*. The song depicts the fate of a mining strike scab, known as a blackleg, who is thrown down a mine due to his willingness to cross picket lines. The song warns,

> So join the union while ye may.
>
> Don't wait til yer dyin' day,
>
> 'Cause that may not be far away
>
> Ye dorty blackleg miner.[128]

Here, the IWW embodies the position of outlaw, as depicted by Meyer, using threats of violence and intimidation to achieve societal justice. Moreover, the songs in *The Little Red Book* embrace the folk nature of outlawry, as they were intended to be sung communally, be it while working or striking. The already tenuous position of the IWW within the American landscape further cements their position as a form of outlaw organization, even while acting entirely within the realms of laws, and the embrace of communal folk music shows how culture develops from these spaces.

If one is considering music within the context of American societal development, and especially with regards towards nature and landscape, it cannot be too long before country music must be addressed. While its evolution is certainly not linear, country music has strong roots in both blues and Appalachian folk music, adopting, or co-opting, the communal nature of both genres. It is at its roots a multicultural genre; many of the instruments used in its making having been introduced to America by immigrants or enslaved people.[129] As the United States progressed into the twentieth century, and the kind of homestead life that Willa Cather wrote of became further relegated to the past, country music adapted to a nostalgic genre as singing cowboy radio shows rose to popularity. From here the rugged Western archetype became nearly

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[128] Industrial Workers of the World, *I.W.W. Songs to Fan the Flames of Discontent*, 68.
[129] "Explore the Roots & Branches of Country Music."
https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/country-music/roots-branches-of-country-music

inseparable from the genre.The reason I choose to bring up country music at this point is that, as an alternative artform to literature, it mirrors many of the same evolutions in thought. This could especially be said to be true in regards to anxieties towards modernity and the use of outlaw narratives.

In the manner that both “The Blackleg Miner,” and “Pretty Boy Floyd” utilize violence or gruffness as a counterculture narrative they become progenitors of a genre known as outlaw country, a movement that emerged in the country music scene in the early 1970s. In his essay “Down in the Hole: Outlaw Country and Outlaw Culture” author Max Fraser makes note of the way that the cave has interacted with American outsiders or “outlaws”, and perhaps most significantly, how these outlaws manage to garner sympathy within the mainstream. Fraser connects the real history of Confederate and Union soldiers, Wild West outlaws and more contemporary fugitives using cave systems for evasion to the rise of Outlaw Country. Outlaw Country rose from a rejection of the industry standards that had become mainstream within the country music world throughout the 1950’s and 60’s. During this time, as country music grew more popular in America, and country variety shows like the Grand Ole Opry brought the music into homes nationwide, the genre began to lose its improvisational and down-to-earth edge, and became far more commercialized. There became clearly defined routes as to how to succeed as a country musician. Artists were unable to pick their band, and were forced to play with certain studio musicians, they had limited creative control over the content of their songs, and they were restrained from saying or writing anything that could be deemed controversial. Going against the grain would mean being blacklisted from a highly insular industry. This is what Outlaw Country seeked to change. The movement, spearheaded by larger artists such as Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings, was led by a desire to let artists have control over their own music. As Fraser

puts it: “The outlaws stood in stark contrast to the smoothed-over edges of the “countrypolitan” artists…who had ruled the country charts since the late 1950s and whose clean-cut packaging seemed to angle more for bourgeois respectability than hillbilly authenticity.”[130] In this way the stars of outlaw country became akin to their real-life counterparts: they were folk heroes who seeked to strike back at the system they felt oppressed them; in the name of the little guy.

The “Outlaw” of outlaw country referred to the independent principles and creative desires of the artists within the genre more so than any actual aesthetic connection, but that does not mean that some artists did not take it literally. Willie Nelson, one of the larger names and founding fathers of the Outlaw Country movement, played it both ways with the concept album *Red Headed Stranger*, a series of old country cover songs arranged to tell the story of a man on the run after slaying his unfaithful wife and her lover. Due to its limited instrumentation, and the rough feel of its recordings, the album was met with extreme doubt by publisher Columbia Records before release, with the label insisting that Nelson go back and polish up the tracks. Nelson refused, however, and the album received extreme commercial success, becoming one of the artist's most highly regarded works.

