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Constructing Dry Wests: Aridity and Water in Twentieth-century Western American Fiction

by

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Dedication

For Judy Grover.

And for the Logan River.

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Constructing Dry Wests: Aridity and Water in Twentieth-century Western American Fiction

Dissertation Abstract–Idaho State University (2019)

As the American West enters an era of climate uncertainty due to anthropogenic climate change, this dissertation looks back to the most recent literary century in which the seeds of climate change were sown. Examining a cross-section of western American fiction from the twentieth century, I propose that the depictions of water and aridity in these texts are intertwined with the metanarratives that have defined the West as a region and the literary genres and structures that authors have used to house their fictions. In other words, responses to water and aridity in individual literary fictions of the twentieth-century American West are at least partially constructed by how a text answers the question “What is the West?” Fictions that define the West as a garden or a frontier or an indigenous homeland draw from those definitions in their depictions of water and aridity and imagine a relationship with aridity and water that conforms to the region’s defining metanarrative. In addition, these definitions of the West and corresponding depictions of water and aridity can be read through genre conventions and literary tropes that were popular during the past century. Ultimately, dry wests are constructed from the material reality of an arid West, the cultural narratives used to define the West, and the literary genres and structures within which narratives are housed. These variables lead to a variety of dry American Wests in twentieth-century fiction, with each West helping to explain the culture that has contributed to climate change while also suggesting revisions to cultural logics that might find America adapting and reducing climate change’s effects.

Key Words: western American literature, material ecocriticism, water and the American West, American literature, aridity and literature, water in literature, deserts in literature, Westerns, American fiction, twentieth-century American fiction

Chapter 1 - Locating Aridity in Western American Literature

Wallace Stegner's novel *Angle of Repose* is narrated by Lyman Ward, an aged and wheelchair-bound historian of the American West who is writing the story of his grandparents, Susan and Oliver Ward, characters that are thinly veiled versions¹ of the writer and illustrator Mary Hallock Foote and her husband Arthur. After coming West from New England and spending years as a mining engineer in a series of mines across the West, Oliver stops searching for rare metals and devises a canal-building plan to irrigate a section of arid land near Boise, Idaho. Oliver's plan will divert a creek from its historical route out onto an "enormous sage plain" in an effort to convert land that has for thousands of years existed as a semi-desert into an agricultural settlement (368). Eventually, as more settlers move to the area, he plans to construct a major dam on the river to irrigate even more land. The Wards will profit from selling the water rights to the project's settlers. This plan requires capital and while this capital always seems close, Oliver is never quite able to secure it. After one setback, Lyman—the story's narrator and the voice of one who is interpreting the lives of his nineteenth-century ancestors and the history of the American West from a century into the future—works himself into something of a lather as he considers the very human story he is trying to tell along with the cultural and environmental consequences that such human behavior wrought upon the West. "They were makers and doers," he writes of his grandparents and the engineers they were working with who had become almost like family, "they wanted to take a piece of wilderness and turn it into a

¹ Stegner's use of Foote's life and her words—he included letters she had written and passages from her then unpublished memoir with only an informal vague citation—is fraught with controversy and complexity. For an overview of the permissions, events, and arguments surrounding this controversy, see Krista Comer's "Exceptionalism, Other Wests, and Critical Regionalism" pages 166-168. I cover Foote's experiences in Idaho in more detail in chapter two.

home for civilization. I suppose they were wrong—their whole civilization was wrong—but they were the antithesis of the mean and greedy” (385).

In this minor outburst, Stegner’s historian captures the ways that American *Wests*—the different versions of the region that populate our historical understandings, cultural metanarratives, and artistic renderings—inevitably come into conflict with each other. Once we begin to unpack it, “the West” is revealed as a series of historical accounts, geographic and ecological realities, and cultural narratives that coexist uneasily, fighting for air and exposure and often revealing tensions and assumptions that seem to transform under scrutiny and analysis. For Lyman Ward, his grandparents do not represent some profane attempt to extract wealth from the land, even though this passage implicitly reveals that such a narrative is part of the region’s history and identity. Instead, the Wards are “makers and doers” who want to civilize the wilderness. They embody the story of the West in which the characters are stubborn pioneers who survive with pioneer spirit, persistence, and American ingenuity. But Lyman the historian can’t help but recognize another narrative of the West encroaching on this romantic story, the fact that such remaking of the wilderness required the displacement and genocide of indigenous people while stopping large rivers in their tracks, capturing water behind concrete dams, and fundamentally changing ecological systems. “I suppose they were wrong” is a subtle yet clear way of establishing Lyman Ward’s own internal conflict, his own cognitive dissonance at *Wests* clashing and fighting, threatening to confuse his narrative. Lyman’s revision of this statement—“their whole civilization was wrong”—makes the colonial project explicit and exposes the scope of tension and conflict between the *Wests* that Lyman Ward is attempting to reconcile.

Embedded within and flowing around Lyman Ward’s rant and his narrative are aridity and water in the American West. Aridity—in its distinct otherness compared to the humid East

from which the Wards have come—allows Oliver to see water as a scarce resource like the rare metals he has been extracting from mines. Aridity is a problem to be solved, not an attribute to be explored. In Oliver’s version of the West, the West is a wilderness in need of civilizing; water is a resource from which an American identity—that of the yeoman farmer—can be extended. In other words, while aridity and water are central to Oliver’s plan and therefore central to the narrative that Lyman is constructing, these environmental attributes are ultimately interpreted through larger understandings of history, culture, identity, capital, and memory. While Stegner has argued that aridity is the attribute by which the West is defined,² in *Angle of Repose*, aridity and water are written into a larger conflict about the narratives of western culture, identity, and history. In this way, Stegner’s novel serves as an example of the arguments that I wish to make in this dissertation: the story of aridity in twentieth-century fiction of the American West is inseparable from larger conflicts and tensions about the cultural meaning of the American West. This inseparability means that depictions of western aridity and water can be read as interpretations that are dependent on how texts and readers define the West itself.

In the entry for “West” in *Keywords for American Studies*, Krista Comer identifies the word’s competing referents. “West” can refer to the “global colonial powers in Europe and North America” (as in “Western Civilization”) (“West”). Alternately it can refer to a direction of movement (as in “go west, young man” or “westward expansion”), which is distinct from the first definition but not exactly unrelated historically. Or, if one wishes to focus on the land itself when studying America, the West can refer to “the area west of the ninety-eighth meridian, where arid country begins” (Comer, “West”). This last definition is the preferred referent of John

² See for instance, Stegner’s essays “Thoughts in the Dry Land” and “Living Dry” in *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*.

Wesley Powell, Wallace Stegner himself, and environmental historians such as Donald Worster. In the essay “New West, True West,” Worster contrasts the definition of the West put forward by the historian Walter Prescott Webb—who argued in the 1930s that the West begins near the 98th meridian where humidity gives way to aridity—with the seemingly ever-present thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, who in 1893 argued that the West was the unconquered side of the frontier line, the conquering of which was a process for the construction of American identity. Worster is not ambiguous about where his allegiance lies: “I know in my bones, if not always in my education, that Webb was right” (24). What Comer captures that Worster does not is that the primary attribute of “West” is not aridity or frontier conflict or even the region’s colonial history (the privileging of which threatens to ignore the much longer indigenous histories of the region and the even longer geologic history). Instead, the West’s primary attribute is the contested definition of the region, which finds American wests at odds with each other, something we see in Worster’s own insistence that aridity wipes out the frontier and in Lyman Ward’s attempts to reconcile colonialism with the culture of “makers and doers.” As William Handley and Nathaniel Lewis argue: “The most continuous story of the West, then, is neither the (Old) clash of civilization and savagery nor the (New) legacy of conquest, but competing claims of cultural authenticity” (2).

Recent scholarship on the literary West³ has pushed the field away from questions such as “which West is the *true* West?” to instead “reconceptualiz[ing] regionalism critically so that it questions the who, what, and where of the West” (Comer “Exceptionalism” 160). This critical

³ Just a few examples of recent books in this vein include Victora Lamont’s *Westerns: A Women’s History*, Susan Kollin’s *Captivating Westerns: The Middle East in the American West*, Neil Campbell’s *Rhizomatic West*, and Krista Comer’s *Surfer Girls in the New World Order*, and Priscilla Solis Ybarra’s *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment*.

regionalism is characterized by a willingness to recognize and study the conflicts of how a region is defined and how these definitions create their own hierarchies and identities—identities that are local, regional, national, and transnational. Critical regionalism examines the tension between the local, the national, and the global while examining how seemingly regional culture, such as the iconography of the cowboy, transcends regional and even national borders and refuses to be contained by traditional concepts of regionalism. Critical regionalism recognizes that regional meaning has a complicated relationship with the land itself, that the meaning of a region is multiple, contested, evolving, and mobile.

This dissertation focuses on depictions of aridity and water in twentieth century fiction of the American West and examines how those depictions intersect and sometimes conflict with competing and changing definitions of the West as a region. Looking at a variety of literary texts that span the twentieth century, my argument has two components. First, I argue that responses to water and aridity in individual literary fictions of the 20th century American West are at least partially governed by how a text answers the question “what is the West?” Fictions that define the West as a garden or a frontier or an indigenous homeland draw from those definitions in their depictions of water and aridity and in the way that characters conceive of their relationships with water and aridity. Second, I propose that definitions of the West and depictions of water and aridity are intertwined with other materials that are used to construct dry wests in culture and literature. As a result, responses to aridity and water in twentieth-century western American fiction are an amalgamation of the materials—genres, ideologies, metanarratives, and preconceptions about land and water—from which the stories of the West are constructed.

Scholarship examining water and aridity in the literature of the West has lagged behind the work of environmental historians (such as Worster) who—beginning with Webb nearly 70

years ago—have positioned responses to western American aridity as a central topic of study.⁴ The most reasonable explanation for this disparity is that the field of environmental history is a decade or two older than literary studies' equivalent, ecocriticism. In addition, environmental history's focus has been on the social and cultural relationships between humans and the environments they inhabit, a relationship that is especially evident in the arid West where massive concrete dams serve as testaments to the relationship between American culture and aridity. Conversely, early ecocriticism often focused on nonfiction nature writing, which has at times foregrounded individual escape from civilization and culture. The result of the larger body of work produced by environmental historians is a deep examination of the texts prioritized by historians—legislation such as the Reclamation Act of 1902, the Colorado River Compact, diaries and journals of colonial explorers and settlers, treaties between Native American tribes and the federal government, newspaper editorials, marketing materials, and propaganda generated by those hoping to profit from the sale of arid land. While literary critics have examined fiction, drama, poetry, film, and nature writing from and about the American West for decades, aridity has perhaps too often been relegated to a mere characteristic of “setting” and work is required to understand how culture and aridity influence each other in the literature of the American West. Literature of the West has generally acknowledged aridity as an environmental reality, but this acknowledgement is mixed into a confluence of cultural milieu. As a result, literary texts—especially fiction—create a distance between the reader and aridity

⁴ Important texts in this tradition include Stegner's essays and his biography of John Wesley Powell, Webb's *The Great Plains* (1931) and Worster's *Rivers of Empire* (1985). An incomplete list of additional texts that have contributed to understanding of this history include Norris Hundley's *Water in the West* (1975), Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert* (1986), Mark Fiege's *Irrigated Eden* (1999), Donald Pisani's *To Reclaim a Divided West* (1992) and *Water and the American Government* (2002), and Nancy Langston's *Where Land and Water Meet* (2003).

that is filled by plot, characterization, metanarrative, history, memory, ideology, and identity.

One way to access and study aridity in the literature of the American West then is to examine the influence that such cultural material has exerted upon the way literature understands, frames, and constructs the arid West. However, such influence does not work in only one direction. Aridity in the West also influences metanarratives, histories, and ideologies through which literature (in its broadest definition) is constructed and read. Therefore, literary analyses must consider both how literature and culture write aridity and water and how aridity and water write back.

Such an approach, which is the approach of this dissertation, adheres to Tom Lynch's definition of ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism is, succinctly, the study of how the manifold interrelationships between literature—a human expressive activity—and the natural world that provides the matrix in which that expressive activity occurs. It is concerned with showing how literature is embedded within and mutually symbiotic with the encompassing more-than-human world that enables, enriches, sustains, alters and in turn is altered by it. (13)

Lynch's definition is in line with Lawrence's Buell's concept of mutual construction and the more recent theorizing of material ecocriticism. For Buell, discourse mediates and constructs our interactions with the world, yet discourse itself is "regulated by engagement, whether experiential or vicarious, with actual environments" ("Endangered World" 42). Material ecocriticism is interested in the "more than human" world of materiality that literature is embedded (or emeshed) within and how literature and materiality combine to create stories. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann suggest that all matter "is a "storied matter." It is a material "mesh" of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players

are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces” and that material ecocriticism locates what has often been described as “nature” within the “material turn” (1-2).⁵ This move asks ecocritics to reconcile the mimetic representations of nature sought by early ecocritics⁶ with the poststructuralist focus on language as the means by which the world is constructed. Material ecocriticism “is premised on the integral ways of thinking language and reality, meaning and matter together” (Iovino and Opperman 4). A materialist ecocritical approach to aridity and water in the American West then reads not only the novels and nature writing that grapples with the West’s desert landscapes and the human interactions with them, but it reads the arid land itself as a text and the material responses to aridity—such as the construction of dams—as textual responses. This is not to say that dams are only text, but rather to say that building the largest concrete dam in the world signifies *something*.

Consider, for instance, Joan Didion’s essay “At the Dam,” in which she analyzes the meaning of Hoover Dam and suggests that the material structure might be read as a monument to the hubris of humanity. The essay ends with Didion imagining the dam functioning out into a future “free of man” operating on an earth in which humanity has failed to survive, “transmitting power and releasing water to a world where no one is” (200). Didion performs a kind reading of the dam itself, which allows readers to read the essay, the dam, the desert that surrounds Lake

⁵ Iovino and Opperman describe the “material turn” as “an extensive conversation across the territories of the sciences and the humanities and embraces such fields as philosophy, quantum physics, biology, sociology, feminist theories, anthropology, archaeology, and cultural studies, just to name a few. Whether one labels it “new materialisms” or “the material turn,” this emerging paradigm elicits not only new nonanthropocentric approaches, but also possible ways to analyze language and reality, human and nonhuman life, mind and matter, without falling into dichotomous patterns of thinking” (2).

⁶ For examples (and a critical assessment) of this approach, see Dana Phillips’ book *The Truth of Ecology*. For a response to Phillips’ critique, see Buell’s chapter “The Word, The Text, and the Ecocritic” in his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism*.

Mead and the dam site, and the Colorado River that the dam holds captive and releases in increments. These readings can increase our understanding of the nature-culture exchanges that make up the material region and mythic constructions of the American West.

Ecocritical analyses of aridity and water in the literature of the American West—while produced at lesser rate than environmental histories of the same subject—have generally been concerned with such exchanges. David N. Cassuto’s 1992 book *Dripping Dry: Literature, Politics, and Water in the Desert Southwest* examines the ways that political ideologies, such as reclamation and the environmentalism of restoration, influence depictions of water in the fiction of Mary Austin, Edward Abbey, John Steinbeck, and others. Cassuto’s book suggests that political ideologies have been important in how Americans write aridity. Alternately, in *Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America*, Caitrin Gersdorf analyzes a wide cross section of American writers of arid lands—from John Wesley Powell to Alfredo Véa Jr.—and argues that the desert has been “a significant medium of American self-creation and identification” (22). In other words, while Cassuto argues that political ideology has helped to write aridity and water, Gersdorf suggests that Americans have used aridity and the desert to write themselves.

Other studies have applied similar approaches in different ways. Lynch’s *Xerophilia: Ecocritical Explorations in Southwestern Literature* argues that literature “is one of the key cultural factors mediating between self and place” and that the connections between humans and the lands they inhabit should be understood at the level of the bioregion rather than the national region, a process in which the land assists in writing the culture by inscribing biologically coherent borders on maps while humans inscribe their connections with the land in bioregional stories and literary texts (21). Lynch reads a variety of texts, many by indigenous writers, which

forge connections between the arid bioregions of the southwest and the people who inhabit them. These texts and Lynch's interpretations provide a series of seldom-heard narratives about how Americans might inhabit arid landscapes. However, Lynch's hope that nationalist identities will be replaced or tempered by bioregionalist identities grows dimmer as nationalism is enjoying a resurgence in the years since his book was published, suggesting that the arbitrary national borders and regions that Lynch argues have "no internally inherent meaning" are growing in importance rather than diminishing (22). The changing meaning of national regions (and by extension the lands they encompass) is the impetus for John Beck's *Dirty Wars: Landscape, Power, and Waste in Western American Literature* in which he argues that literature since World War II reveals that "the so-called "wasteland" discourse that can be said to have characterized negative Euro-American responses to much of the desert West up until World War II is given a new positive valence as the thinly inhabited areas of the region become the location for American military-industrial enterprise" (2). For Beck, the desert southwest in the late twentieth century operates like a version of Poe's purloined letter; the evidence of cold war atomic testing, military empire, Japanese internment, and nationalist border wars are hidden in plain sight. These material constructions are open secrets that remain generally unexplored by historical conceptions of American culture because the desert is imagined as empty, wasted space.

Each of these critics examines the ways that literature and culture frame and construct the arid West while in turn being altered and influenced by aridity itself. This dissertation takes a similar approach that focuses on the interplay between aridity and two specific aspects of culture that past studies have not covered in depth: cultural conceptions or metanarratives that have been used to make meaning of the West as a region and the literary structures in which those conceptions are housed.

American Wests and Aridity

One of the persistent activities of literary critics and historians of the American West has been grappling with large, all-encompassing metanarratives.⁷ This activity has been necessary in part because American culture has been willing to embrace such narratives about the West, and those narratives, once ensconced in the culture, reproduce themselves in the region's literature and culture and reify their authority in explaining and defining the region. In this section I summarize the metanarratives—the American wests—that I find in the fiction I examine in the chapters that follow and consider how these wests interact with each other along with the “nature-culture exchanges” each West performs within the material reality of aridity in the region.

These American wests are not always distinct from one another; they often bleed together and apart. While the act of trying to define them and generalize their characteristics is, I think, necessary for understanding the relationship between western American literature and aridity, it inevitably fails to capture the full complexity⁸ and diversity of any single version of the West, an act that is beyond reach given that each individual constructs their own version of the West.

⁷ My use of “metanarrative” draws on Jean-Francois Lyotard's use of the term in *The Post-Modern Condition*. Critics and historians of the American West have often referred to the “mythic West,” a term that is associated with the image of the frontier, the cowboy, the dime novel, and western film along with other wide-ranging and difficult to pin down connotations. My use of “metanarrative” and the discussion of various metanarratives that have been used to explain the West, is an attempt to classify the cultural material of the American West with more precision than the terms “myth” or “mythic West” allow.

⁸ While these characterizations shouldn't be thought of as definitive, nether should the list of “Wests” I describe be considered complete. This section describes the various literary Wests I find cropping up in the literature I examine in this dissertation, but other Wests remain unexamined here. Wests such as the urban West, the Chicano West, the transnational West, the deep geologic West, or the many versions of the West unique to specific indigenous traditions are all important for thinking about how the West has been constructed and continues to be reconstructed in literature and culture.

Having a sense of the metanarratives that have been used to construct the American West is important not because I wish to identify the “true West,” but because these metanarratives render visible the materials that those inside and outside the region use to construct depictions of western aridity. In other words, these definitions of the West have contributed to how aridity has been written in the West while also revealing something about how aridity has contributed to the construction of American wests.

The West as a Reclaimed Garden

The idea of the American West as a garden is inseparable from the unstable referents that Comer describes in her definition of the keyword “West”; it is tied up in the conflation and overlapping meaning of the West and the American West. In *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, Carolyn Merchant links nineteenth century westward expansion in the United States with the cultural tendency that labeled America a “new world” and ultimately with a longstanding Christian belief—which ultimately became a mainstream Euro-American secular belief—that humanity could be restored to a kind of Garden of Eden. For Merchant, this desire to recover the Garden has been present in what is referred to as Western culture for centuries. Beginning with the Old Testament and working her way through Greek and Roman philosophers and poets, early modern and renaissance thinkers (primarily John Locke and Francis Bacon), capitalist and colonial reactions to Columbus’s arrival in the Americas, and Puritan reactions to the American Wilderness as a place of terror and evil, Merchant finds that the story Western culture has told itself about nature has been a story of fall and recovery. In European colonial and American history, this idea of recovery has driven the idea that movement westward is key to recovering Eden. Columbus’s own reports from the Americas in 1498 (his third trip, this time to what is now South America) trumpeted his finding of what he thought was

the location of the biblical garden (Merchant 57-58). More than two hundred years later Crèvecoeur wrote of American farmers as a kind of “American Adam” (Merchant 102-104). These kinds of arguments were echoed by the American proselytizers of westward expansion in the nineteenth century. Henry Nash Smith traced the use of this metaphor in his popular cultural history *Virgin Land*. Annette Kolodny noted that the metaphors Smith was examining were inherently gendered and that the garden metanarrative depicts the land as a nurturing woman, a “movement back into the realm of the Mother, to begin again” (*Lay of the Land* 153).

For some Americans, aridity in the West did not complicate the garden narrative, even as settlement began to grapple with the climate beyond the hundredth meridian. Wallace Stegner memorably summarized the salesmanship of one such proselytizer, William Gilpin, the first governor of the Colorado Territory:

Agriculture was effortless: no forests needed clearing, manual tillage was not required, even the use of the plow was not essential, so eager were seeds to germinate in this Paradise. As the plains were amply irrigated by underground and artesian waters, the plateau was watered by mountain streams of purest melted snow . . . No heat or cold, no drouth or saturation, no fickle climate of uncertain yield. (“Beyond the Hundredth” 4)

Others, however, saw the recovery of the Garden as a process that required technology. They believed that a kind of Eden could be reclaimed by engineering a garden landscape from the arid West.

This idea of an engineered Eden perhaps best explains the pervasiveness of the term “reclamation” in rhetoric surrounding federal dams and irrigation projects in the American West throughout the twentieth century. Merchant argues that “consciously at times, unconsciously at others, we search for ways to *reclaim*” the lost biblical Garden and “This powerful story of

reclaiming and redeeming a fallen earth by human labor becomes the major justification for westward movement and the effort to remake indigenous Americans in the image of European culture. Eastern wilderness and western deserts are turned into gardens for American settlers” (3, 7; emphasis mine). This idea of “reclaiming” what has been lost is encoded into the name of the legislation that funds the major dam-building projects in the West during the twentieth century (The Reclamation Act) and the federal agency that constructed and operates most major western dams (The Bureau of Reclamation). In addition, as I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, the terms “reclamation” and “reclaim” occur widely in twentieth century western American fiction, often to describe efforts to remake the land. However, as the texts I analyze show, the signifier “reclaim” is slippery and often repurposed to signal a wide variety of ideas beyond the recovery of the Garden.

The West as Frontier

The metanarrative that has been foremost in generating conversation among literary critics and historians of the American West is Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis. In 1893, Turner claimed that the country was fundamentally changing with the so-called closing of what Anglo Americans saw as a frontier line, a border into an uncivilized, unpeopled country. Turner’s famous thesis⁹ argues that the process of settler colonialism—which required Anglo American settlers to subdue the wilderness and indigenous populations—created a unique American identity, a “coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness . . . that dominant individualism . . . and exuberance which comes with freedom” (61). While the

⁹ Turner’s thesis is one example of how these American Wests bleed together as it is linked with the Recovery of the Garden (and with the West as a site of colonialism, as I will discuss). Merchant argues that the structure of Turner’s argument fits into that of heroic tales that have sustained the Recovery of the Garden metanarrative for centuries (111). Similarly, Turner’s thesis is one source for constructing the West as a paradise for rugged individualism.

“new western history” spearheaded by Patricia Limerick has succeeded in challenging Turner’s thesis, it was fundamental to the way America thought about itself and about the West through much of the twentieth century. It is Turner’s thesis that troubles Lyman Ward in Stegner’s *Angle of Repose*. The business of “making and doing” is what Turner celebrated.

In chapter two, I read the fiction of Mary Hallock Foote (the inspiration for Stegner’s novel) and consider her depictions of water and aridity in light of a land that, for Foote, needed making and doing. Foote’s fiction was published in the years following the publication of Turner’s thesis. In some ways they shared a conception about the meaning of the West. For Turner, the Westward movement of the “frontier line” meant that the frontier was a cyclical project, a chance for Americans of multiple generations to civilize the wilderness, to take their turn in making America once more and thereby become American themselves in character. For Foote, the landscape of the arid West was very much in need of being made *into* American space. In arid southwestern Idaho, Foote encountered a land she did not recognize, a place that seemed threatening and in need of civilizing. Her Idaho fiction, which was written while her husband was working on the canal project Stegner fictionalized in *Angle of Repose*, depicts aridity in terms of savagery and monstrosity, attributes that she houses in stories and novels that I read as gothic. For Foote, the arid West was a frontier that could be made into a garden, but her optimism is balanced by anxiety generated by the land’s distinct otherness. For those who shared Foote’s anxiety, aridity made the frontier into an alien space compared with the greenery of England and the American East where Anglo American culture and literature were born.

Turner himself recognized this anxiety and connected it to both aridity and the closing of the frontier. In “The Problem of the West,” published in 1896 in *The Atlantic*, Turner wrote that “the rushing wave of settlement has broken with a shock against the arid plains”; in the same

paragraph he describes, with some alarm, the growing populist movement in the West and the accompanying “Discontent” of those with “training in the Old West” who were finding “the frontier opportunities gone” (74, 75). This discontent and the lack of opportunities helped to create the political will that passed the Reclamation Act six years later. While Worster sees Reclamation as the beginning of a technocratic, centralized control of western water, Reclamation can also be understood culturally as an attempt to reopen the frontier by shifting the site of battle to those bioregions that had resisted frontier advancement. The environmental historian Donald Pisani argues that “it makes more sense to see the Reclamation Act of 1902 and the events that followed as evidence of the persistence of “frontier America” . . . rather than as the emergence of “modern America.” (*Water and Government* xi).

While Turner’s thesis begins by declaring the frontier closed, it reflects and reinforces a metanarrative—the West as frontier and maker of America (and American men)—that reclamation proponents were determined to keep open. This same determination characterizes the production of genre Westerns, which increased in popularity and literary reputation in the early twentieth century. Like Turner, the genre Western often bemoans the disappearing “Old West” and the closing frontier. But like reclamation, the genre attempts to keep the frontier open. Rather than build dams, the genre Western keeps the frontier open by reestablishing its place in cultural memory. It does so by inscribing Turner’s frontier characteristics onto its protagonists and then placing those protagonists onto the landscapes where the “waves of settlement” broke “with a shock”: the most arid parts of the American West. In the Western we find the bleeding together of two metanarratives about the West. The genre sees the West as frontier but, taking a cue from Turner and others, it also depicts the arid, desert West as a paradise for rugged individualism.

The West as an Individualist Paradise

The word “individualism” has a variety of definitions and a slippery history. The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that the term denotes both “self-reliance” and “self-centeredness” (“individualism”). In the American West, “individualism” has been used to mean both (and neither) of these things. This ambiguity, along with the term’s association with American identity, has meant that “individualism” has been a useful rhetorical commonplace for a number of causes in the history of the nation and the West. The phrase “rugged individualism” was popularized by Herbert Hoover in his 1928 speech at the Republican National Convention where he was nominated as the party’s presidential candidate. For the westerner Hoover—and for the genre Western—rugged individualism is primarily concerned with freedom from government oversight and interference. Hoover’s speech describes the period from the end of World War I to the late 1920s as a period in which government control over American life was in retreat. While government intervention was necessary during the war, American democracy requires that centralized government be minimized for the sake of the citizenry. Hoover frames government’s role as the defining question of the election and argues that Americans must choose between “the American system of rugged individualism and a European philosophy of diametrically opposed doctrines—doctrines of paternalism and state socialism.” This framing turns individualism into a choice between East and West, between a return to Europe or a continual striking out to the Individualist West, which fits into the ideologies of Manifest Destiny and westward expansionism.¹⁰

¹⁰ Hoover focuses on the role of government as related to industry. While he touches on personal freedoms and social welfare programs, neither of these items are his primary concern. He also goes out of his way to clarify that he is not advocating an unregulated free market system. Individualism, he argues, “demands economic justice as well as political and social justice.”

It is this idea of self-reliance and a rejection of government intervention that come to characterize the rugged individualism of the genre Western, even while federal intervention into the West's economy increased during the twentieth century through dam building and operations, agricultural subsidies, management of public lands, and construction and operation of military installations.¹¹ In the Western,¹² the frontier is always open because it is always 1880, and disillusioned post-civil war southerners such as Owen Wister's *Virginian* and John Wayne's Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* can be reborn outside the sphere of government influence, exacting frontier justice on cattle rustlers and savage Indians without interference from eastern sensibilities or governments. Similarly, in Jack Schaefer's 1949 novel *Shane* and the 1953 film adaptation directed by George Stevens (both of which I analyze in chapter three), decisions about criminal justice, land use, settlement, and especially water use are outside the sphere of governmental influence. Rugged individualists such as Shane—another white southerner who has come West after the civil war—rely on their own sense of justice, a rather extreme configuration of what Hoover called “self government.”

For Wallace Stegner, aridity plays a role in the interpretation of the West as a paradise for rugged individualism. In the essay “Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur,” Stegner suggests that the West's large, lightly inhabited spaces—a product of aridity since towns and dwellings

¹¹ This contradiction has not gone unnoticed by historians. Carl Abbott notes that “the ‘independent’ and ‘individualistic’ West . . . finds itself dependent on farm supports [and] subsidized water” (471). Similarly, Patricia Limerick describes the West's relationship with the federal government as one of dependence and denial of that dependence. Westerners adopted Hoover's rhetoric of rugged individualism, but they also benefitted more than any other region from the policies of Franklin Roosevelt, who defeated Hoover in 1932 with the country mired in depression, and whose New Deal flooded the West with public works projects including dam constructions and drought relief programs (Limerick 88).

¹² Following the lead of the journal *Western American Literature*, I have capitalized “Western” when it names the genre, but left it lowercase when functioning as an adjective to denote something as being associated by the American West.

require water to subsist, leaving many of the extensive dry swaths of the West uninhabited—is at the root of individualism in the West. Stegner argues that all that unpeopled space combined with the western penchant toward mobility has required westerners to be self-sufficient travelers, and this self-sufficiency has been captured and sometimes perverted by western American literature into rugged individualism. Stegner traces rugged individualism in the genre Western—both its penchant for self-reliance and its perversions—back beyond Hoover to James Fenimore Cooper and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and arrives at the conclusion that rugged individualism as performed by the hero of the Western is difficult to separate from that same hero’s self-interest. Stegner would love to bury the hero of the Western, but he cannot, because the culture refuses to give him up. This love affair with the Western’s hero can also be traced to aridity and its resulting space: “Space, itself the product of incorrigible aridity and hence more or less permanent, continues to suggest unrestricted freedom, unlimited opportunity for testings and heroisms, a continuing need for self-reliance and physical competence” (*Bluebird* 109). Here Stegner is reading the story of matter, crediting the land itself as co-author of the American obsession with individualism and freedom in the West; space is a text that “suggests” freedom from oversight and community.

Stegner is not alone in his suspicions of individualism as an ideal in the arid West, and aridity itself has been at times an argument for a more community-based culture in the region. When the Reclamation Act was working its way through congress, the irrigation evangelist William Smythe was arguing that aridity required Americans to forsake their individualism and embrace communities. The war against the frontier in the humid East could be won by individual settlers, Smythe claimed, but to conquer aridity Americans would need to band together. Aridity was “an obstacle beyond the power of the individual settler to overcome” (17). In his book *The*

Conquest of Arid America, Smythe includes a short poem titled “Emancipation,” which implies that aridity and perhaps individualism are forms of slavery. The final stanza of this poem begins with the lines “*The Nation reaches its hand into the Desert. / That which lay beyond the grasp of the Individual yields / to the hand of Associated Man*” (ix; emphasis Smythe). Similarly, Frederick Jackson Turner thought that the most arid portions of the West required “vast paternal enterprises of reclamation” from the federal government to subdue a “frontier” that “should be social rather than individual” (quoted in Hundley, “Historical Imagination” 6). It seemed to these thinkers at the beginning of the twentieth century that aridity would temper individualism.

But the narrative of the West as a space designated for rugged individualism outside the reach of the government’s hand has remained even as federally funded and operated water projects have allowed massive cities to grow in the most arid regions of the American West. The story of rugged individualism has risen and fallen since Hoover’s speech, perhaps spiking once with the Sagebrush Rebellion of the 1980s in which Colorado governor Richard Lamm complained that westerners who faced government regulation and oversight were the “new Indians” and spiking again with the militia movement of the early twenty-first century in which anti-government activists led an armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge (quoted in Limerick 47). Even more recently, in 2017 the conservative Hoover Institution at Stanford University published a book called *Rugged Individualism: Dead or Alive?* A book that evokes the link between the West and rugged individualism with its subtitle before arguing—much like the Hoover Institution’s namesake in 1928—that “rugged individualism is in a fight for its life” (80). Like the frontier—which Richard Slotkin and others have noted continues to be present in American culture through political rhetoric—rugged individualism maintains a place in American culture through complaints about government interference into industry and

personal freedom that are used to argue against policies such as those designed to combat the effects of climate change.

Because the American West has so commonly been associated with individualism, this is a cultural thread that I track in multiple chapters, examining questions about who gets to be a rugged individualist and examining how individualism (and its darker twin, alienation) interact with the material fact of aridity in the West and in the region's colonial history. While I examine individualism in most of the chapters that follow, I focus on it most specifically in chapter three where I survey how rugged individualism has influenced depictions of water and aridity in two twentieth-century Westerns while also examining how the Western has used aridity to celebrate its most rugged and isolated individualists using imagery that runs directly counter to the idea—put forward by Smythe and Turner—that aridity would encourage a more community-centered culture.

The West as Colonial Space

The concepts of individualism and the frontier bleed into conceptions of the West as a site of colonialism. Individualism is (somewhat counterintuitively) intertwined with North American settler colonialism in that colonial attempts to assimilate Native Americans into Anglo American culture often focused on a desire to change the cultural logics of Native Americans from prioritizing the communal to focusing on the individual. In *Individuality Incorporated*, Joel Pfister examines how this focus on the individual was (paradoxically) the lynchpin to assimilation programs such as the Indian boarding schools and the allotment program that broke up communal lands into privately owned “allotments” while allowing white settlers to acquire much of the best, well-watered land that had been under tribal control. Similarly, to see the West as a site of colonial conquest and aftermath is to view the frontier from another perspective. Alex

Trimble Young notes that, while critical regionalism is moving away from frontier conceptions of the West, “Settler colonial studies puts a consideration of frontier processes at the center of its study of settlement and indigenous dispossession” (116). The desire to move beyond or past the frontier in western studies, Young argues, “risks reproducing a discourse” that relies on the same frontier tropes that postwestern and critical regionalists hope to leave behind. To see the West as colonial is to recognize the frontier as a narrative that drove colonial expansion and was then used to excuse it. But to see the West as colonial is also to value and recognize indigenous narratives of life under colonial rule. The postcolonial west—a place which is “post” in name only for Native Americans—seeks to examine the frontier narrative from the perspective of those who would be conquered in the name of forming a national character. Seeing the West as postcolonial also expands the canon of stories that are considered “western” to include the stories of those which were (and continue to be) colonized and marginalized under the auspice of Euro-American narratives of “progress.”

Native Americans have viewed what Anglo Americans call “the West” as a site of colonial invasion since Spanish conquistadors entered the region in the 1530s. What has followed is five hundred years of colonialism. In this narrative, the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 is part of the same war that was fought between the American army and Native American people on what is known as the Great Plains in the nineteenth century, the same war that included the destruction of the massive buffalo herds and the displacement and deaths of millions of Native Americans. This view of the West has certainly been present in Native American discourse since contact and was made manifest in American literary culture by Native American authors. Twentieth-century novelists such as John Joseph Mathews, D’Arcy McNickle, N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, and Leslie Marmon Silko have written versions of the American West

that don't fit into narratives of garden, frontier, or individualist paradise. In these novels, the American West is often not a "geography of hope" (to borrow another phrase from Stegner). Instead, individualism (as I argue in chapter four) is made grotesque in the form of alienation as indigenous characters are alienated from their communities, histories, and homelands. Despite such alienation, these stories foreground a reality that garden and frontier narratives tend to ignore: Native Americans have managed to persist despite colonial attempts to cast them in the tragic, doomed roles they occupy in many Anglo-American narratives. In this way, the colonial narrative is one that documents what Gerald Vizenor has termed "survivance"; these stories "create a sense of narrative resistance to absence, literary tragedy, nihilism, and victimry" (*Native Liberty* 1). Resistance to native absence separates Turner's heroic frontier from the frontier depicted in postcolonial narratives. In this way, the metanarrative of the West as a site of colonial conquest is older even than Turner's 1893 thesis.

For those (mostly white academics) who study the West in the academy, the idea of the West's primary narrative as a colonial narrative could be said to begin with what is known as "the New Western History" in the late twentieth century, nearly five hundred years after the narrative's historical roots were planted. Central to New Western History's narratives about the West is Patricia Nelson Limerick's *Legacy of Conquest*, which replaces Turner's frontier process narrative with a narrative of subjugation. For Limerick, centering western history around the region's unending contests "for cultural dominance" means that "a fragmented and discontinuous past becomes whole again" (27). New Western History extends the concept of colonialism beyond human dominance to include environmental dominance, and in doing so draws attention to aridity in ways that frontier and individualist narratives tends to ignore. Worster's *Rivers of Empire* frames the story of the Anglo American response to western aridity in colonial terms.

Western water projects and dams are compared with colonial projects in countries under the rule of the British Empire through the lens of Marxist theorist Karl Wittfogel. For Worster, dams convert western rivers to imperial resources controlled by a class of wealthy water users and a remote eastern government. The price for this conversion is laid at the feet of the field worker and the land itself. These ideas are encapsulated by the Bureau of Reclamation's slogan during the middle of the twentieth century: "total use for greater wealth" (*Rivers of Empire* 266).

Worster notes that the "total use" and the "greater wealth" of reclamation have generally been enjoyed by agribusiness. For Worster and others, Native Americans and the lands they have inhabited for thousands of years were colonized together. In chapter four, I read two novels of colonialism by Native American authors—James Welch and D'Arcy McNickle—that examine the relationship between water manipulation and colonial conquest.

The West as Indigenous Homeland and Borderland

Intertwined with and inseparable from the West's colonial history is the indigenous history of the region, which stretches back beyond European contact and forms a narrative that is not Eurocentric but centered on the human relationship with the land over thousands of years. The recently published second edition of *The American West: A New Interpretive History* states that human habitation of what we call the American West began "thirty to forty thousand years ago" (4). As early as twelve thousand years ago these early American cultures were fashioning stone tools while hunting and gathering across what is now the American West. In her environmental history of the region, Sara Dant notes that a warming trend approximately ten thousand years ago was one of several causes of a mass extinction event that left the land without much of its megafauna (9). One casualty of this event was the North American horse, an animal which had "dominated the natural environment of North America" and has, of course, played a

role in its more recent history and its present (Dant 12). Around five thousand years ago, various Native American cultures began domesticating animals and relying on agriculture, including the “three sisters” of Native American agriculture: corn, beans, and squash. Native cultures in this period often used fire to preserve grasslands and create habitat for large game animals. In some cultures, fire was used in conjunction with irrigation so that “sizable populations” could “live in otherwise arid environments” (14). While precise numbers are difficult to ascertain, historians and anthropologists estimate that around 3.8 million people lived in the region we now call the American West prior to European contact. Dant notes that there is “an extensive scientific record of human habitation and alteration of the natural environment” that undercuts the narrative of the West as “empty” and “virgin” and of the peoples who inhabited the region as “savage” and “primitive” (14). That these attributes are so present in metanarratives of the West as a garden and frontier serves as evidence for how cultural metanarratives encourage specific readings of regions and landscapes despite scholarly and scientific evidence that runs contrary to such readings.