Even more emblematic of outlaw country’s dual definition of independent recording and hard-living, wild West aesthetic was Ohio born David Allan Coe. Coe certainly embraced the anti-authoritarianism of the outlaw archetype, spending much of his youth in reformatory school, and time in his young-adulthood in prison. Furthermore, an overview of Coe’s life will find that he aligns himself with many of the tenets described by Meyer in his consideration of the American outlaw. Of Coe, Fraser writes in “Down in the Hole:” “The Coes came in from underneath: Donald [David’s father] made just $340 the year David was born, about one quarter

[130] Fraser, Max. “Down in the Hole: Outlaw Country and Outlaw Culture,” 92.

of the average household income at the time,"[131] this origin meeting the standard set by Meyer that the outlaw-hero be a man of the people. More than this however, Coe can be said to meet Meyers' final rule that, "the outlaw's actions and deeds do not always provoke approval and admiration." Coe was nothing if not a controversial figure; his work was filled crude, misogynistic and racist language, and his ideology was often paradoxical, with tracks such as "I Still Sing the Old Songs" dreaming for the day that the Confederate South returns, while others like "Fuck Aneta Briant[sic]"[132] demanded tolerance for queer individuals, albeit in no less of an offensive fashion. For Coe, as with the outlaws of the Wild West, the goal was not to be liked, or to be admired, but rather to exist in a space outside of the norms of society.

**"The Hole" and "The Cave."**

It is fitting, then, that Coe has a cave story of his own. Fraser writes, "After the federal government repossessed his home for unpaid taxes in 1990, a rumor began to spread, despite absolutely no proof of its veracity, that Coe had taken to living in a cave in Tennessee."[133] The cave was a fitting space for Outlaw Country artists, as it represented a disconnect from society. The Outlaw Country artists were unified in their desire for personal freedom, and when this clashed with the constraints or anxieties of modernity, the cave became a space of solace. Take for example artist Townes Van Zandt's song, "The Hole," in which an old woman who catches the singer "sneaking around her cave," attempts to compel the protagonist to stay with her. The song utilizes the cave to describe disconnect from society and a regression into the internal. Throughout Van Zandt's song, a minor-key spoken word piece, the narrator makes pleas to the

[131] Fraser "Down in the Hole," 92.
[132] Anita Bryant is an American singer known for her anti-gay activism.
[133] Fraser, 94.

old woman, a witch like figure, asking what will his friends, family and lovers think of his disappearance:

> I cannot stay too long, you know
> I left some friends at home
> Don't you fret about your friends
> Down here we're all alone
>
> What about my mother?
> I can't just leave her there to mourn
> You don't have to think about her
> Just forget you were ever born[134]

While the cave is clearly a place of darkness and isolation, as seen in the line "Don't you fret about your friends, down here we're all alone," it is also one of temptation. There is an allure to the solitude that the witch offers the narrator, an escape from the complexities of above-ground living and a simplicity found in isolation. While the narrator seems to care for his friends and family, the lyrics suggest that it is not he who will miss them, but rather that he fears his absence will hurt them. In this interpretation lies an anxiety towards outer relationships that could be perceived as anti-social. The cave, while stealing these relationships, also offers solace in a numbness towards them.

"The Hole" was first released on *No Deeper Blue*, an album put out in 1994, three years before Van Zandt's untimely death. Van Zandt said of the album, "You can't listen to it without throwing up blood," and the many melancholic tracks held within certainly emblemize demons that the artist could not seem to escape. Van Zandt, who worked most prominently as an outlaw country artist in the seventies and eighties, struggled with addictions to alcohol and drugs, including heroin, that would strongly influence his songwriting, and also severely alienate him from a number of friends and family members, including his children with whom he had an estranged relationship. Beyond his substance abuse issues, Van Zandt was haunted by other

[134] Townes Van Zandt, *The Hole*.

ghosts that would shape the narrative he portrays in “The Hole.” While in college, after falling out of a fourth story window in what seemed to be an attempted suicide, Van Zandt was sent to a mental hospital where he underwent electroshock therapy, permantly altering his short-term memory. Not long after, his 19 year old girlfriend was murdered while running errands for Van Zandt, an event which influenced the creation of his album *High, Low and in Between*. Traumatizing events such as these, combined with mental health issues, left Van Zandt bitter towards the world. While he still found beauty in his life, as evidenced by the numerous sentimental songs he wrote that avoided the despair of “The Hole”, it did not come to him through stable society. Perhaps the two most consistent themes of Van Zandt's work are, somewhat paradoxically, poetic professions of love and an unquenchable desire to leave everything he knows behind.