Pre-contact Native American cultures of the West responded to the region’s aridity in a variety of ways. Some cultures embraced irrigated agriculture while others used mobility as a means of surviving in the desert region. This mobility troubles the concept of national regions and is an important part of the metanarrative of indigenous homelands. In the wake of contact, from the 1500s to 1846, what is now the southwest region of the United States became known as *El Norte* or northern Mexico, a region with its own indigenous and colonial past, a past that is in many ways inseparable from the United States’ past, given that indigenous populations didn’t construct—physically or culturally—a border in the region. The arrival of the border in 1848, at the end of Mexican-American War, changed the political and cultural realities of the region’s

inhabitants, but it did not erase the past. Gloria Anzaldúa has written about the traveling and mobility of both people and borders between Mexico and the United States and the ways that this traveling creates *La Frontera*, a borderlands place where many cultures and people interact and bleed (sometimes literally) into one another. *La Frontera* has been marked by violence and survivance. Its history vacillates between colonial brutality and indigenous history as a site of contact and conflict between cultures. Water and aridity are an important part of this story. Anzaldúa writes: “In the 1930s, after Anglo agribusiness corporations cheated the small Chicano landowners of their land, the corporations hired gangs of *mexicanos* to pullout the brush, chaparral and cactus and to irrigate the desert. The land they toiled over had once belonged to many of them, or had been used communally by them” (9).

While colonial capitalism sees water and race in terms of profit, indigenous cultures often see water in the arid West in terms of ancestry and sacred cultural logics. Anzaldúa describes the Aztec “common people” worshipping “*Chalchiuhtlicue*” the “goddess of sweet or inland water” (33). Similarly, Leslie Marmon Silko notes that most Pueblo cultures designate “a small natural spring edged with mossy sandstone and full of cattails and wild watercress” as a sacred emergence place that serves as the setting for cultural emergence stories (“Pueblo Imagination” 272). Silko also describes Pueblo beliefs regarding rain as akin to remaining on good terms with one’s family: “The ancient Pueblos believed the Earth and the Sky were sisters . . . As long as good family relations are maintained, then the Sky will continue to bless her sister, the Earth, with rain, and the Earth’s children will continue to survive” (“Pueblo Imagination” 267). This concept—the nonhuman and the human as members of the same family—is present in many Native American cultures. For Silko and others, indigenous conceptions of the relationship between the human and nonhuman offer an alternative to the colonial relationship that has

contributed to the current climate crisis. In regard to aridity and literature in the American West, viewing the West as an indigenous homeland opens up the possibility for new kinds of stories that attempt to link the indigenous past with the crises of the present while suggesting a kind of hope for the future. This is the subject of chapter five, in which I read Silko's novel *Almanac of the Dead*.

Literary Structures of Aridity and Twentieth-century Western Fiction

Metanarratives that define the West make up only a portion of the cultural material that influences how aridity has been read and written in the literature of the West. Another important factor has been the literary structures that house western fiction. Like metanarratives, these structures regulate depictions of aridity while also being influenced by aridity. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* famously begins with "A Fable for Tomorrow," invoking the genre of the fable and the fairy-tale with its chapter title and its opening lines: "There once was a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings" (1). The fable Carson presents is the story of a paradisiacal rural town that falls into environmental decay. As Carolyn Merchant has noted, the book mirrors this opening chapter in that it describes a narrative of decline while holding out hope for a kind of Edenic recovery. Greg Garrard notes that the fable in *Silent Spring* relies on a combination of the poetic tropes of the pastoral and the apocalypse, ancient tropes that have been used to define humanity's relationship with the non-human for thousands of years (*Ecocriticism* 2). Garrard's book, *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom*, groups depictions of nature into categories of "large-scale metaphors" or tropes such as wilderness, dwelling, pastoral, and apocalypse as a way of explaining how literary analysis can be brought to bear on depictions of the non-human in human culture.

Depictions of aridity and water in the West are housed in literary structures—tropes, metaphors, genres, devices, even metanarratives. These structures influence how aridity is written and how it is read. The network of influences between these structures and their authors, readers, and the material reality they seek to represent is complex and perhaps unmappable in its entirety. Scholars of rhetoric have described the various elements, components, and relationships that influence any one instance of writing as a series of “*affective ecologies* that recontextualizes rhetorics in their temporal, historical, and lived fluxes” (Edbauer 9; emphasis in original). This view suggests that literary structures and lived experiences circulate and connect in complex ways that defy one-to-one, cause-and-effect explanations. Viewing literary structures and the texts in which we find them as parts of systems whose complexities mirror ecological reality is humbling when one considers that ecologists do not understand ecosystems in their totality, rather they are only able to capture how some components of systems work together.

Rather than focusing on large-scale metaphors such as those described by Garrard, I examine how literary structures that were popular in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries influenced texts concerned with aridity in the American West during that period. In chapter two I examine how Mary Hallock’s Foote’s stories contain attributes of the gothic that serve to describe aridity as a kind monstrous condition. The monstrosity of the arid landscape is accompanied by the gothic trope of captivity, which is applied to both women and water in an effort to reclaim the West from aridity and remake the region as a garden. Similarly, in chapter three, I explore the use of binaries in the Western and argue that the literary structure of paradox allows the protagonists of the Western to use aridity and a professed love of the land as signifiers for rugged individualism and national identity while at the same time turning a blind eye to ecological damage inflicted by individualist ideologies. In chapter four, I examine how Welch

and McNickle use depictions of manipulated watersheds—dams, reservoirs, canals, and ditches—in concert with modernist literary structures to rewrite rugged individualism as alienation and describe the colonial condition in the twentieth-century Native American West. Finally, in chapter five, I explore Leslie Marmon Silko’s combining of indigenous literary structures with attributes of postmodern fiction to contrast the colonial history of the West with an indigenous conception of the West in which individuals and communities, the human and the non-human, and even aridity and water are sown together into a collective that relies on diversity for survival.

Recognizing the presence of these structures underscores the inseparability of form and content along with the inseparability of nature and culture. Aridity in the American West can only be glimpsed through the structures that make interpretation possible at all. Such structures include the human eye and the human brain, personal history, cultural metanarratives, literary genres, metaphors, along with physical objects such as books, computer monitors, and mobile phones in addition to countless other considerations. In our glimpsing, we build structures of our own in which to house our own limited understandings of aridity. To recognize our interpretations of aridity as being influenced by how those interpretations are delivered—and to recognize our understandings of aridity as social constructions—doesn’t make aridity any less real or material as a climatic condition, rather it makes us aware of how aridity’s physical reality is but a single factor in its own representations. Looked at negatively, we might think that aridity will always elude us, hiding behind all that interpretive machinery. But the optimist in me recognizes that all that interpretive machinery serves as an opportunity to change *how* we see the arid West. Such change is especially important as we speed toward a century destined to be defined by a climate crisis that promises even more aridity.

Why Aridity? Why Fiction? Why Now?

My discussion of metanarratives that have been used to define the West left out the metanarrative of aridity itself. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, important thinkers in the history and identity of the American West such as John Wesley Powell, Wallace Stegner, and Donald Worster all advocated defining the region by its most dominant climatic trait: aridity. In 1980, the U.S. Forest Service biologist Robert Bailey divided the United States into “ecoregions” based on similarities in climates and ecological attributes. These ecoregions (there are more than two dozen) are grouped into four larger “domains.” A map of the domains shows what Bailey refers to as the “Dry Domain,” which matches Stegner’s conception of the West quite closely. The Dry Domain begins near the 100th meridian and covers the U.S. from north to south until it hits roughly the Cascade and Sierra mountains, meaning that western Washington, Oregon, and much of California belong to a region Bailey refers to as the “Humid Temperate Domain” (see Figure 1). Of course, climate cares not for national borders, so a broader view of the Dry Domain extends into Mexico almost to Mexico City and north into Canada. Bailey notes that “the essential feature of a dry climate is that annual losses of water through evaporation . . . exceed annual water gains from precipitation. This creates a deficiency of water” (44).

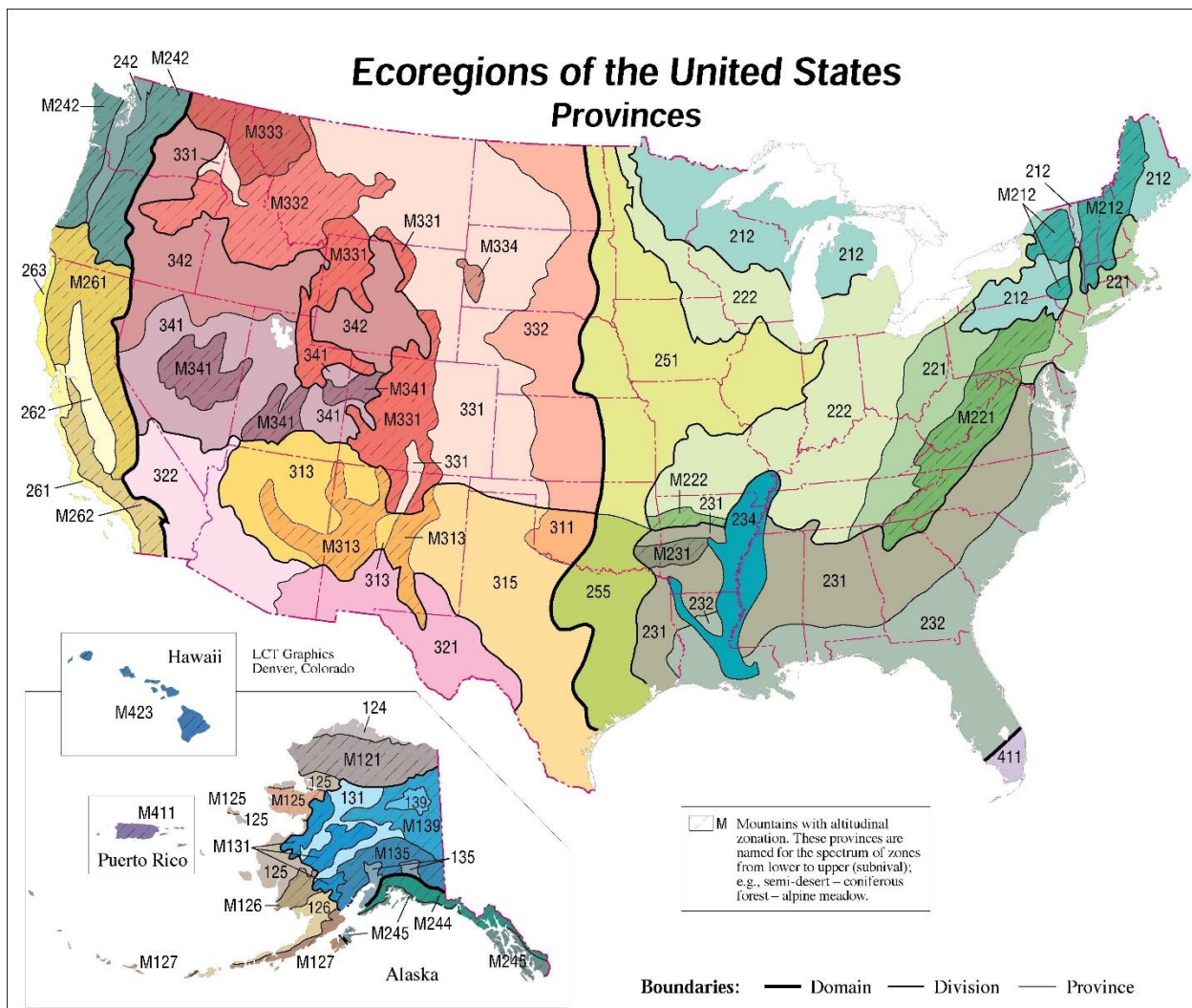


Figure 1. Robert Bailey's ecoregions and domains. The "Dry Domain" begins with the thick black line stretching from the middle of Texas to the Canadian border north of the Dakotas and ends with the thick black line that bisects Oregon and Washington and stretches south to the border with Mexico.

While aridity's position as the region's defining trait has been an important narrative for historians and biologists, America itself has often been preoccupied with narratives of frontier, garden, individualism, colonialism, and "progress." As such, aridity has been acted upon as much—if not more—than it has prompted American culture to reflect on the dry nature of the nation's west. Given this history, this dissertation seeks to contribute to broader questions related to how and why aridity as a metanarrative has been overwhelmed by competing narratives and

history. While science has established aridity as a reality, literary studies and the environmental humanities seek to learn how humans have responded to western aridity and why. Literature provides unique insights into such questions in that literature reflects the cultures in which it is produced while at the same time contributing to the creation of those cultures and the cultures that follow.

Literary figures—such as Stegner, John Muir, Mary Austin, and Edward Abbey—have been writing explicitly about aridity in the West for more than a century. Much of this work takes the form of nature writing, nonfiction that often attempts to influence policy. Because this study is especially interested in the relationship between humanity and the arid bioregions of the West, I have limited my study to fiction. While this limit helps to define a reasonable scope for the project, the very nature of fiction foregrounds the presence of characters—people—and their interactions with other people and the environment. Environmental nonfiction of the West, Comer argues, has generally conformed to what Willam Cronon and others see as “The Trouble with Wilderness.” Texts related to aridity and water such as Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*, Mary Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain*, and John Van Dyke’s *The Desert* generally conform to major elements of what Comer calls “The Wilderness Plot,” which locates a narrator (or characters) in a traditional “wilderness,” away from the civilization and culture of a region, in an attempt to connect with the region’s “natural” landscape and achieve redemption through a rejection of technology. Such plots ignore the places where people live and interact regularly with the landscapes they inhabit, such stories “[encourage] environmentalists to idealize big wild spaces that, most consequentially, are usually not the actual places that people call ‘home’” (“Sidestepping” 77). Therefore, by analyzing fiction in this project, I am foregrounding the social components of humanity’s relationship with the nonhuman over more explicitly environmental

texts that privilege individual interactions with “nature” while leaving the social world in the background. I think this focus is appropriate given that reckonings with western aridity in the twenty-first century are certain to be social in nature. As such, I have attempted to select fiction that Dana Phillips describes as “environmental” (as opposed to “environmentalist”). In environmental fictions “an engagement with environment shapes more than the movement of plot and the portrayal and dialogue of characters; it is also fundamental to narration and the elaboration of a much more critical point of view” (“The Environmental Novel” 250). For Phillips, these fictions represent the exchange between the human and the environment in a way that locates humans within a lived environment and examines the role of humans as beings inhabiting a place. In the American West, that habitation is likely to change as the habits that characterized living in the twentieth-century American West are likely to be untenable in the face of a changing climate.

From 1901 to 2016, the global average temperature increased 1.8 degrees Fahrenheit, although in many areas of the American West, it increased much more (see Figure 2). According to Volume II of the recently released National Climate Assessment report, “observational evidence does not support any credible natural explanations for this amount of warming; instead, the evidence consistently points to human activities, especially emissions of greenhouse or heat-trapping gases, as the dominant cause” (64). This human-caused climate crisis spans the twentieth century and promises to redefine our understanding of the American West in the twenty-first century. The National Climate Assessment report notes that climate change is already making the West hotter and drier, which is leading to reduced natural resource and recreation economies and is beginning to lead to spikes in illness and disease, concerns related to water availability and quality, increases in wildfire, disruption of western ecosystems, rising sea

levels, disruption of indigenous ways of being, reduced energy capacity from hydropower and fossil fuels, and potential food shortages.

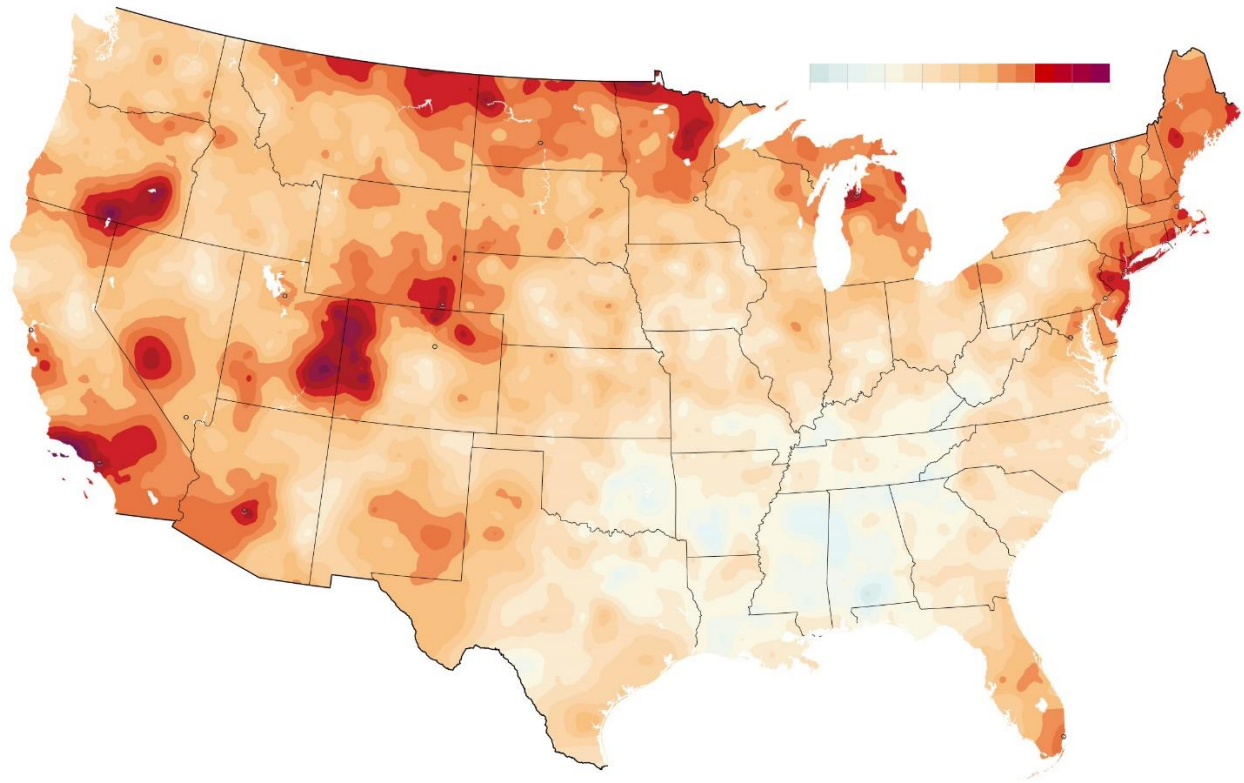


Figure 2. Temperature increase from climate change is not distributed evenly. This map shows the range of increase across the United States from 1895 to 2018. The darkest shades indicate counties with the greatest temperature increase; the darkest red indicates an increase of 3-degrees Celsius or 5.4-degrees Fahrenheit. The largest instances of these hotspots are disproportionately located in the West. This map is based on data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate Divisional Database (nClimDiv) and was developed by the Washington Post (Mufson, et al.).

To face these problems humanity will need the full power of its imagination. We will need to imagine a way through the crisis that we have created because we lacked imagination, because we couldn't imagine our way into a relationship with the planet that didn't foreground extraction and colonial conquest. The literature of the twentieth century, the period in which this crisis evolved, offers a glimpse into that failed imagination while also offering other ways of thinking that we perhaps can no longer afford to ignore.

Chapter 2 - “That Violent and Promiscuous Birth”: Captivity and Creation in Mary Hallock Foote’s Idaho Fiction

In the 1905 edition of *The Conquest of Arid America*, the irrigation booster William E. Smythe writes that westward expansion “paused” when it encountered aridity west of the 98th meridian. For Smythe, this temporary stoppage of expansion was evidence that aridity was “beyond the power of the individual settler to overcome” (17). As a result, his book celebrates the recently signed Reclamation Act, which he sees as a means for completing westward expansion by populating the most arid regions of the West with Anglo American settlers. Smythe argues that settling the arid West will produce truly American communities rather than the individualists of the nineteenth-century frontier. Western communities will be healthier, thanks to the arid climate, and wealthier, thanks to the science of irrigation, which Smythe argues will encourage communal cooperation and more efficient yields for agriculture.

Smythe’s text can be understood by considering his position as a booster. Historian Daniel Wrobel has shown that boosters of the American West wrote the landscape and culture that they hoped migration would create rather than attempting to accurately depict conditions in Western communities, which were less likely to attract settlers. Promotional materials like Smythe’s book were “imaginative efforts to bring places into existence” (Wrobel 3). As such, the rhetoric of boosters was an attempt to create the West through language. Unsurprisingly given his book’s title, Smythe uses a series of war metaphors, writing that those who move to the arid West will help to “drive the desert back inch by inch” and describing American expansion into the West as “the fiercest war of conquest in all history” even though this war was waged against “fields and streams” (xv, 6). By describing the process as an act of conquest, Smythe is evoking the frontier West, which argues that the process of taming of the frontier was difficult but worth

it because its fruits were Americans themselves. Within these war metaphors, however, Smythe turns to an oxymoron to describe the process for converting deserts—which he calls the “waste places of the West”—into utopian farming communities (xx). Smythe modifies the language of war with adjectives of peace. He writes that settlers of the arid West will be enlisting in “the *peaceful army* which is engaged in the conquest of Arid America” and that the history of Western expansion is the history of “a policy of *peaceful conquest* over the resources of a virgin continent” (xxii, 8; emphasis mine).¹³

While it might be tempting to read Smythe’s oxymoron as the work of a booster who is merely attempting to have it both ways, Smythe’s book indicates that—at the beginning of the twentieth century—Americans were uncertain, even fearful about the deserts of West. By describing conquest as “peaceful,” Smythe is attempting to ease anxieties about aridity, which Smythe admits constitutes a “strange boundary” at which expansion “trembled and hesitated . . . then fell back baffled and disappointed” (18). In other words, American expansion had encountered an “other,” a landscape wholly unfamiliar when compared to the wet, green eastern landscapes Anglo Americans had come to associate with America itself. Smythe recognizes that the “strange boundary” of aridity was making potential settlers anxious about the region. What Anglo Americans from the East needed, in Smythe’s view, was the assurance that there was nothing to fear, that conquest would be peaceful. This alien landscape would offer no more surprises, but would instead acquiesce.

This chapter explores similar anxieties about aridity in the fiction of Mary Hallock Foote, an author and illustrator who began writing about the West in the 1880s and illustrated several of

¹³ Conveniently for this narrative of peaceful war, Native Americans are all but absent in Smythe’s historiography.

Smythe's irrigation articles for *Century* magazine (Thompson 45). Over the course of the next three decades Foote's fiction and her illustrations appeared in major eastern magazines (including both *Century* and *The Atlantic Monthly*) as she and her husband (Arthur, an engineer) moved from mining towns to cities and back again before settling in Grass Valley, California. During the 1890s, the Footes lived in Boise, Idaho, where Arthur was developing an irrigation project, designing canals and ditches and drawing up the plans for what would ultimately become Arrowrock Dam. During this time, much of Mary Hallock Foote's writing and illustration shifted to mirror her husband's work and their new home. She produced several short stories and a novel as well as illustrations about irrigation and Idaho. Her heroes are engineers and ditch workers; her heroines are their love interests. Generally, the stories end with the two parties getting married, though some of the stories (as I will discuss) end with suicides and deaths.

Critics have noted that Foote sets these romantic stories in a dangerous and uncontrolled landscape. In her analysis of Foote's novel *The Chosen Valley*, Joan Thompson argues that Foote's ambivalent reception of the western landscape is influenced by her connection to the landscape and climate of New England. Thompson suggests that Foote saw her husband Arthur's work as a way to familiarize the landscape, to make it into something that she might recognize and feel at home in (35-36). However, other critics have suggested that Foote's work sees the landscape as being beyond control. Laura Katherine Gruber reads Foote's Idaho short fiction as an example of literary naturalism, a movement that was in full strength in the 1890s with the work of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser. Gruber writes that Foote adopted the notion of naturalism in which men and women were controlled by natural forces they could not contain: "These writers create worlds in which humans drift along in a tide of history, and

characters' fates are dictated by external forces beyond their control" (356). Such forces are especially strong in limiting the choices and controlling the fates' of Foote's women characters, who are compelled to marriage by their engineer love interests or destroyed by the power of the natural landscape. I propose that these three concepts—the idea that Foote was disconcerted by the distinct “otherness” of the Idaho landscape, the need to control that landscape amid naturalist fears that the landscape was beyond control, and the fraught relationship between women and the landscape of the American West—find a home in Foote's fiction through another literary mode that was in ascendance in the 1890s: the gothic.

Foote's Idaho fiction is gothic in part because it uses moments of violence and terror to reveal anxiety. The stories are anxious about the naturalist forces¹⁴ that Gruber has identified and uncertain about the ability (primarily of the men in the stories) to control those forces. There is an underlying fear in Foote's stories that the arid landscape is so foreign that it will remain a monstrous “other.” By extension, the stories betray a fear that traditional Anglo American approaches to national expansion—technical mastery, settler colonialism, boosterism, and the civilizing forces of marriage and domesticity—might fail to bring the arid landscape and its inhabitants under control. In addition, Foote's Idaho fiction is filled with gothic-style heroines who feel trapped, held captive by exile, by marriage, and by the landscape itself. As a result, the texts take on the attributes of eighteenth-century gothic romances rather than stories of peaceful conquest.

¹⁴ Monika Elbert and Wendy Ryden have argued that naturalist writers such as Crane, Frank Norris, and Ambrose Bierce often relied on “grotesque Gothic imagery” to depict the biological forces that worked to determine their character's fates (51). Elbert and Ryden argue that the gothic was an important component of naturalism. However, Gruber's treatment of naturalism in Foote's Idaho stories focuses solely on the naturalist attributes of the texts, while my work in this chapter focuses more overtly on Foote's use (and subversion) of gothic conventions.

These two anxieties—fears about the landscape (especially the need to control water) and anxiety about the role of women in the Westward expansion—are manifest in two common gothic tropes in Foote's stories: depictions of captivity and violence. Foote's stories describe engineers who use dam and irrigation engineering to capture water and social engineering to capture women. These twin captives are then put to work in the service of the American ideology of progress in an effort to make the West into an engineered Eden, a recovered Garden that includes distinctly (Anglo) American communities in spaces previously considered un-American (because of aridity and indigenous presence). However, like many gothic stories, Foote's Idaho fiction simultaneously reinforces and resists dominant ideologies such as progressivism, the garden narrative, and the frontier. The ideologies of gender and expansion (men as individualists who can tame the frontier and women as a civilizing force that can tame the culture) are reinforced by the stories' marriage plots and Foote's attempts to moralize and interpret her work on behalf of her audience. But these same ideologies are resisted by women characters who choose suicide over the captivity of marriage and a landscape that refuses captivity in equally violent terms.

Mary Hallock Foote's Idaho fiction sees the arid American West as a landscape that was in process of being born, an act of creation. In this sense, her work views the West as a potential reclaiming of Eden. But—perhaps because of anxieties about the landscape and about the role of women who had been exiled to the West—Foote's Idaho fiction also saw this re-birthing of Eden as a violent process. Writing in the introduction to her book *The Last Assembly Ball*, Foote describes the West as an unfinished landscape under violent construction, a landscape in need of ordering and creation.

Add the melancholy of a land oppressed by too much nature, not mother nature of the Christian poets, but nature of the dark old mythologies, the spectacle of a creation indeed scarcely more than six days old. When Adam's celestial visitor (in the seventh book of *Paradise Lost*) condescends to relate how the world was first created, he gives an astonishing picture of the sixth and last great act; when the earth brought forth the living creature after its kind regardless of zones and habitudes, crawling, wriggling, pawing from the sod, rent to favor the transmission. Life on the surface could not have been simple, for a few days at least, after that violent and promiscuous birth. (“Introductory” 7).

This rather astonishing passage runs counter Smythe’s irrigation boosterism and replaces the oxymoron of peaceful conquest with the metaphor of a grotesque, violent birth. In the section of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* that Foote refers to, Milton writes: “The Earth obeyed and straight, / Op’ning her fertile womb, teemed at a birth” (Book 7 lines 453-454 page 171). The birth indeed is violent in that the personified Earth—described as a mother with an open womb—is torn and ripped by animals that force themselves out of the captivity of the ground during the moment of creation. This image implies that captivity is somehow a part of creation—or at least a part of Edenic *re*-creation—a concept that recurs in Foote’s Idaho fiction. Foote’s stories see irrigation (the captivity of water) as a kind of mothering, a domestication of water for the purposes of birthing a new landscape to replace the arid semi-desert of Idaho, but also as a violent process that destroys as it creates. Similarly, the stories link the captivity of water to captivity of women, who are held captive by the institution of marriage and the remoteness of the West. These women have few choices beyond the captivity of marriage (in the service creating a new, Anglo American culture in the West) and violence as means of escape.

Gender and the Gothic in the Late Nineteenth Century

The birth of the gothic novel is generally considered to have taken place in England with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. Kate Ferguson Ellis describes the genre's evolution in the decades that followed as "a spate of novels, primarily by women, which feature haunted castles owned by usurping aristocrats, heroines who are persecuted but not "ruined" by these false owners, and young men of the sentimental-hero type who marry the heroines in the end" (*Contested Castle* 37). For Ellis, these early novels are especially concerned with idea of "separate spheres" that had emerged in the eighteenth century. As industrialism grew in England, the middle class responded by attempting to isolate the home space, which came to be seen as a kind of heaven on earth, from the site of work and commerce, which was seen as representing humanity's fall from grace. Part of this separation included isolating women from the vulgarities of the fallen world. The gothic is a response to this movement because it inverts the concept. Novels by Walpole, Radcliffe, and others are "preoccupied with the home. But it is the failed home that appears on its pages, the place from which some (usually "fallen" men) are locked out, and others (usually "innocent" women) are locked in" (*Contested Castle* ix). From the beginning of the genre, then, boundaries, captivity, and marriage have been mixed up in both the gothic and the cultural milieu that underpins the gothic.

The end of the nineteenth century saw a swelling of gothic fiction in both Britain and America as the genre expanded beyond the gothic romances of Radcliffe and Walpole. Works by significant American and British men that were published while the Footes lived in the West include (but are certainly not limited to) Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Wilde's *A Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Glennis Byron has argued that gothic in the

1890s was often concerned with the decline of imperial power and anxiety about colonialism (187). These gothic texts often suggested that the waning of imperial power would lead to dire consequences as imperialism could no longer be counted on to control gothic forces while simultaneously questioning the monstrous nature of the imperialists themselves. Foote's fiction works within this tradition as it imagines technological solutions to colonial problems, while also imagining colonialism itself as monstrous when women are taken captive not by grotesque foreigners (as imagined in early gothic novels), but by colonial instruments who have headed West to tame the frontier.

More importantly as a way to locate Foote's work within the literary gothic, Andrew Weinstock has identified the period from 1850 to 1930 as a significant era of production for female gothic writers on both sides of the Atlantic, but especially in America. In this period, American women such as Edith Wharton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Austin, and many others published ghost stories in some of the same magazines in which Foote was publishing her Western stories and illustrations. Weinstock suggests that these ghost stories (and the gothic novels these women produced) reflect the idea that women themselves were only partially present in their own lives, their lack of power rendered them ghostly and the ghost story was one way that this dissatisfaction with life itself could be worked out on the page. However, Weinstock also cautions that such an explanation runs the risk of overgeneralizing a vast body of literature by a diverse set of authors. Weinstock notes that "parameters such as class, race, region, religion, and sexuality" along with marketplace factors related to literary production and economic station (ghost stories were a popular genre and women—including Foote—used magazine writing as a way to make money)

combine to make each story in this body of literature worth exploring on its own and worth understanding in terms of its position in literary and cultural history (16).

Even though Foote's work was originally published alongside some of the ghost stories in Weinstock's study, it is absent from his list for at least one reason: Foote's narratives are not always overtly gothic (they do not include ghosts, for instance) while Weinstock's work is primarily focused on ghost stories. Foote's fictions have generally been interpreted as straightforward romances; Gruber writes that the romantic conventions in Foote's fiction are "obvious" (356). But I believe that Foote's work is worth considering alongside the large body of gothic fiction that Weinstock calls "The Unacknowledged Tradition" because Foote appropriates gothic conventions to express anxieties and dissatisfactions that are similar to those writers that Weinstock is exploring.

In addition, the work of women writers and the ideology of domesticity (an important consideration for the gothic stories of the period) are intertwined with the ideology of colonial expansion. In "Manifest Domesticity," Amy Kaplan argues that the language of domesticity was employed in tandem with the language of American empire and expansion in the nineteenth century. Matters related to the nation have been referred to as "domestic" while the home has been referred to as a woman's "empire" (585). Domesticity itself—to have a clean and ordered home—was used as a justification for expanding the ordered space of the nation into the unordered space of the wilderness. Kaplan suggests that regional women writers who were arguing on behalf of the separate spheres concept and perpetuating dominant Anglo conceptions of gender roles were complicit in the colonial enterprise. More recent scholars have expanded Kaplan's ideas to examine how domesticity was performed and depicted by writers of color and how domesticity is, according to Rosemary Marangoly George, "a dynamic and changing

concept, one that serves as a regulative norm that continually refigures families, homes, and belonging” (90).

Similarly, the idea that the colonial enterprise is “civilizing” or “domesticating” the wilderness (and its inhabitants) is inherent in colonialism itself. Stegner’s “makers and doers” that I referenced in the introduction “wanted to take a piece of wilderness and turn it into a *home* for civilization” (*Angle* 385; emphasis mine). Susanna B. Hecht has written that “Domestication fundamentally conflates with sedentary lifeways and civilization and has often, incorrectly, been portrayed as part of a linear progression from nomadism to sedentarism, associated either with domesticated organisms or exceptionally rich “natural” concentrations of wild resources” (22). In other words, domestication blurs the line between the sedentary, home-based ideal of domesticity and the larger rhetoric of what it means to live a civilized life. Domesticating the land is a task that adopts the ideology of domestication in a way not unlike movements such as “true womanhood.”

But locating domestic tropes into gothic stories complicates this idea because gothic stories tend to both undermine and reinforce traditional conceptions of domesticity. Consider, for instance, Foote’s story “A Cup of Trembling.” The plot revolves around a failed marriage. Esmée and Jack are wintering in the manager’s cabin at the site of a mine deep in the Idaho mountains. Esmée has abandoned her wealthy, mine-owning husband in favor of his employee, Jack, an upstart mining engineer. Their winter quarters keep them from being seen by the people of the town who believe the couple have fled the area together. Each day Jack travels to a nearby mine to work in exchange for groceries so they don’t have to travel to town. However, Jack has failed to explain the situation to his brother who had previously agreed to spend the winter at the same cabin to keep Jack company. Somewhat predictably, the brother arrives while Jack is away,

in the midst of a blizzard. Esmée is unsettled by his presence as he knocks on the door and then looks through the windows. Because she and Jack have agreed that she shouldn't let any strangers in while he is gone, she doesn't open the door and Jack's brother freezes to death in the blizzard before Jack returns. Once she learns who he was and what she has done, Esmée kills herself by setting the cabin ablaze. While the story can be read as a tragic romance, a melodrama of sorts, the scene in which Esmée is being surveilled through the windows reads as gothic in that it serves as a doubling for the surveillance that she and Jack are hiding from in the small town (while the brother serves as an unfamiliar double to Jack himself) and thereby contains a distinct sense of the uncanny¹⁵ and the monstrous.

The girl was unspeakably alarmed, there was something so imperative in the stranger's demand. It had for her startled ear an awful assurance, as who should say, "I have a right to enter here." Who was it, what was it, knocking at the door of that guilty house? It seemed to Esmée that this unappeasable presence had haunted the place for an hour or more, trying windows, and going from door to door. At length came silence so prolonged and complete that she thought herself alone at last. (48)

The conventions of the story—the heroine who has escaped to an exotic wilderness only to be trapped in a residence—combined with the language used in the passage—an “unappeasable presence” that “haunted” the cabin at the liminal spaces of the door and the windows to threaten the domestic space in which the heroine is trapped, the “awful assurance” that Esmée feels, the guilt that is assigned to the house itself for the couple's transgression of marital norms, the surveillance that follows this passage as Jack's brother scans the room and recognizes the signs

¹⁵ Freud's essay “The Uncanny” identifies several of these components—doubling, anxiety related to sight, the sense of dread—as part of the sensation of the uncanny.

of infidelity—all of these signal that this is a gothic story in which Esmée is haunted by the expectations of marital fidelity and the captivity she feels in masculine space of both the wilderness and the mining camp.

Two elements from *A Cup of Trembling* that are indicative of Foote's gothic tendencies are mirrored elsewhere in her Idaho fiction. First, Esmée feels that she is both a captive and an exile, which is a theme common for Foote's women characters and is exemplified by the title of one of her early stories, "In Exile," which was published in a collection in 1894 with some of her Idaho stories. In a way, Esmée is an uncommon heroine for a Foote story¹⁶ because she is an unfaithful wife rather than a marriageable eastern girl in love with an engineer. But she also shares the anxieties of many Foote heroines, women who feel so constricted and imprisoned by the West itself and the men who inhabit it that their only choices are suicide or marriage. Second, the death of Jack's brother is carried out by the landscape as he freezes to death in the snow. While "A Cup of Trembling" is not overtly about irrigation or water, the blizzard and the miles of snow that Jack's brother must trek through to reach the cabin are forerunners to the raging river that kills a character in Foote's story "A Cloud on the Mountain" and the river that destroys the dam and kills the dam's builder in the novel *The Chosen Valley*. The environmental historian Dan Flores writes that "the mountain snowpack can be thought of in terms of a slow heartbeat, pumping the West's water through a dendritic circulatory system" (148). In a real way, the snow that kills Jack's brother is the same water that kills characters in other Foote texts. Indeed, many of the deaths in Foote's Idaho fiction are delivered by the setting itself, a move that sets Foote's

¹⁶ In a letter to Richard Gilder, the editor of *Century* and the husband of Foote's good friend Helena de Kay Gilder, Foote worried that "The Cup of Trembling" had an "ugly theme" but argued that it was also necessary theme "in any true series of western tales" (*Idaho Stories* 305).

characters in conflict with the landscape and makes the arid West a wilderness of chaos and danger, a common trope in American gothic literature.

In this way, Foote's moments of gothic serve to both destabilize and support concepts of domesticity. The wild landscape seems to need domesticating, but its wildness is also dangerous, unpredictable, and untamable by any single character in the story. Similarly, Esmeé is punished for transgressing the domestic rules of marriage, but what are we as readers to make of a story in which domestic transgression leads to suicide? This turn in the plot questions the underlying ideology of domestication and highlights the relative paucity of choices at Esmeé's disposal. The story renders domestication itself doubled and uncanny, seemingly familiar but also dangerous and grotesque.

Captivity Narratives and Women in the West

Two ways that gothic literature in America diverges from British gothic literature are in its depiction of the landscape and the way that landscape is connected to the presence of racial others. Matthew Wynn Sivils has argued that, while American gothic borrowed conventions from eighteenth-century gothic novels by Radcliffe and others, American writers (such as Charles Brockden Brown) also infused the genre with uniquely "American settings and social anxieties" (84). One such anxiety was the fear of captivity at the hands of Indians. Sivils traces the rise of the American gothic in work such as Brown's *Edgar Huntly* and Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* as importing the gothic story to the American frontier, in part because captivity narratives such as Mary Rowlandson's immensely popular *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, published in 1682, had made the American frontier a site of terror and anxiety. Captivity narratives embody much of what colonial white America feared about the land to the West—dark forests that could not be controlled filled with savage, beast-

like men who would enter the sphere of the white community or the domestic to steal a community's women and disappear back into the night. Americans also feared that they would be enticed by the wilderness and choose the uncontrolled wilderness landscape over the godliness of civilization. These tropes (including the devil-like Indian) made their way into Hawthorne's gothic ("Young Goodman Brown" is an example) as well as the texts that served as an influence for what became the Western, such as Cooper's novels and the Daniel Boone stories.