Returning to “The Hole” with this portrait of Van Zandt in mind it is worth considering that the darkness written about in the song, which might at first glance appear to be sequestered away in the witch’s cave, merely takes another form above ground. Van Zandt writes,

> I'll miss," I said, a girl I know
> I can't just leave there to pine
> She’s still got plenty of men to go
> I'm sure she'll do just fine
>
> What about my little boy?
> She said he’s just like you
> Let a few short years roll by
> He'll end up down here too

In this first stanza Van Zandt’s words, while speaking to the possibility of love offered in the upper-world, and the power of such relationships, also lament just how fleeting it can be, something which Van Zandt, who was unsuccessfully married thricely, was well aware of. “She’s still got plenty of men to go, I’m sure she’ll do just fine” is a reminder of the bittersweet way in

which the wounds from a lost relationship are often healed through forgetfulness and replacement. That the narrator's absence will not be mourned too harshly by this woman implies that even the strongest of feelings above ground can fade away, and could call into question the need to invoke said feelings in the first place. The second stanza quoted above is perhaps the most clear example of the emotions Van Zandt writes about not being confined to the cave. The very first lines of the song are,

> The old woman finally caught me
> Sneaking around her cave

If a literal interpretation of the song were to be taken, the narrator's position in the cave seems not to be an accident; rather the unintended event was being caught in the cave. The fact then that the narrator's son, "just like you" will too find the cave implies that it holds a draw of this kind of person. All that seems necessary for the son to reach the cave is to allow some time above ground. Here the roles of the cave and the above seem to switch; the hole now acts as a solace from what occurs outside. It is an inevitable final point, and the largest difference between the two worlds seems to be the visibility of darkness.

A second example of the cave in Outlaw Country can be found in Johnny Paycheck's 1967 song, "The Cave." Rather than the personal struggles Van Zandt discusses, Paycheck's song, written in the midst of the Vietnam war seems to be more directly addressing anxieties surrounding warfare and the use of large scale destructive weaponry. In "The Cave," a minor key, but upbeat country ballad, Paycheck relays a dream in which he has reverted to a child and becomes lost in a cave:

> Tunnel after tunnel going this ol' way and that
> Until suddenly I knew I didn't know where I was at
> I tried to find the way out but it seemed to be in vain
> The more I tried the more confused and frightened I became[135]

[135] Paycheck, Johnny, "The Cave."

Much as in “The Hole,” Paycheck’s cave seems to be a source of darker, more primal emotion, as conveyed through a return to childhood and sensations of helplessness. That the entire story plays out in a dreamstate lends itself to the notion of subconscious anxiety. However, the role of the cave evolves as the song progresses. Paycheck describes hearing a great storm while trapped in the cave, “the worst storm in a thousand years,” but, upon finally finding an escape to the surface he discovers that what he actually heard was a bomb exploding above ground.

> For there was not a blade of grass, a tree or bush around
> Not even one small bug crawling on the parched burnt ground
> And looking down the hill I saw the shambles of a town
> Where people used to live before the bomb came down

Now, the cave becomes a source of security, protecting the narrator from the devastation of war occurring above ground. More specifically, it became a source of naturality, far away from the pains of modernity. The narrator is a child underground, the sounds of modern day weaponry are converted to thunder and lightning, and once above ground it is discovered that all forms of natural life have been entirely eviscerated. The security offered by this lack of modernity, and the horrors of what is above ground, are enough to make the narrator, “wish I was back down in the cave.”

In taking this foray into the world of country music I hope to display a mirrored account of the struggles between individualism, environmentalism and frontier values that has occurred on the physical land of the United States: A philosophy that places emphasis on freedom and naturality becomes overtaken by a machine created from the development of said philosophy until counter-culturists demand a reversion of sorts, one that is likely impossible to achieve. The reason I am eager to create this parallel is because I feel the late stage–the current stage–of the frontier mindset within our approach to landscape and environment may contain a subtlety to it

that late stage country lacks. Modern country music is so blatant in its miserableness–rich elites selling pipe dreams of honest rural living infused with Christian values and militaristic nationalism–that the facade becomes undeniable. While it seems too cruel to say that some of the guests of my ranch were acting under the physical version of this facade, I can't help but connect the dots. This isn't the fault of the ranch, just as one cannot blame any individual country star, rather so many layers of complicated relationships with land and environment, society and independence, prosperity and greed, have built up over time that we must cling to the idealized notions of simplicity and core values that we have, or look for a hole in which to hide.