While critics have linked the captivity narrative to the gothic, considerable critical work has also connected the genre to the way Americans think about the frontier and national identity. Richard Slotkin identified the captivity narrative as an antecedent to the genre Western in his trilogy of books on the frontier myth in American culture. For Slotkin, captivity narratives in the seventeenth century serve as an impetus for Puritans of New England to wage all-out war against the indigenous populations of the region. Puritans saw captivity narratives as a microcosm of their own isolation from England among a devilish, dark wilderness. This isolation is mirrored in the isolation that captives such as Rowlandson wrote about at length in their narratives: "She stands alone in her trial, and the first test imposed on her is that she accept her isolation," Slotkin writes (*Regeneration* 107). Slotkin finds that isolation is often an area of focus for the editors of captivity narratives—men such as Puritan clergy and local publishers—and that the genre itself was eventually appropriated by men to help create the mythology of the frontier. In the decades that followed, the captivity narrative plot is altered to become the story of the sacred hunter / Indian hater, a Daniel Boone-style character who rescues captive women from savage Indians. This literary type survives well into the twentieth century in films such as John Ford's *The Searchers*. Slotkin argues that the tropes of captivity and Indian hunting worked their way into

the mythology of the frontier and the way Americans thought about westward expansion more generally.

However, other critics have read the captivity narrative as a genre that women writers were using to tell important stories about gender roles. Christopher Castiglia argues that Slotkin and others are too quick to read the genre as a means of establishing women in positions of vulnerability in need of men to rescue them. A careful reading of early captivity narratives finds that women were using captivity narratives for some of the same cultural purposes that Radcliffe and others employed in their gothic novels: to establish female strength (and sometimes retributive violence), to force their culture to reckon with racial difference, and to write the captivity of marriage in colonial white America. Like female gothic stories in general, these narratives had to pose such critiques using the structures in which women writers were allowed a voice. Castiglia writes that “as captives challenged the dominant discourse of their cultures, often in explicit and daring ways, their challenges were never complete” because these authors were held captive by the structures of a male-dominated publishing system (39). Like the eighteenth-century gothic novel that also influenced American authors of the gothic, the captivity narrative resists and reinforces dominant ideologies by telling stories that sometimes depicted Indians as less than human and women in need of rescue, while in other cases depicting Indians as communal and compassionate and depicting female captives as being able to survive alone in the wilderness for months at a time (and sometimes rescue themselves or refuse to be rescued at all).

Moreover, Annette Kolodny has suggested that women writers have often been held captive by the frontier metanarrative itself. This narrative tells the story of men heading to the frontier as means of escaping civilization and replacing the women in their lives by conquering the “virgin land” of the American West. Once the wilderness has been vanquished, men return

for the white women from whom they escaped and remove them from their homes and families in the East to serve as a civilizing force in the communities of the newly conquered land. In Kolodny's *The Land Before Her*, she writes that the eighteenth-century captivity narrative was a means by which women readers who "choose relocation to the frontier" but who felt both exiled and imprisoned "might safely confront the often unhappy experiences of their westward migration" (34). The genre allowed such women to see "suffering in the wilderness" as a trial that could be survived and overcome (33). Such assurance was necessary because the Anglo women who went West—like Mary Hallock Foote—were often exiled from their homes and families to places where Anglo communities were under construction and feelings of isolation were not uncommon.

In "*It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*," the historian Richard White argues that the formation of Anglo communities in the nineteenth-century West depended on the presence of women, yet sometimes lacked such a presence in ways that made Americans anxious. When kinship groups migrated together, they often formed communities similar to those in the East because they migrated as families. However, when single men migrated for the purpose of accumulating wealth, the places in which they gathered bore little resemblance to the communities of the East. White argues that, even though these young men were "conforming to the prevailing social ideologies of late nineteenth-century America: individualism and laissez-faire," their fellow citizens often viewed them as something to be afraid of: "Nineteenth-century writings on the American West reflect a pervasive fear that such unattached men would never permanently settle. Failing to form community ties of their own, they seemed to present a constant danger to those communities that did establish themselves in the West" (302). White suggests that Anglo Americans in the nineteenth-century saw frontier individualism as a positive

force when considered as a kind of economic and cultural theory, but they “feared” such individualism when faced with it as a social fact in the West (302). The solution for assuaging these fears was to prescribe institutions such as marriage and community. One problem, however, was a scarcity of marriageable women in the places where such individualists were seeking their fortunes. In the middle of the century at the height of the gold rush, California’s population was 93% male (White 303). David Courtwright notes that “The prevailing lack of rain” in the arid west “discouraged family farming and therefore family migration. The nature of the Far Western economy encouraged the migration of young unattached men” (50). For men in these places, marriageable women were often located in the East because many of these men refused to marry women of color. To create the Western communities that Americans imagined, white women had to be brought West. The stories that women wrote about such displacement drew on the concepts of captivity and exile while also suggesting a belief that “idealized communities” could be established in the West (Kolodny 11).

For Kolodny, these narratives serve a role quite similar to the role Weinstock assigns to the gothic for women in the late nineteenth century—the genre allows women to “locate and mediate their fears . . . The young bride who saw herself going off to a “howling wilderness,” after all, also professed herself “willing to leave” (Kolodny 11). Women writers, then, traded one kind of captivity narrative for another when they went from writing stories about being taken captive by Indians to writing stories¹⁷ of going West and being held captive by the social

¹⁷ In *Playing House in the American West*, Cathryn Halverson suggests that life narratives written by western women often amplified the difference between domesticity in the East (which was depicted as the standard) and domesticity in the exile of the West. For western women, “playing house” in the West—that is amplifying these differences—served as an argument for mastery of their situation, or (to continue the metaphor I have used in this chapter) a kind of escape from captivity. Halverson writes: “Playing house is at once a symptom of estrangement and a manifestation of agency” (4). Amanda J. Zink has noted that this type of “play” is its own

structures that left them dependent on men in a vast landscape that isolated them from human contact. Both story types traffic in gothic motifs and were used by women to both reinforce and resist the dominant cultural conceptions of gender roles, domesticity, and femininity. In Foote's work, the gothic at times provides an alternative narrative to the story of the idealized community,¹⁸ suggesting that the captivity of Western exile was anything but ideal.

Mary Hallock Foote's most distinct captivity narrative is also her most overtly gothic story and a story that is preoccupied with the West's perceived scarcity of women and water. "Maverick" was published in 1894 in *Century* magazine. Like *The Virginian*, the story adopts the genre Western convention of being titled after its most Western character while being narrated by an eastern tenderfoot, but from there the story renders the Western hero grotesque and questions assumptions about marriage in the West. Foote's narrator has come West on a hunting trip when he is stranded at Arco, Idaho, for several days while his companion attends to business. He learns the story of Maverick, the local sheriff who lives at the nearby stage station (called Traveling Buttes) and was captured and mutilated by Indians when he was a child. Maverick is deeply in love with Rose, the daughter of Gilroy, the stage station owner who has looked after Maverick since he was a child but has since gone mad in his old age. However, Rose does not return Maverick's feelings and she desperately wants to leave, often trying to escape with men

kind of colonial privilege and that white women in the West—while they campaigned for and achieved suffrage for themselves—were simultaneously passing domestic ideology on to women of color.

¹⁸ Arguments in the name of idealized communities are interesting to consider in light of the work by Miranda Joseph who has argued that, while "community"—like "individualism" is a rhetorical commonplace that has been deployed throughout American history—the concept is often used in the service of legitimating social hierarchies and the practice of production and consumption within capitalist economies. Arguments for community tend to focus on some kind of purity or authenticity that divides and excludes as much as it includes. Often, this focus has served to reinforce "exclusionary gendered and racial norms" (Joseph 54).

who stop at the stage station. In the main action of the story, Maverick comes through town chasing two riders and needing an extra horse. The narrator goes along with him to help (or perhaps to watch a Western story unfold). When they finally come upon the two riders, Maverick kills one rider in a Western-style shootout. It turns out the dead man is a Swede boy who was working at the stage stop. The other rider is Rose. When Maverick, the narrator, and Rose begin the trip back, Rose begs the eastern narrator to help her escape. When he can't offer a way to help, Rose flees, taking her horse into a sea of lava rock. She dies somewhat mysteriously, killed by the landscape.

While the main storyline of "Maverick" is about Rose's captivity at the stage station, the story is actually a series of captivity narratives. Maverick's backstory of mutilation at the hands of Indians is a standard captivity narrative trope. His scarred face that signifies his captivity is a reminder of how women who were taken captive were often thought to be contaminated if returned (this is one theme of the film *The Searchers*). However, those rules don't seem to apply to Maverick, who—despite or perhaps because of his encounter with Indian-ness—has risen to be an important individual in the region. The narrator is uncertain about Maverick. At times he is sympathetic to Maverick's unrequited love for Rose; in other moments he is repulsed by Maverick's grotesque appearance and behavior. When Rose escapes with the Swede, another captivity narrative is at play as Maverick goes from being captor to hunter. Once Maverick has killed the Swede, the narrator holds Rose captive so that she cannot run away while Maverick buries the man he has just shot. When the narrator and Maverick are chasing Rose in the story's climax, the narrator describes her making "the most dreadful sound I ever heard from any hunted thing" (550). Perhaps most importantly, Rose sees marriage to Maverick as a kind of captivity. Rose describes life at the stage stop as isolated and rages against the idea—held by the local

women—that she should marry Maverick: “The say—they think I ought to get married—to Maverick or somebody. I’ll die first! I *will* die, if there’s any way to” (549; emphasis Foote). She finds a way to die when she escapes onto the lava rock, claiming her limited agency by trading the cultural captivity and isolation of marriage in the West to the physical captivity of the lava rock, where she dies separated from any kind of communal acceptance. Rose’s story evokes early captivity narratives in which captive women integrated themselves into native culture and didn’t necessarily want to return to their New England communities.

Rose sees marriage as a kind of captivity and she sees her place in the arid West at the edge of a sea of lava rock as the worst kind of place to be a captive. “Maverick” is a story that upends traditional concepts of the captivity narrative in part because Rose is such a nontraditional heroine. To see marriage—especially to the local sheriff who has the characteristics of a damaged gothic hero—as a kind of captivity that is worse than death upends the traditional gothic marriage plot while also questioning the dominant narrative about the American expansion into the West, which held that women (and marriage as an institution) were needed to civilize the wilderness. “Maverick”—like “A Cup of Trembling”—is part of a body of western American literature that William Handley argues tends to undermine the idealism of marriage and individualism. Handley writes: “Scenes of domestic discord and violence represent, in effect, a white dominant culture turning inward, after its conquest of native peoples and cultures, against its most cherished myths about how American character was formed and about the individual’s and nation’s seemingly manifest destinies” (27). While Handley’s work generally looks at violence within marriages, “Maverick” is working in a similar way in that the story undermines dominant beliefs about marriage and individualism in the West. For Rose, marriage is not civilizing but barbaric and terrifying because it denies her agency and mobility.

While the characters in the story see Maverick sympathetically (the narrator calls him “that which has sorest need of love”), he exists in a liminal space between the “savages” who captured him as a child and the civilized girl he loves as an adult (548). Ultimately, the story suggests that Rose sees Maverick as too wild, more savage even than the brutal landscape that offers her only escape. The story asks many of the same questions that were common of the female writers of the gothic in Weinstock’s *Scare Tactics*. For instance, Rose is trapped and dictated to by men in a way similar to the narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gillman’s classic gothic tale “The Yellow Wallpaper,” which was published in 1892, just two years before Foote’s story. Similarly, “Maverick” undermines the ways that domesticity has been used in service to Westward expansion and the ideology of Manifest Destiny. While Foote herself may have been in favor of Westward expansion (her memoir certainly suggests she had great hopes for Arthur’s irrigation project in Idaho), “Maverick” as a text can be read against the ideology of Manifest Destiny. Rose chooses the unordered (un-domestic) space of the lava rock over the domestic space of the home and marriage (and by extension, the American nation itself). Such a reading places my reading of Foote’s work in opposition to the educational reformer Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe,¹⁹ whom Kaplan reads as advocating domesticity as a colonizing force.

However, this story is also preoccupied with the landscape in which it is set and allegorizes the characters with both water and aridity. First, consider Rose’s name, which echoes the first verse of Chapter 35 of the Book of Isaiah in the Old Testament: “the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as *the rose*” (*King James Bible*, Isa, 35.1; emphasis mine). This verse was often used in nineteenth century rhetoric pertaining to water and the reclamation of the West. For

¹⁹ Mary Hallock Foote’s husband, Arthur, was a cousin to Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Roxanna Foote—Catherine and Harriet’s mother—was Arthur’s aunt (see *Victorian Gentlewoman* 81).

instance, Worster quotes a California newspaper using the phrase “blossom as the rose” to describe a canal project in the 1870s (*Rivers* 104). More importantly for Foote, the phrase held power among the irrigation communities of southern Idaho. Mark Fiege argues that the recovered garden narrative was a powerful cultural force in the “irrigated Eden” of the Snake River plain that Arco sits on the edge of (171). Much of this force was exerted by the Mormon settlers in the region²⁰ for whom making the desert “blossom as the rose” was a rhetorical commonplace (Farmer 127). Foote’s heroine, then, is initially linked with the recovery of the garden within the desert by her name.

Rose’s connection to water is strengthened when we consider her role as a captive. When the stage passes through Travelling Buttes on its way to Arco, the driver complains about Gilroy capturing the water²¹ from a local spring and selling it to travelers for the same price as alcohol (the driver describes Gilroy as having “jump[ed] God’s water,” as if God has a mining or irrigation claim on the landscape) (544). The water—much like Rose herself—is held captive by the stage station. The water that Gilroy hasn’t captured is imprisoned by the lava rock, the same lava rock that Rose escapes to so that she will be out of the reach of Maverick. She is unavailable

²⁰ Fiege notes that “Probably the greatest single migration to the Snake River valley came from Utah and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Mormons established their first agricultural settlement in the upper valley in 1879; by 1914 about 36,000 church members . . . made their home there” (16). For a description of the specifics of this migration, see Coates, Boag, and Hatzenbuehler. Foote mentions Mormons occasionally in her Idaho fiction.

²¹ There is an irony in the way that Gilroy’s capture of the water is depicted negatively in “Maverick” because the story was written as Arthur Foote was attempting to similarly capture the water of the Boise River. Without stepping too far onto the thin ice of authorial intent, I think Foote would have seen a distinction between Arthur’s project and Gilroy’s actions because Arthur was attempting to literally build a Western community while Gilroy is depicted as a greedy individualist. My readings of “The Watchman” and *The Chosen Valley* suggest that Foote saw community building as the proper use for captive water in the West, even as the gothic elements of her stories often undermine such a reading.

to men in the novel in the same way the lava rock renders the water of the aquifer unavailable to the local residents. The story makes another direct connection between Rose and water when the narrator sits with Rose “by the sunken stream” (a reference to a river that has disappeared into the lava rock) and thinks of “how other things as precious as “God’s water” go astray on Jericho Road, or are *captured* and sold for a price, while dry hearts ache with the thirst that asks a “draught divine” (548; emphasis mine).²² Rose and the water are both figured as “precious” because of their scarcity. Water is scarce in an arid landscape and a marriageable woman is scarce in Foote’s version of the male-dominated West. Foote’s stories rarely have more than a single woman who might serve as a love interest. This strange passage also conflates Rose’s failure to love Maverick with the failure to achieve Christian salvation (Christ is often called “the living water” in *The Bible*) and with the water Gilroy is selling at the stage station. In this configuration, Rose’s rejection of Maverick is sinful while marriage is a kind of heaven. Alternately, Maverick could be seen as a sinful because of his encounter with the Indians and his inability to marry Rose. Either way, the landscape itself is described as a fallen kind of hell (the consequence of sin) because of its lack of water. When Maverick shouts: “She has taken to the lava!” as Rose escapes to her death, the narrator describes the landscape as a hell on earth by linking it to Dante’s *Inferno*: “I think that if were a poet, I could add another “dolorous circle” to the wailing-place for lost souls” (550). In addition, early in the story the narrator says that an “old plainsmen” told him “This is where hell pops” and the narrator agrees, “the suggestion is perfect,” he notes (545). The narrator is “haunted” by the lava and worries that he “must be

²² The phrase “draught divine” appears to refer to a nineteenth-century poem by Juan Lewis titled “A Draught Divine” (see page 37 of Lewis’s *Poems*). The poem also includes the line “My cup of love that trembles so” which seems a likely inspiration for the title of Foote’s story “The Cup of Trembling.”

getting morbid” (546). It is the lack of water that disconcerts the narrator, who sees the arid, lava rock as a “stupid, cruel sea that crawls upon the land” as a kind of monster (550).

Moreover, the story links the monstrous, arid landscape to Maverick (a character rendered monstrous by his disfigurement and his violence) in the same way it links water to Rose. Foote’s narrator says of the lava rock “For a hundred miles to the Snake River, this Plutonian gulf obliterates the land—holds it against occupation or travel” (546). This metaphor casts the lava rock field and the landscape itself in a kind of captivity narrative in which the lava is the captor. A few paragraphs later the narrator describes Maverick (who has been holding Rose captive) using a simile that links him to the lava rock that the narrator finds so haunting: “his awful face struck me all afresh, as inscrutable in this strange distortion as *some stone god in the desert* from whose graven hideousness a thousand years of mornings have silently drawn the veil” (546; emphasis mine). In these passages Maverick becomes the monstrous landscape that he inhabits, the lava rock about which the narrator says “What it held, or was capable of hiding, in life or in death, no man knew” (545). Maverick is linked to the desert that needs to be redeemed, but can only be redeemed through “God’s water”—an implicit argument for the kind of irrigation work Foote’s husband was doing and an argument for marriage. Maverick, then, is both gothic hero and gothic monster. He is damaged and in need of saving by a gothic heroine, but he is also a grotesque captor who shoots down the Swede rather than allow Rose to escape. Whereas the gothic heroes of novels such as *Jane Eyre* are more vulnerable to women because of their injuries, Maverick is rendered more grotesque. While Rose’s name connects her to the divine reclaiming characteristics of water, Maverick’s name signifies his liminal position in the story and the way he merges hero and villain. Victoria Lamont has written about the term “maverick” and its association with the Johnson County War. “Mavericks” were calves that were

born on the open range with no easily identifiable mother. These animals occupied an uncertain legal status and were used by the Wyoming Stock Growers Association (a group of wealthy livestock businessman) as justification for mob violence against smaller outfits in the range war that took place in the early 1890s, contemporaneous with the publication of Foote's story several hundred miles east in Wyoming. Lamont writes that the status of mavericks was "uncertain" and opened the behavior of cattle rustlers to "alternate readings" (163). Like the calves whose identity is contested, Maverick's place in Foote's story is contested. He renders the familiar unfamiliar, opening up alternative readings and leaving the reader uncertain about conventional gothic romance tropes.

Like much of Foote's Idaho fiction, the story embraces gothic conventions only to subvert them. Foote's story casts women and water as co-civilizing forces in the arid West while also revealing that doing so holds women as captives in a way not unlike the water that is trapped in the aquifer under the lava rock or piled up behind a dam by engineers. The men in Foote's stories seek to hold water and women captives because of their scarcity and their civilizing power, but doing so strips both nature and women of agency and mobility while stripping Maverick of his humanity.

Rose's attempts to escape reflect the individualizing effect of mobility on inhabitants of the West. While men on horseback are often considered the symbol of mobility and transience in the nineteenth-century West and the symbol of western rugged individualism, historians have noted the ways in which mobility also provided middle- and upper-class white women a level of agency that had previously been unavailable. Laura Woodworth-Ney has identified the late nineteenth century as an important moment for the mobility of such women in the West. Automobiles and railroads allowed movement in ways that make the West seem less like a

region of captivity for women who meet the requirements of class and race. Woodworth-Ney notes that these transportation technologies made visits East “much more likely, thus easing the perception that women settlers were leaving behind all of their social networks” (194). Foote’s story alludes to this change in the culture of the period by standing in contrast to it; Rose is defined by her lack of mobility even though mobility is what she desires most. Yet mobility exists within the story. The narrator, a moneyed eastern man, is the character who has access to mobility and by extension the agency and social status that comes with it. Rose attempts to assert her agency by becoming transient but Maverick and the landscape itself won’t let her. Maverick’s role in the story is to maintain the order of western expansion, an order in which eastern men have mobility and western women are meant to remain in the sphere of the home.

The idea that women—like water—should only move when being “channeled” or held captive by the forces of civilization who are creating the West is a common theme in Foote’s Idaho fiction. The story “The Watchman” describes the same conflict that Smythe takes on in *The Conquest of Arid America*: the tension between the individualist reputation of the West and the need for community in the arid West. The story describes the watchmen of a newly constructed ditch (Travis) who is hired to ensure the water doesn’t leave the channels as the dirt settles. He is given a section of ditch to patrol that has had a series of breaks. What Travis doesn’t know is that these breaks have been caused by a local farmer, a homesteader who lives along the ditch with his daughter (Nancy) and who feels threatened by the ditch company. The farmer—Solomon Lark—has watered the crops on his “old homesteader’s claim” through sub-irrigation (using the water from an aquifer that is close enough to the surface to create a swampy slough or pond). The narrator describes the farm like the grounds of a crumbling gothic castle: “The worn out land, never drained, was foul and sour, lapsing into swamps, the black alkali

oozing and spreading from pools to boggy pastures” (57). Lark himself is described as being like his ruined land: “Similar weather-stains and odd kicks and bulges the old rancher’s person exhibited when he came out to sun himself” (57).

Given that Lark is the embodiment of Jefferson’s yeoman farmer—a homesteader who has come West and made a living through his own hard work—these descriptions are a bit odd for a late nineteenth-century story about settling in the West. But Lark is the tale’s villain; he holds Nancy in a kind of captivity through his individualism in the logic of the story. She argues against the presence of the irrigation company and sees the world through her father’s eyes until the company’s role as builder of the West is explained to her by Travis. Lark’s position as villain and Travis’s position as the story’s hero supports Smythe’s idea that engineers in the arid West must build communities because individualism won’t work in an arid landscape. Travis tells Nancy that the arid West can’t be tamed by individuals alone and the region and the nation require a level of cooperation that runs counter to so much of western identity: “This country is too big for single men to handle; companies save years of waiting” (67). Travis oversees the story’s other tale of captivity, the water that is held captive in the ditch. It is this captivity that Travis (and eventually Nancy) believe will lead to communities in the West. Once Lark is exposed as the saboteur of the ditch, Travis forces the old man to repair his most recent break while standing waist deep in cold ditch water in the middle of the night, hitting him in the head with a shovel whenever he tries to get out of the ditch. Travis calls Solomon an animal and the narrator describes the experience as “shocking, hideous, like a horrible dream” (63). This moment of violence against her father initially keeps Nancy from marrying Travis, and Lark dies soon after his sabotage costs Travis his job. But eventually the girl does marry Travis and accepts her new captivity side-by-side with the water itself. Foote’s narrator describes the happy

ending: “Nancy and the ditch are behaving as dutifully as girls and water can be expected to do when taken from their self-found paths and committed to the sober bounds of responsibility” (76). Over the course of the story, Travis has become the captor of both the water and the woman. This passage makes explicit the idea of captivity that is present in the story. Nancy and the water in the ditch have been “taken from their self-found paths” and placed in “bounds.” Yet these lines suggest that the products of this captivity—an Edenic West in which water leads to flowers, livestock, and marriage—more than justifies the means. Like the gothic heroines in eighteenth-century English novels, Foote’s heroines create an idealized home space as part of their captivity while the captive water creates an agricultural American Eden. In Foote’s stories that have happy endings, that home space is the recovered garden version of the American West. To create such a West, Foote’s stories require the captivity of the two scarce resources described in this passage: “girls and water.” Foote depicts both women and water as domestic, civilizing forces employed in the service of the nation. However, both women and water must be “taken” and pressed into such service by men who recognize the Edenic potential of the West and can put water and women to use in building that version of the region.

However, the “taking” and “bounding” of women and water leaves the reader slightly unsure of this process and this West, leading to questions about western metanarratives. For instance, what are we to make of a story in which the agent of a capitalist ditch company “hideously” assaults a homesteading farmer and then marries that farmer’s daughter? How should we interpret the narrator’s ending paragraphs of marital and irrigational bliss given that they come at the expense of a character who, as a homesteading pioneer, would have been something of a national hero in the 1890s? The happy ending of the story allows it to be read as a parable of water in the West, a morality tale in service of cooperation. Lark’s role as villain and

Travis's role as hero suggest that perhaps the West is not a paradise for rugged individualists. In "The Watchman," individualism is a hindrance rather than a help. Solomon Lark's name provides a clue, especially since the story is replete with allusions to the Old Testament including references to "clever sons of Jacob" and "the daughter of Esau" (71). The Old Testament King Solomon goes from being a wise king favored by God to a sinful king punished by God. Solomon Lark's life story is similar. His resilience as a pioneer cements his national credibility, but his refusal to give up any of his individualism to the ditch company is his sin. Travis represents the kind of westerner that Lark fails to be. Travis recognizes the need for cooperation in an arid landscape. "I'm a poor man, a settler like your father," he tells Nancy, "but I can see we farmers can't do everything for ourselves"; in regard to fears that the ditch company owns the river he says: "They are just peddlers of water and we buy it. Who owns the other, then? Don't we own them just as much as they own us?" (67). This argument—which seems to run directly counter to rhetoric surrounding the homestead act and the individualism that Turner argues is one of the products of the frontier—cements the need for cooperation and foreshadows the marriage plot in which Travis needs Nancy as much as she need him. The story's final scene finds Nancy as an idealized domesticating force, bringing bread to her husband in stark contrast to Travis's camp along the river where he ate bread covered in sand. While our romantic couple needs each other, both also need the water imprisoned in the ditch. Yet this reading also seems to undermine itself. As readers we are left wondering about the violence, the violence to the landscape in the form of ditches and dams and the violence to the yeoman farmer at the hands of "the company." Foote's story manages to both reinforce the idea that aridity requires community in a way not found in the humid East while questioning the violence that such an idea seems to ignore or

count as necessary. Like the narrative of the Garden, this Foote story describes an act of creation that is inseparable from destruction.

In ways that are similar to Smythe's attempt to assuage anxieties about aridity by describing conquest as peaceful, "The Watchman" uses a marriage plot to ease anxieties about the violence that is present in the stories' action. But this happy ending doesn't erase the violence, the captivity, the domestication of water and women through the removal of agency and mobility, and the environmental manipulation that populate both "The Watchman" and "Maverick." Readers can't help but feel uncertain with the route that Foote's stories take to arrive at their happy endings or with the suicides that are meant to make a story like "Maverick" or "A Cup of Trembling" into a straightforward morality tale but seem to do almost the exact opposite. This uncertainty is part of what haunts Foote's Idaho fiction, providing it with a sense of the gothic, a sense that separate spheres are not so separate, that what Ellis calls "the ideology of domesticity"—which Foote's fiction prescribes for both the women and the water of the West—is not as rational or safe, not as peaceful (to use Smythe's word), as the stories would have us believe.²³

Captivity, Creation, and Destruction in Foote's *The Chosen Valley*

While Foote's fiction leaves its readers uncertain about the use of captivity and the presence of violence, her stories often encourage readers to put aside that uncertainty and place

²³ Because historians and critics have generally viewed Foote as an advocate for traditional (domestic) gender politics rather than a suffragette (or a progressive), my readings of Foote's texts as questioning the separate spheres concept and domesticity in general might be considered "against the grain" of authorial intention. However, a 2013 article argues that Foote's own gender politics are perhaps more complex than they might seem. Tara Penry's article examines an 1887 letter Foote sent as a refusal of an offer to display her illustrations as "woman's work" at an exposition in Chicago. Penry notes that the language in Foote's letter (and the lack of context) allow for an ambiguous reading that might mean Foote was more progressive in her view of women's roles than she has been given credit for.

their faith in her engineers (characters like Travis in “The Watchmen”), who are creating—or birthing—a civilization in the West out of an empty landscape. But like her use of the captivity narrative, Foote’s treatment of creation is also laced with gothic anxiety. This anxiety stems from an uncertainty about the landscape itself and is deeply seeded in American gothic literature that deals with the theme of the frontier. The editors of *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Literature* suggest that American gothic is interested in “the most fundamental conflict shaping American experience, the battle between civilization and nature, between the mental landscape of European consciousness and the physical and psychical landscape of the New World” (15). This is the conflict at the heart of captivity narratives, especially considering that captivity narratives helped to establish or reinforce the idea that Native Americans were essentially part of the landscape itself. In captivity narratives the American Indians are the wilderness made monstrous. Hence the genre, like the frontier gothic stories it gives rise to, houses the anxieties that Americans feel about frontier destruction, native displacement, and genocide. The wilderness itself serves to haunt the characters (and readers) of American gothic tales by signifying a history of violence: “The history of the other speaks, not from books, but from landscape, which is no longer a locale, which opens itself as an unmediated text of the other filled with dark ruins and shadowy presences whose experience is queasy, uncertain, chaotic, and unknown” (Mogen et al. 16).

This view of wilderness as chaotic and unknown, a reminder of violence, is underpinned by European conceptions of wilderness in the middle ages that were culturally present for Americans faced with the wilderness of the “new world.” In his intellectual history *The Idea of Wilderness*, Max Oelschlaeger explains that Christian belief in the middle ages associated wilderness with paganism. Oelschlaeger writes that “A constant theme of medieval theology is

the insistence that nature, though proof of God's existence . . . was not divine. The sacred groves worshipped by pagans, and reputedly the denizens of witches, shamans, and Lucifer himself, had to be eliminated from the face of the earth" (72). This conception of wilderness led "ax-wielding monks" to wage war against the wilderness spaces that often surrounded the remote locations of their monasteries (72). Oelschlaeger argues that medieval Christians saw reverence toward wilderness as heresy and the subjugation of wilderness as part of God's plan as described in Genesis when "man" is given "dominion . . . over all the earth" (*King James Bible*, Gen, 1.26).

These ideas informed the Anglo American reaction to wilderness in the seventeenth century. In his history of the concept of wilderness in American thought, Roderick Frazier Nash traces the idea of the wilderness as a space of danger back to its European antecedents: "its dark, mysterious qualities made it a setting in which the prescientific imagination could place a swarm of demons and spirits" (8). In this period, the lack of control that wilderness symbolized created a tendency to tell stories in which the forest itself becomes monstrous (10). Indeed, Nash notes that the term "wilderness" can be traced to Teutonic and Norse roots that translate literally to "self-willed, willful, or uncontrollable"; wilderness as a landscape that has a mind of its own (1). In North America, westward expansion then became an effort of ordering chaos, of controlling the uncontrollable, of bending the will of nature to the will humanity and by extension the will of God. Amy Kaplan has written that the nineteenth-century rhetoric of imperial expansion describes the nation as "bounded and rigidly ordered" (and thereby domestic) whereas the land outside nation (the land in need of ordering) is "boundless and undifferentiated space" (583). These ideas have had a long shelf life. Contrary to how we might think of aesthetically pleasing wilderness landscapes in the twenty-first century, many Americans throughout the nation's history did not see wilderness scenes as beautiful. Rather they found beauty in the finely

cultivated field. The west has long been the site of the garden narrative, but a garden is a place that has been ordered and made sensible, not a place of uncontrolled nature. Nash quotes an article from the *Saturday Evening Post* published in 1965, one year *after* the Wilderness Act was passed: wilderness “is precisely what man has been fighting against since he began his painful awkward climb to civilization. It is the dark, the formless, the terrible, the old chaos which our fathers pushed back . . . It is held at bay by constant vigilance, and when the vigilance slackens it swoops down for melodramatic revenge” (Quoted in Nash 27). This idea of the wilderness as a site of gothic terror is still part of American culture, entrenched in American gothic novels, horror films, and television shows like the hugely popular Netflix series *Stranger Things*.

For early Anglo inhabitants of North America and Anglo settlers who came to the arid West, these ideas were coupled with Christian notions of the desert (which is a term used interchangeably with “wilderness” in *The Bible*) as a place where God is absent. Aridity is a factor in Nash’s analysis in that he describes God using arid climates as a punishment. Christian stories that take place in the desert—such as Christ’s temptation by Satan or the exodus from Egypt—serve to purify the characters in the stories. But this purification doesn’t occur because of God’s presence, rather it happens precisely because God is absent. It is only by surviving these tests that God’s people draw closer to Him. At the end of Foote’s *The Chosen Valley*, the settlers post a plaque on the finished dam that quotes the Old Testament: “I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert” (*King James Bible*, Isa, 43.19). The lack of water signifies the absence of God. Consequently, to inhabit the desert is to experience a spiritual isolation. This is the same isolation that Slotkin finds integral to the captivity narrative, which Puritans also interpreted as a test of one’s devotion. Accordingly, these stories are not unlike the frontier metanarrative itself, which is described by Turner and others as a process for creating

Americans precisely because the frontier itself is such a wild and howling wilderness, a place where civilization (and God) are absent. Men must leave civilization behind so that they can tame the wilderness, not so that they can enjoy it. Nash writes that wilderness conquest is the dominant narrative of western expansion into the twentieth century.

The gothic, however, is a means of questioning dominant narratives. Frontier gothic, and American gothic in general, question the “dominant, sanctioned history of the United States,” which Charles Crow argues is seen as a “a narrative of social, economic, and technological progress” along with a dose of American exceptionalism and divine mandate (xviii of Preface). Given this definition, gothic readings of Foote’s stories are especially fruitful because they describe the use of technology to order the chaos of the wilderness, what Americans of the late nineteenth century would have seen as the leading edge of progress. Progressives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century believed national progress was tied to the ability to continue the conquest of the frontier that Frederick Jackson Turner and others believed was so valuable to the creation of American character. The environmental historian Donald Pisani has argued that attempts to “reclaim” Western lands from aridity—which began in earnest in the 1880s and 1890s with projects like the one described in Foote’s *The Chosen Valley*—were essentially attempts to extend the frontier. Debate about the Reclamation Act—a piece of legislation supported by progressives and signed by Theodore Roosevelt in 1902—was steeped in the rhetoric of the frontier. Water projects would keep Turner’s frontier from closing by opening up previously uninhabitable lands for settlement. Progressivism imagined these lands being peopled by the urban poor in a marriage of Turner’s frontier and Jefferson’s yeoman farmer while also extending traditional notions of masculinity, femininity, and the centrality of the nuclear family.

Richard Slotkin has argued that progressivism of this period was reinforced by literature and culture that celebrated western masculinity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly Buffalo Bill Cody's *Wild West*, a stage show professing to be history. As Americans considered Cody's show as the West's past, they drew connections with the West's future. In 1886, on an advertisement for the *Wild West*, readers learned that Cody himself had done "so much for the *reclamation* of the prairie from the savage Indian and wild animals" (quoted in *Gunfighter Nation* 68; emphasis mine). This usage suggests that the role of Indian hunter (Cody's role in his show) and the role of the engineer are linked by the desire to *reclaim* land for American progress. Roosevelt's view of the frontier saw the Buffalo Bill-style Indian hunter as the central component of the frontier process (Slotkin 35). In such a view, the Western's hero is a man who prepares the frontier for settlement; in the twentieth century such men were dam and irrigation engineers, men who were attempting to order the chaos of the wilderness. In *The Chosen Valley*, Foote describes Philip (an engineer) and Dolly (his love interest) seeing a "cowboy shape" disappearing into a cloud of dust, symbolizing the end of the cowboy era (283). Philip responds to this image by describing how the wilderness land will be "reclaimed" by the dam project, allowing for a series of small farms. In this passage, Philip assumes the role of the man who is preparing the frontier. Like Buffalo Bill himself, Philip is doing his part to "reclaim" the desert from what white Anglo Americans saw as a kind of savagery: the otherness of aridity.

It is the presence of otherness that renders frontier texts gothic. Wendy Anne Witherspoon has argued that the gothic is the exploration of liminal space—those boundary spaces that expose the other to the self and ask which is monstrous, especially in stories that deal in national identity. She traces this back to the eighteenth-century gothic novels of Radcliffe and Walpole that use the Alps and Italy as frontiers because of their distance from England and their

suggestion of a threatening other. Frontiers that are figured as threatening reassure the reader that the home place—the nation—is safe and secure. The Italians that serve as the villains in the novels of Walpole and Radcliffe are portrayed as “passionate and cruel” back to the theatre of Shakespeare, and Italy was the home of the pope, who served as “the greatest bogeyman in gothic literature” (Witherspoon 8). In English gothic novels, English identity is established in the frontier of Italy where the English heroes and heroines can perform their Englishness and where that identity can be contested. The division between the hero and the monster (self and other) in the gothic is often symbolized by a dividing barrier at which violence takes place (11).

Witherspoon argues that these conventions are still present in the American gothic, especially at the frontier where Americans can perform their American-ness by rescuing captives and fighting Indian wars. In Foote’s Idaho fiction, American-ness is performed by creating a version of (Anglo) America in a place that looks distinctly other. But, as we see in “Maverick” and “The Watchmen,” there is an underlying anxiety to this idea of creating an America in a place that looks un-American. Readers of Foote’s Idaho fiction are left wondering if national identity is powerful enough to subdue the otherness of aridity.

The performance of national identity is perhaps the defining convention of the genre Western and is present in much of western American literature. However, in literature about the arid West, that performance is especially vulnerable because aridity runs counter to the American commonplace of rugged individualism. In Foote’s fiction, it is not the Indian who is the “other,” it is the landscape itself that is foreign to conceptions of America in the 1890s. Joan Thompson has explained how Foote’s idyllic childhood in the well-watered, New England landscape informed her reaction to the dry landscapes of the West:

The description of her parents' New York farm suggests a landscape in which water is a comforting part of domestic and agricultural rhythms that mark the cycle of the years. It suggests a human presence that is permanent rather than the image in her passage on Idaho in which water is threatening and uncontrolled. She suggests that the water she associates with Idaho will resist human control and threaten domestic stability. (36)

In her memoir, Foote recalls her reaction to the news that she and the children would be joining her husband in Idaho: “darkest Idaho! Thousands of acres of desert empty of history,” she writes (265).

For Foote the wilderness was very much a place of terror and anxiety, but also a place that could give “birth” to the Christian, American world. The separate spheres of humid East and arid West could become one single sphere, but only through the “violent and promiscuous birth” that would require engineers to capture two scarce resources—water and women—and set them to work as mothers creating a domestic space in the wilderness. Metaphors of birth and mothering are present in Foote’s memoir and fiction. In her memoir, she titles the section in which she introduces the irrigation project and her move to Idaho with her children as “The *Birth* of a Scheme or The Vision in the Desert” (247; emphasis mine). When she describes her view of the land the Footes came to irrigate she writes that it was “a land without life, not dead, perhaps, but *unborn*” (270; emphasis mine). In Foote’s novel, *The Chosen Valley*, the engineer Dunsimir describes the water entering a canal as “a baby taking its first steps” (286). When Dunsimir begins filling the reservoir, he calls the ceremony that will celebrate its completion “the marriage of the ditch” (299). The story of Dunismir and his dam in *The Chosen Valley* is a story of captivity, marriage, and mothering as a means for creating America in the arid West.