# Conclusion

Many times in writing this project I have been reminded of the epilogue to *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy's violent magnum opus, in which he writes,

> *In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there.*[136]

This passage, while vague in its exact meaning, is assertive in its hubris. Progress is made through holes in the ground, holes which seem to be an affront to a plan made by God. We are unclear of their purpose–they could be railroad tracks, fence posts, telephone poles–but they signify some form of progress. *Blood Meridian* is an account of cycles of brutality, ones posited as both meaningless and inevitable. It seems impossible that they could occur within the same sphere as Cather's idyllic pastorals, yet both authors seem to account similar histories of Western growth. Both certainly marvel at the ability of humans to lay claim to their domain, though perhaps in different ways.

I want to compare these two accounts at the conclusion of my project because I don't doubt the veracity of either of them. One can admire, and long for, the tender relationship between farmer and land that Cather so eloquently displays, while acknowledging the bloodshed and desire to claim that brims beneath the surface of this fantasy. Still, respecting both accounts does not mean being satisfied to meet in the middle of the two. Abbey, in the final pages of *Desert Solitaire*, suggests that a balance between worlds is the key to happiness, a "moderate

[136] McCarthy, Cormac, *Blood Meridian, or, the Evening Redness in the West*, 351.

extremism,"[137] though given his penchant for wryness I somewhat doubt his sincerity. Furthermore, in a world plagued with ecological strife, and constant mechanization and urbanization, to stay in balance means to constantly shift in one direction.

I have attempted to keep my project somewhat chronological, leading up to the present, and that presents an extra challenge of the conclusion, which is to try to answer the question of, "So what now?" If attempts to harken back to a more simplistic, less modernized, lifestyle are inherently embroiled with ideology that demands progression and consumption, where are we to go but deeper into modernity? To try and begin to answer this question I would like to turn to one final source. In a 2007 paper titled "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster" Canadian cultural theorist Imre Szeman discusses the ways in which oil discourse, especially in regards to its future as a finite resource, is wrapped in a shroud of what he calls techno-utopianism. This idea suggests that post-oil futures are being considered with an exclusively oil-centric mindset, one heavily rooted in capitalism.

> With respect to the end of oil, it proposes two solutions: either scientific advances will enable access to oil resources hitherto too expensive to develop (the Alberta tar sands, deep-sea reserves, etc.) while simultaneously devising solutions for carbon emissions (exhaust scrubbers, carbon sequestering, etc.), or technological innovations will create entirely new forms of energy, such as hydrogen fuel cells for space-age automobiles.[138]

Szeman suggests that when considering how the future will reckon with the disappearance of oil, we like to turn to futuristic ideas based on the belief that the science needed to solve the problem will come in time. We need not worry now, as we have the innovative capacity to solve the problem when the time comes. Szeman says this is a more right-wing approach, one which

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[137] Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 298.
[138] Szeman, Imre, "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster," 812.

assumes technological superiority over environmental problems. The left-wing alternative is what Szeman calls apocalyptic environmentalism. In this version of the future, it is recognized that in order to address such a pressing issue, change must occur on a societal level, "However, since such change is not on the horizon or is difficult to imagine, it sees the future as Bosch-like—a hell on earth, obscured by a choking carbon dioxide smog."[139] The issue, Szeman seems to argue, is that both sides are concerned with a symptom, not the disease itself. It is capitalism, as a political and societal structure, that has engendered the chokehold oil has on modern life, and should the life-saving futuristic innovation that renders oil obsolete not arrive, it will be capitalism that forces society towards apocalypse.

The two ends of the spectrum, stuck on a two dimensional X axis and unable to perceive the shift to Y, feels highly relatable when considering the problem of our relationship to landscape. One does not need to hope to escape to some romantic past ideal, nor does one need to bitterly embrace an industrial future. However, if a genuine connection with the land is to be made, it does not seem entirely possible to do so within the current social mindset. This does not mean that one should take to the woods by themselves and carve out their own life, as that only feeds into the rugged individualist archetype. Instead it would seem a new conception of what it looks like to be a part of nature is needed. Maybe a connection to the land does not come in the form of sprawling farmlands and rural homes, but instead through dense urban areas, which are beginning to be debated as the more environmentally sustainable option. Maybe it is not the raising and slaughtering of cattle, or the breaking and riding of horses that creates the simple life, but a distant admiration of the flora and fauna that surrounds us.

I'll be honest, it doesn't sound as exciting to me. That seems to be the sad reality of this problem; the best option is not always the most enjoyable one. Still, returning to the compulsive

[139] Szemen, "System Failure," 815.

urge I feel upon witnessing some breathtaking view, I feel that if I was able to shirk this culturally passed on desire to make something of the land, or the assumption that I am somehow currently separate from it, it might be replaced with some sense of satisfaction.

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