The novel opens with a young dam engineer named Philip joining his father (Norrisson) in Idaho where Norrisson has spent more than a decade working on a dam and canal project on a fictitious river called the Wallula, a tributary to the Snake River. Norrisson began the work with a Scottish engineer named Dunsimir, but the two had a falling out over how quickly the project should be completed. Norrisson prioritizes speed, arguing that Europeans are missing the American desire to get things done. Dunsimir prioritizes the quality of the project at the expense of speed. The two have spent the years since their split battling in court and public opinion. Dunsimir owns a water right and the best dam site. Norrisson has the capital to back the project. Philip has been summoned because Norrisson has finally managed to tip the scales in his favor by overturning Dunsimir's water right. Eventually, Philip and Dunsimir build the dam against their better judgment at Norrisson's behest. During this process Philip falls in love with Dunsimir's daughter (Dolly) while Dunsimir's son (Alan) abandons his father. In the novel's climax, the ill-suited dam collapses while the lake behind it is filling. The collapse kills Dunsimir. Philip rebuilds the dam with his father's money and marries Dolly.

Like much of Foote's Idaho fiction, *The Chosen Valley* explores captivity in multiple ways, all of which seem to complicate and resist traditional captivity conventions. The most overt captivity plot is the story of Alan, who runs away from home only to be captured. Alan is impatient with his father's slow-moving work and identifies most with the cowboys in the novel. He is young and in a hurry to get rich quickly, an approach Foote's novel argues against. After an argument with his father, he leaves and spends the night drinking, hearing stories about a pool of water in the desert. Setting out to find this pool, he encounters an opening in the lava rock and rope leading downward. He goes in only to find Juan Pacheco, a "yellow Mexican" who is hiding out to avoid a murder charge and is described as "murderous" and "ghastly" (136).

Pacheco takes Alan's horse and leaves him in the cave without a way out. Alan's story has some of the makings of a traditional captivity narrative: the murderous man of color who turns Alan into a captive, the dark and gothic nature of the desert where he is stranded in a hole unable to return home. But the story is also subverting the genre because Alan is the story's cowboy, yet he is taken captive rather than rescuing a captive woman. To invert the story farther, Alan is rescued by a woman of color; Juan Pacheco's "amiga" arrives to save Alan from starvation (145). This captivity seems almost incidental to the story of the dam, but it serves to complicate and render unfamiliar assumptions about how captivity might work in the West. Alan sees himself as an individualist, setting out across the dry plains in search of wealth, the very definition of a Western story. Yet he ends up in a hole—held captive by the landscape itself and nearly dying of thirst, a passive captive completely dependent on his rescuer, a woman of color who returns him home. Like "The Watchman," the novel suggests that the individualism of the Western past will not be repeated in the arid West. Alan's story also warns against the romantic idea of pools of water in the desert, just waiting to be found. Water in the novel is unpredictable and dangerous, in need of control.

Captivity in this instance also describes the risks and complications of settling in what Foote calls a region "scarcely more than six days old" ("Introductory" 6). Alan's failures are as much about his youth as they are about his tendency to individualism. He is described as impatient and impetuous; he mocks his father's failed dam scheme in a local parade. These same traits are used to characterize the water in the canyon, the water that will be taken captive behind the dam. When Philip firsts visits the canyon, the narrator notes that the river has "a mocking coolness" (34). Chapter IV is titled "The Water's Gecking," a term which OED defines as "to scoff at, to use mocking language or gestures towards" ("gecking"). This chapter introduces the

river's gothic element, a mocking laugh that is a motif throughout the novel. Dunsimir proclaims that "When the rife river heads into a lake, and leans its breast against the scarp of a dam, you will hear no more of the water's gecking" (74). Just before the dam breaks, the narrator again compares the water to a child: "Water is a very secret, subtle thing; it dissembles its sinister forces in trifling appearances which might amuse a child" (303). For both Alan and the water, the antidote for the petulance of youth is captivity. Alan's foolhardy choice to climb into the hole leads to his captivity. Similarly, Dunsimir argues that the dam will stop the water's "gecking." And yet, in both cases the captivity does not have the desired effect. By the novel's end Alan has made his way east to marry the daughter of Norrison's investors. His cowboy dreams are long forgotten but he is still not the engineer his father would have him be. When the water breaks free of the dam and kills Dunsimir, Foote's narrator personifies the aftermath using the language of child throwing a tantrum (or perhaps the language of female hysteria that was so common in the era): the water "thrashed and sobbed and rocked itself to rest in its old channel again" (306). Neither Alan nor the water are so easily taken captive or made to mature.

What is missing for both Alan and the water is a mother. Alan's mother has died and left Alan to be raised by his father and his sister. Similarly, Norrison's wife is absent, remaining in Europe rather than living in the intensely male space inhabited by her husband. The character who recognizes these absences is Philip. Once he has decided to marry Dolly (whom he first encounters hidden in a hillside cave, a potential setting of captivity rescue), he feels a sudden increase in his responsibilities to the region: "He felt himself not content to be merely a builder of ditches; he looked forward to being an administrator of waters, in the new *communities* water should create, and here came in the human element which immensely enlarged the scope of his work and of *her helpfulness*" (274; emphasis mine). Philip recognizes the landscape as needing a

motherly influence. Dolly's "helpfulness" is her position as a mother to the "communities water should create," the same position that is held by irrigation water directed into ditches. Ditches are described as mothers to the petulant, mocking water of the canyon when Philip argues that "Our waters shall do their singing and shouting in the mountains; they come down here on business. Your burns are nothing but mad children. *Ditches are tender, good mothers*" and irrigated land is described as "like a matronly lap" (284, 286; emphasis mine). In this version of creation, the Garden West grows mature under the guiding hand of motherly ditches and mothers themselves. Both the ditches and the mothers have been "captured" by engineers and made domestic.

This idea is neatly present in one of Foote's illustrations from *The Chosen Valley* when it was serialized in *Century* (see Figure 3). In the image, which is captioned "Dolly was serving a housekeeper's apprentice," Dolly is leaning on a table next to a mixing bowl, presumably looking at a book of recipes. Behind her, framed in the window, is the river. The water is flat and settled, not dangerous or uncontrolled while Dolly is equally subdued in the sphere of the home preparing a meal. The river itself is held captive by the frame of the window. Nature has been ordered and made sensible by the limits put on it. The small square windows suggest the river has been plotted and planned on a sheet of graph paper while simultaneously serving as a set of bars²⁴ to keep Dolly in. In the bottom right corner of the window the water almost seems to flow into (or out of) the bowl Dolly is using to prepare a meal. The image depicts the two kinds of captivity that are so central to Foote's Idaho fiction: the domestic confinement of women and water. The water's connection to the bowl suggests a kind of symmetry between the two kinds of

²⁴ This image is similar to one of Joseph Hatfield's illustration that accompanied Gillman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper," which was published the same year. In both images, women are located near a window and the window's panes seem to be serving as bars to keep the women captive. See Catherine Golden's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Joseph Henry Hatfield's Original Magazine Illustrations."

captivity that results in creation. Dolly is *making* a meal and making a home in the same way that the water is *making* agriculture possible in spite of aridity. The engineers in the novel are using both women and water to *make* a version America in the arid West.

THE CHOSEN VALLEY.¹—V.

BY MARY HALLOCK FOOTE,

Author of "The Led-Horse Claim," "John Bodewin's Testimony," etc.

WITH PICTURES BY THE AUTHOR.



XV.

MARGARET had been able to choose her successor, a young woman who presented herself with an appositeness which might have been called providential but for the drawback of a ten-months-old baby. Margaret made light of the baby in comparison with the baby's dire alternative, a Chinaman; and the family assented. No one likes to think one's self so inhuman as to mind a baby. A baby, Margaret claimed, steadies a young woman and gives her ambition; she had seen a slender bit nursing mother go through the same work, and find time to rest and tidy herself, that "twa jaukin' hizzies wad be dallyin' with the lee-lang day." The young woman's husband was busy, like Job, getting his land in shape for the water, which had been promised by the following spring.

It was several weeks before the admis-

ENGRAVED BY C. STATE.

"DOLLY WAS SERVING A HOUSEKEEPER'S APPRENTICESHIP."

¹ Copyright, 1892, by Mary Hallock Foote.

Figure 3. Illustration and text from *The Chosen Valley*, serialized in *Century*, volume 44 (1892) pp. 702.

Engineers, in the novel's logic, serve as creators; the relationship between the engineers and the West is not unlike the relationship between God and the earth in the section of *Paradise Lost* that Foote cites in the introduction to *The Last Assembly Ball*. Early in *The Chosen Valley*, Norrison (the land booster) describes Dunsimir (the engineer) as a "theorist," which he defines as someone who "isn't satisfied with the work of the creator" (30). Similarly, when Alan suggests to Philip—Norrison's son who is also an engineer—that God created the desert in just the way He wanted, Philip is unconvinced. Foote's engineers don't see the desert as a finished creation, they see it as a landscape "unborn," waiting to be created. Dolly says that her father's work is "nearest to the work of the Creator" then she argues "if it's glorious to discover new lands, is it less so *to make them*, out of old waste places that . . . add nothing but distance?" (60; emphasis mine). The idea that deserts were places that needed finishing was not uncommon in the late nineteenth century or even in eastern Idaho. In his book *Irrigated Eden*, which is an environmental history of the Snake River region that Foote is writing about, Mark Fiege finds that irrigation was described as a means to "complete nature" (23). This view, which Fiege found explicated in newspaper editorials in the early twentieth century, saw engineers as working with and for God to complete the work of creation: "God, a sort of Chief Engineer, had drawn up the blueprints and built the framework; now his understudies, the irrigation engineers would finish the job" (23). Similarly, in his book *Dirty Wars*, John Beck argues that the Anglo Americans have long viewed the western desert wastelands as a "screen upon which openness is projected" (21). He notes that while Spanish explorers rarely remarked on the desert landscape, Anglo explorers and settlers: "seem from the outset to have been preoccupied with the perceived emptiness of the desert" (23). This emptiness allows the West to be created. Both Dunsimir and Norrison in *The Chosen Valley* create a version of the valley in the form of engineering plans and

promotional materials before they begin to change the land itself. In both cases the desert is a blank slate to be written upon. But the ultimate version of the West that is created in *The Chosen Valley* is constructed by Foote herself, and this version of the region is not so easily made into a garden as its engineers would like.

In *The Chosen Valley*, as in other stories from Foote's Idaho period, the utopian stories that characters wish to project onto the desert are undermined by moments of gothic terror. The engineer whose work is "nearest to the work of the creator" is killed by his own creation. The anxiety that undermines creation in the novel is the anxiety of Western expansion. If *The Chosen Valley* has a villain beyond aridity itself, that villain is Norrisson and the desire for wealth and growth without thought and patience. It is this force that creates additional layers of captivity within the novel. Dunsimir is described as a captive to Norrisson and his boosting. This imprisonment is linked to Dunsimir's failure to secure the water right he needs to build the dam his way, meaning that Norrisson's ability to capture the water allows him to capture the engineers. Norrisson makes this argument when he claims that Dunsimir's right has failed because he has let the water run free for too long: "Water belongs to the man who uses it. We claimed his location, *and shall hold it*, on the ground that we are ready to build our canal now" (158, emphasis Foote). Once his water right is void, Dunsimir views himself as having been similarly "claimed" by Norrisson as a captive. He sees himself a person in bondage who cannot escape the vulgar, capitalistic boosting that he fears will lead to destruction. While initially Dunsimir decides to resign, the narrator describes Dunsimir's reconsideration using the language of captivity: "No man may be *captive*, even to his own will, for as long as Dunsimir, without suffering the prison change. If Norrisson's company owned the scheme, the scheme owned Dunsimir" (235; emphasis mine). Like his son trapped in the dark cave waiting for rescue,

Dunsimir is a passive captive, stripped of his individuality: “he had no elasticity, no imagination, no conviction left for any new work, so long as he was chained to this. He knew his bondage at last” (235). He admits that “they have captured my scheme by the strong arm” (238). Finally, on the day that the dam is complete and the lake is filling, Dunsimir’s tells Philip “it is time we gat us up out of this land of bondage” (300).

It is this captivity—the imprisonment of the creator—the leads the novel to be anxious and unsure about Western expansion itself, about the process of eastern men finishing God’s work in the desert and creating the West. The novel leaves the reader unsure about the emptiness of the landscape, the process of reclamation and about this place in which the characters have been trapped. Early in the novel, Foote introduces the motif of the laugh: “Out of the darkness and clamor came a small, cold, mocking laugh, distinctly syllabled, repeated on one note, but devoid of human expression. It was like a cold touch laid upon the spine” (74). This laugh suggests that the landscape is not empty, that something “devoid of human expression” lurks in the boundary spaces between civilization and wilderness. Hence, the novel depicts creation in such spaces as a kind of destruction. Creation cannot avoid destruction in the arid West, and the novel implies that such destruction is inherent in the processes of Westward expansion and reclamation. In the novel’s closing passages, Foote’s narrator remarks: “Over the graves of the dead, and over the hearts of the living, presses the cruel expansion of our country’s material progress” before ending with an ominous sentence: “And victory, if it come, shall border hard upon defeat” (314). These final sentences blur the lines between progress and failure, creating a liminal space (the “border hard upon defeat”) in which American expansion and reclamation are made monstrous, like water itself in *The Chosen Valley*. Wendy Anne Witherspoon writes that “often gothic violence occurs at the threshold of a barrier. . . . gothic violence has less to do with

the depths or divisions themselves, than with a threatened interaction between the divided spaces” (11). This pattern recurs in Foote’s novel when the dam (a barrier and a symbolic line between controlled nature and uncontrolled wilderness) is the site of Dunsimir’s death. In addition, Dolly senses violence at the figurative borders of their work in the canyon. When it looks temporarily as if Dunsimir’s water right will be upheld, Dolly is afraid of the figurative border between success and failure, which she describes as a doorway that is dangerous to pass through: “If the door is open at last, let us creep through softly, and not boast we are free. I am afraid” (73). Her suggestion is cut off by the laughing sound that the river makes throughout the novel and repeats when Dunsimir is killed. The language in this passage indicates that Dolly recognizes the danger of liminal spaces. She fears the moment of slipping through the “the door” between captivity and freedom. And, indeed, Dunsimir’s water right is not upheld and the resulting action leads to his death.

Borders serve as sites of violence in Foote’s other Idaho stories. The violence in “Maverick” takes place on the edge of the lava rock “sea” where Maverick shoots the Swede and Rose escapes across the border into the rocks that lead to her death. In “The Watchman,” Travis assaults Solomon while the old man stands in a ditch that serves as a border between the land of the small farmer and the holdings of the irrigation company. Foote’s fiction is consistently filled with anxiety and violence at such liminal spaces. This violence undermines the idea of utopian Western communities and throws the concept of creation into uncertainty. Instead of utopian Western communities where the line between the nation and the other is clearly demarcated and engineered to perfection, we witness a violent conquest perpetrated by individualists such as Norrison and Maverick who are grotesque and perverse versions of traditional Western heroes. These stories don’t provide a West in which rugged individualism has been peacefully converted

to communal cooperation; they describe American individualists turning to violence in the name of the nation, capturing and keeping scarce resources in the form of water and marriageable women.

The anxiety and loss of faith in *The Chosen Valley* is mirrored in the history of reclamation during the early twentieth century, prior to construction of Hoover Dam and other large dams that characterize the middle of the century. When Frederick Newell assumed control of the federal reclamation program in the West in 1907, he had an almost unshakable faith in the ability of American engineers to shape and control the land and the culture of the region (Pisani, *Water and Government*, 24). This faith was mirrored by his faith in the frontier metanarrative and the ability of the frontier to shape American character. Donald Pisani writes that “The key to understanding Frederick H. Newell is the tension between his admiration for the technology and organization of the new bureaucratic age and his respect for the virile, “character-building” frontier society” (*Water and Government* 27). Yet during his tenure with the Reclamation Service, Newell came to doubt that engineers could make the West into a profitable culture and that the frontier metanarrative could continue to build Americans. The land, Newell confided to a friend in 1915, “does not have the economic value equaling the cost of reclamation” (quoted in Pisani, *Water and Government*, 28) and by the 1930s he was describing reclamation of the arid West as a mistake. Similarly, reclamation efforts, he claimed in 1916, were undermined by settlers who lacked the character of those who came West in the nineteenth century. It seems that both people and aridity were beyond the engineer’s control in the early twentieth century, a feeling that Foote’s fiction anticipates with its moments of gothic anxiety and ambivalent descriptions of westward expansion.

Controlling Stories

While *The Chosen Valley* suggests that efforts to control the arid Western landscape are violent and dangerous and may end in a success that resembles failure, the story reserves its agency primarily for its male characters. With her father dead, Dolly makes the only choice that seems left to her. She marries Philip and serves in the role he has imagined for her helping to create the communities of the West. The novel's ending provides an image of Dolly at her most motherly, showing Dunsimir's grandson the dam that her father designed and the plaque that marks his death. Like Dolly, many of the women in Foote's Idaho fiction—Rose from “Maverick,” Nancy from “The Watchman”—are faced with limited choices, a scarcity that mirrors the choices available to their author. Mary Hallock Foote was filling a role that looks very similar to the role she wrote Dolly and Nancy into; she was supporting her husband's efforts to create an American version of the West in an arid landscape. However, she held a measure of control (and creation) unavailable to her female characters: she controlled the stories themselves.

Like the engineers of her stories who seek to control both water and women, Foote took her role seriously, attempting even to control the interpretations of her readers. The moralizing ending of *The Chosen Valley*, in which Foote lectures the reader about the imperfections of Western schemes, is mirrored in stories such as “The Fate of a Voice” and “The Watchman.” In both of these stories, Foote's narrator provides interpretive conclusions to her stories, acknowledging the potential for multiple interpretations while attempting to “channel” the reader like water in a ditch to the reading most fertile for a positive interpretation of Foote herself and the role of women in Westward expansion. However, like the water in Dunsimir's dam or Travis's ditch, the meaning of Foote's stories is difficult to contain and leaks out in surprising ways, sometimes undermining and subverting control.

Often these moralizing closing passages seek to steer the definitions of marriage in the story away from earlier depictions of the institution as a kind of captivity. “The Fate of a Voice” is a story about a woman whose love interest convinces her to give up a career as a singer in the East to go West with her husband, a railroad engineer. Early in the story, when she is arguing against what eventually becomes her life, she describes marriage and Western existence as being “buried alive” (226). But when her engineer love seems to fall to his death in a Western river canyon while the woman watches, she loses her voice. Once she regains it (after the engineer is found to be alive), she changes her mind and moves West with the man she loves. The ending passages read like a moral, a rebuke not of marriage as captivity but of choosing to be anything other than a captive. The narrator dismisses the suggestions that this girl “threw away a charming career” and assures that reader that “the soul of music . . . will find its listeners; though it be a voice singing in the wilderness, in the dawn of the day of art and beauty which is coming to a new country and a new people” (275). The story’s ending suggests that the engineer’s role is to domesticate the land (and provide the women) while the women’s role is to domesticate the culture, a captive who brings light to the darkness. The narrator recognizes that the story opens itself up to an interpretation in which the woman’s choice can be viewed as a mistake and spends the final passages arguing against such an interpretation.

Ironically, this argument undermines the attempt to control the story. By raising the possibility that the story’s heroine has thrown away a promising career, the story leaves the reader with the ghost of that career, a separate version of the plot. The reader cannot help but wonder what might have been and if the woman’s choice was a wise one. If the reader is also aware that Foote herself left a promising career in the East to go West with her husband, the specter of what might have been is even more present. The effort to control the story serves to

open up new channels of meaning by protesting too much. We are left wondering who the narrator is trying to convince, the readers or the author herself. The image of the voice in the wilderness, the new country and new people, looks as much like exile as it looks like Eden. Like Foote's other gothic stories, the text both resists and reinforces the ideology of manifest destiny.

The use of an argument that undoes itself repeats in "The Watchman." As the plot ends with Nancy realizing she should marry Travis, the narrator leaves the reader with images not just of what might have been, but what cannot be again.

Nancy and the ditch are behaving as dutifully as girls and water can be expected to do when taken from their self-found paths and committed to the sober bounds of responsibility.

Flowers bloom upon its banks, heaven is reflected in its waters, fair and broad are the fertile pastures that lie beyond; but the best-trained ditch can never be a river, nor the gentlest wife a girl again. (76)

This passage highlights the scarce resources needed to create an American version of the arid West, "girls and water," while also highlighting the transformation that both require. Rivers must become ditches (controlled, gentle water) while girls must become "the gentlest" wives. While the final sentence opens with an independent clause that emphasizes the product of these transformations (an agricultural Eden), the final independent clause dwells on what has been lost. For the reader, the previous paragraph (in which the narrator argues in favor captivity for both women and water) is undermined by the loss of youth and the loss of wildness. Is a ditch truly better than a river? Should all girls aspire to be "the gentlest wife"?

Like Smythe's metaphors of "peaceful war," these parable-ish endings try to anticipate any misgivings the reader may have about the captivity that the heroines (or the water) are

subject to and assure them that all is well because the creation that results from such captivity is worth it. Yet—like the marriage plots of eighteenth century gothic novels—the stories succeed in both supporting and subverting the dominant ideology they seem to serve. Ellis has argued that gothic novels in the eighteenth century were a “product” of the separate spheres concept while at the same time “creating a resistance to an ideology that imprisons [women] even as it posits a sphere of safety for them” (*Contested Castle* x). Similarly, Weinstock notes that feminist critics read gothic stories that seem to be acquiescing to patriarchy as using a “a formulaic covering or “overplot” that allows the female author to express discontent without ostensibly challenging or undermining social definitions of women’s roles” (12). Something similar is happening with Foote’s stories—although the question of whether she intended it is an open one. The romantic marriage plots serve as “overplots” for stories of captivity, exile, and a shortage of female agency. Similarly, the tragic suicides in stories like “Maverick” and “A Cup of Trembling” can be read as cautionary tales of woe about women who have held fast to their “self-found paths” rather than allowing themselves to be “channeled” like water into their rightful spheres. Yet these stories are littered with moments in which men are monstrous and all-controlling and leave readers wondering what options these women have open to them. Attempts to control these stories via moralizing conclusions only reveal that meaning itself is difficult to capture, that it is bent on escape by wearing away at the channels that have been constructed to direct it, that it finds a way to become something altogether unlike what its authorial engineers might have expected.

Chapter 3 - Aridity, Individualism, and Paradox in the Genre Western

In Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, the title character and his fellow westerner, Steve, welcome the tenderfoot eastern narrator to the West with a seemingly innocent question about the weather: "How does the climate strike you?" (25). When the tenderfoot replies that the Western "climate was fine," the two Westerners proceed to begin teaching their charge what it means to be a man in the West (25).

"Makes a man thirsty though."

This was the sub-current which the Virginian plainly looked for. But he, like Steve, addressed himself to me.

"Yes," he put in, "thirsty while a man's soft yet. You'll harden." (25)

This genre Western dialogue evokes a paradox. Wister's title character is arguing that the narrator will become²⁵ like the land itself, hard and dry, no longer in need of water. But it is this wilderness dryness and the land's unsuitability for settlement that the genre Western hero takes part in conquering. So, because the landscape is dry, the narrator himself must become hard. But as civilization comes West (as it does in the novel with the opening of the school and the marriage of The Virginian to Molly Wood), such hardness will no longer be needed, in fact, it will need to be overcome. The arrival of civilization requires water to become abundant rather than scarce, it requires the land to be soft and fertile rather than hard and dry. In the novel's closing, after the Virginian has married Molly Wood, Wister's title character takes his bride to a

²⁵ The idea that the Western experience was transformative for eastern men—and that these transformations were in part due to aridity and the desert landscape—is also a recurring theme in the genre Westerns of Zane Grey. Grey's first novel is titled the *The Heritage of the Desert* (1910) and includes this passage about an Easterner who comes West: "The desert regeneration had not stopped at turning weak lungs, vitiated blood and flaccid muscles into a powerful man; it was at work on his mind, his heart, his soul" (146).

river island, a place surrounded by water. He tells Molly that the place makes him want to “to become the ground, become the water, become the trees, mix with the whole thing. Not know myself from it. Never unmix again” (321). Here, at the novel’s end, the Virginian embraces the land and water, wanting to “mix” with the land, he wants to become a part of the wilderness even as civilization overtakes it. Wister’s character wants both wilderness and civilization, individualism and community, aridity and water.²⁶

This paradox matches the cultural contradictions taking place as Wister’s novel was published and gained popularity. During the early twentieth century, Anglo Americans were writing the individualist cowboy into the metanarratives of the West while lobbying for a communal response to the arid landscape in which cowboy stories take place. *The Virginian* was published in 1902, the same year Congress passed the Reclamation Act. The aridity that Wister’s title character saw as a means for baking hardness into Western men was seen by many Americans (especially Western politicians) as a problem that could—in the words of Wallace Stegner—be “engineered out of existence” (*Bluebird* 75). As Wister’s novel took off as a national bestseller, codifying the Virginian’s Anglo code of aridity, manhood, and individualism while purchasing cultural capital for the Western as a literary genre, the government was underwriting the conquering of the desert by putting in place an immense communal effort to provide water for the masses. As the century progressed, this contradiction continued to grow.

Large government water projects in arid Western states contributed to the rise of the urban West by bringing ever more water that helped to grow cities like Phoenix, Las Vegas, and

²⁶ In her article “Land “under the Ditch”: Channeling Water through Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*,” Jada Ach examines depictions of water infrastructure such as ditches and diversions. She argues that the novel depicts such water development as a threat to the masculinity that the title character claims comes from aridity itself.

Los Angeles. These projects and others also provided water for agriculture (which is the still the largest water user in the West), even though much of the water set aside for small farms and ranches ended up irrigating the fields of large agribusiness interests rather than the small farmers and ranchers that politicians were purporting to help.²⁷ Reclamation projects—along with the vast public lands that are located in Western states—changed the nature of the Federal presence in the West, a presence that is unlike the Federal presence in any other U.S. region and is especially contentious among many of the locals in rural areas of the West. The Federal government has been one of the dominant presences in the West since Anglos began to move onto the lands that had been set aside by their own government for Native populations in the nineteenth century. Displacement and colonization of indigenous populations in the form of forced removal and war (and the management of the reservation system) was carried out by the army and the Bureau of Indian Affairs while railroad companies were gifted huge swathes of the public domain to build a rail system that would knit the nation together. The General Land Office (precursor to today’s Bureau of Land Management) oversaw the parceling out of the public domain (what had been Indian country) to homesteaders and speculators. But in the 1930s, the Federal presence in the West began to change in character. Reclamation projects installed the government as a kind of utility provider for Westerners while land that was considered too arid to be “reclaimed” for agriculture or development was often turned into government facilities for weapons development. With these actions, the Federal government became a permanent resident of the West rather than a presence that could be looked at by the (Anglo) locals as temporary or part of the process of expansion. The Bureau of Reclamation

²⁷ This history is described in Worster’s *Rivers of Empire* and Reisner’s *Cadillac Desert*.

itself locates its “heyday” of dam building as stretching from the 1930s to the 1970s (United States Department of Interior).

This period of dam building, urbanization, and an increasing federal presence coincides with a rise in popularity of the Western as both a literary and cinematic genre. In the New Deal era of the 1930s, more than 1,000 feature-length western films were made while Max Brand and Zane Grey were fixtures on the bestseller lists (White 17). In the 1950s, Louis L’Amour began to appear on the bestseller lists and have his novels adapted into movies. During this period the Western as a genre also came to dominate television. Jane Tompkins notes that in 1959—the tail end of the great dam building era in the West—“there were no fewer than thirty-five Westerns running concurrently on television, and out of the top ten programs eight were Westerns” (5). In other words, as the West became less and less of a retreat from both the trappings of civilization and the communal forces of the federal government and law, Americans became more and more interested in escaping into the genre Western’s individualist paradise—an imagined version of the late nineteenth century West in which a heroic gunfighter could ride into a small town, kill a cattle baron in the name of justice (absent any kind of government oversight), and ride back into the desert, alone. If the genre Western’s version of the late nineteenth century was increasingly a contradiction compared to the West’s twentieth century, its readers were happy to embrace the paradox.

This chapter looks at the treatment of community and individualism in genre Westerns that deal with issues of water and aridity and examines internal contradictions and paradoxes in two such novels: Jack Schaefer’s *Shane* (1949) and Elmer Kelton’s *The Time it Never Rained* (1973). Schaefer’s novel—and the immensely popular film adaptation directed by George Stevens with a screenplay by the fiction writer A.B. Guthrie—helped to create a template for the

heroic gunfighter plot and *Shane* is considered an important genre Western for both its popularity and its literary merit. However, as I will explain, the status of Kelton's novel as a Western is somewhat contested. I choose to read these two texts together because they share several important traits and a few vital differences. Both texts are concerned with how Americans should inhabit and use arid landscapes and both have at their center characters that embody the trope of rugged individualism. Yet both of these rugged individualists find themselves in a struggle to reconcile that individualism with communal responsibilities. Both novels are also set against historic events related to land management—the Johnson County War for *Shane* and the extended southwestern drought of the 1950s for *The Time it Never Rained*. Most importantly, both texts are littered with contradictions and paradoxes in regards to aridity and individualism.

I propose that these paradoxes reveal an inherent tension between the arid Western landscapes in which Westerns are set and the metanarratives of the West as frontier and individualist paradise that underlie the genre. At the heart of this tension are the genre's rugged individualist heroes, characters so enamored with individualism itself that they ignore their membership in environmental and biological communities in which individualism for its own sake is potentially harmful. The paradoxes in both novels offer readers a way to see such individualism (and the frontier narrative) as environmentally friendly, or at the very least neutral. By relying on paradox rather than confronting contradictions and inconsistencies, these novels elide substantive environmental responsibility in favor of environmental conquest, even while performing a kind of surface-level environmental ethos in the texts themselves.

Paradox, The Western, and The Lone Rider in Monument Valley

The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms defines a paradox as a “statement that seems self-contradictory or nonsensical on the surface but that, upon closer examination,

may express an underlying truth” (365). It is no surprise given this definition—with its focus on “underlying truth” revealed by close reading—that paradox is a subject of study for New Critics. Cleanth Brooks saw paradox as a kind of uber-trope that characterized the best literature, especially poetry. For Brooks, “paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry” because poetry (and literature in general) makes the ordinary extraordinary by showing that “the common was really uncommon” (28, 30). Brooks’ definition of paradox is perhaps broader than the *Bedford Glossary* definition in that Brooks identifies paradox as an inherent contradiction that a text both reveals and reconciles. For Brooks, contradiction is manifest and reconciled through both wonder and irony, the interplay of connotation and denotation, and rhetorical figures such as metaphor, in which two contradictory ideas become one. Hence, paradoxes explore tensions between things that contradict (or seem to contradict) each other.

However, what the *Bedford* definition fails to address (and what New Critics like Brooks were perhaps uninterested in), is the possibility that the contradictions that make up paradoxes also allow readers to select from a variety of potential interpretations without grappling with the complexity of contradiction. Paradox by its nature muddies the waters of meaning and introduces ambiguity. If a text attempts to reconcile a contradiction using irony or metaphor, a reader is left to sort through multiple potential interpretations as part of the process of understanding the text. While some readers may choose to consider the ways that paradox illuminates the two contradictory concepts and their tensions, the way that two seemingly opposite ideas can both hold truth—other readers can use paradox as a means for picking and choosing interpretations that don’t challenge their ideological positions. I believe that this is the case when paradox is found in larger, unchallenged cultural metanarratives that inform the creation of literary texts and

popular genres like the Western. In such genres, paradox allows readers to “have it both ways,” to paraphrase Forrest G. Robinson’s book on the Western.

Many critics have noted that the metanarrative of the frontier in American culture underpins the genre Western in the twentieth century. As I noted previously, Richard Slotkin traces the frontier narrative back to captivity narratives in seventeenth century New England. But as the story was repurposed in James Fenimore Cooper’s novels in the middle of the nineteenth century and the dime novels of the late nineteenth century, it codified into a story of Anglo American males fleeing civilization in favor of the wilderness as means of regeneration through violent confrontation. This regeneration in turns allows for the creation of a new civilization and the advancement of the frontier. This narrative trope is based on the paradox of escaping civilization only to create civilization again. Concurrently, once the frontier hero tames the wilderness, he immediately longs for the land as it was before he entered it, bemoaning the eminent death of the frontier even as he is complicit in its so-called destruction. Indeed, the frontier hero has often been referred to by the paradoxical description of “a good bad man” (which is the name of a 1916 genre Western film) (Bandy and Stoehr 13). While critics such as Slotkin see the paradoxes present in these narratives as revealing an underlying truth about Anglo-American culture’s violent past, many devoted fans of the genre Western have chosen to read such paradoxes as the heroic depictions of American individualism and love letters to a romantic version of that same American past.

Critics have also read the genre Western as creating a place in which men learn to be men, a place which would be spoiled by the presence of women, even as men prepare the frontier for communal habitation, which by definition requires women. This paradox is encapsulated by

this passage from Wister's *The Virginian*, in which the novel's men recognize that their labor has helped to construct a place in which they no longer belong.

they came upon the schoolhouse, roofed and ready for the first native Wyoming crop. It symbolized the dawn of a neighborhood, and it brought a change into the wilderness air. The feel of it struck cold upon the free spirits of the cow-punchers, and they told each other that, what with women and children and wire fences, this country would not long be a country for men. (70)

Lee Clark Mitchell sees the Western as providing lessons on manhood. While the genre remains committed to the metanarrative of the frontier, Mitchell argues that it is far from static, but rather a genre that changes in an effort to answer a single question: what does it mean to be a man (primarily, an Anglo-American man)? For Mitchell, the Western needs the emptiness that the arid, desert West has symbolized for Anglo Americans because it is on such a landscape that metanarrative can be written, landscapes in which the readers (primarily Anglo Americans for much of the twentieth century) perceive as existing outside of history, in a kind of timeless otherworld.²⁸ Mitchell argues that the timeless setting allows readers of the Western to find multiple interpretations and multiple answers in response to the genre's questions about manhood as the culture in which westerns are produced changes. This timelessness is often evoked by the landscape itself, which suggests a kind of period before time in the Anglo

²⁸ As an example, consider the first two sentences of Stephen King's fantasy novel *The Gunslinger*: "The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed. The desert was the apotheosis of all deserts, huge, standing to the sky for what looked like eternity in all directions" (3). *The Gunslinger* is set not in history or even in the American West, but in a western-style literary otherworld King was inspired to create after reading Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and watching Sergio Leone's *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*.

imagination. In her study of the genre, Jane Tompkins writes that many western films open on landscape shots that show the audience a broad desert.

In the beginning, say these shots, was the earth, and the earth was desert. It was here first, before anything. And the story you are about to see goes back to the beginning of things, starts, literally, from the ground up. In the instant before the human figure appears we have the sense of being present at a moment before time began. All there is is space, pure and absolute, materialized in the desert landscape. (Tompkins 70)²⁹

It is this emptiness, this space, that Mitchell argues allows for aridity and the desert to be written upon and allows the genre to always remain timely, because it exists outside the control of time.

Mitchell and other critics have recognized that the ambiguities in the genre are, at least in part, a result of the genre's inherent paradoxes. For instance, the genre introduces a conflict between wilderness and civilization and then proceeds to argue for both without resolving these tensions other than to have wilderness always be on the brink of disappearing forever while civilization always fulfills a narrative of "progress." In addition, the genre suggests that the proper way to build community is through the work of rugged individualists. Paradoxically, communities are built by those who have rejected their own communities and ventured into the wilderness alone. Characters that—like the title character of *Shane* or John Wayne's character in *The Searchers*—cannot peacefully live in the very communities they have a hand in creating. Jim Kitses defines the genre by what he calls "antimonies": a series of concepts and groups of concepts that are often at odds with one another and are broadly separated into the categories of

²⁹ Tompkins description here and Mitchell's argument about the genre's timeless setting are examples of how the Western erases indigenous history and writes Native Americans as a kind of timeless, primitive presence, a component of the "empty" and mythical landscape rather than cultures with histories of their own that take place within the western landscape prior to colonial contact.

“The Wilderness” and “Civilization” (59). Among these subcategories are the individual—which Kitses associates with the West, freedom, self-interest, and integrity (among other concepts)—and the community—which Kitses links to concepts such as the East, restriction, institutions, and compromise. These concepts provide the “ideological tension” that is “Refracted through and pervading the genre” (58).

Kitses notes that even the genre’s name contains a paradox in that it represents both a “direction and place” (57). Similarly, Wallace Stegner argues that the Western—despite its association with the West as a region—is not so much a genre of place but rather a genre of “motion,” a concept neatly captured by John Steinbeck in “The Red Pony” when his pioneer character de-emphasizes the geographic location of the West as a destination in favor of the *movement* West: “But it wasn’t getting here that mattered, it was movement and westering,” he tells his grandson (*Bluebird* 105, Steinbeck 224). What could be more paradoxical than the fact that the genre Western is not primarily a genre about the West despite being named after and taking place in the region? In other words, the West is a means of travel and a place of dwelling, a place of routes and roots, to use the terms of James Clifford. Such contradictions and ambiguities provide readers with a variety of ways to read genre Westerns, de-emphasizing those parts of the genre they find ideologically problematic in favor of the opposite sentiment, which is present as the other side of a contradiction.

Forest G. Robinson’s *Having It Both Ways* suggests that popular Westerns are predicated on the move of approaching “pressing moral issues” (such as the genocide and displacement of Native Americans, slavery, and gender in American culture) only to shine a half-light on such issues, illuminating just enough to reveal the complexity of history and American complicity in the nation’s darkest moments before pulling back and evading a true reckoning with that history

(3). In his reading of *Shane*, for instance, Robinson notes a paradox in the love triangle between Shane, Miriam Starrett, and Miriam's husband Joe. Shane and Miriam's mutual attraction (and Shane's more subtle homoerotic connections with Joe) threaten to undermine the ideal American family that Shane's heroism is attempting to save. This paradox is only hinted at, never developed in a way that reckons with the complexity of Shane's isolation and individualism, his inability to have a family or a community and remain the hero that the Starretts need. Shane merely rides away after the final gunfight and the complexities of Joe and Miriam's feelings and desires are hidden by the inability of the novel's narrator—the couple's son, Bob—to understand adult desire. Although Bob is an adult when he narrates the story of his childhood, his narration is “the simulation of a boy's perspective,” as if he is choosing to retreat to the simplicity of childhood understanding rather than reckoning with the complexities of adulthood (Robinson 94). It is this tendency, what Robinson calls “the contrary impulses to see and not see,” that leave paradoxes unfroneted and unreconciled in Westerns (114).

Such paradoxes extend to ecocritical issues in the genre, even if such issues have received less critical attention. Robin Murray and Joseph Huemann have noted that critics have rarely attempted to read the Western ecocritically (5-6). This critical absence exists despite the fact that the binaries (especially wilderness and civilization) and paradoxes are often intertwined with the environment and landscapes in which the stories are set. Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin Stohrer have argued that control of the landscape and extraction of wealth are at the center of the genre's famous conflicts and that the most unpredictable component of Western landscapes is water (14). While the hero of the Western loves the land, his primary purpose is to conquer it, to replace the wilderness with civilization and replace the indigenous cultures that have adapted to specific bioregional complexities of the region with the American culture of wealth extraction or

eastern approaches to farming. The wild landscape that is the hero's reason for fleeing the cities of the East or South is prepared for a kind of domestication. Western stories are littered with people who come West and fall in love with the landscape while simultaneously manipulating it in the name of wealth and the late nineteenth-century conceptions of "progress."

Such a contradictory relationship with the land one inhabits manifests itself in iconic images of the cowboy hero in the West. How, except by embracing paradox, can we explain the image of the rider on horseback—carrying little more than a rifle, a pistol, a canteen, and a bedroll—riding into a small town after wandering the desert in an effort to save that small town from the evils of Indians or cattle barons? Deserts, "waste spaces" as they are often referred to,³⁰ are too inhospitable for settlement in the logic of the genre Western, and yet they are often the home of the lightly outfitted Western hero, who would seem to be completely at the mercy of the climate and the landscape without the ability to fall back on the aid of communal ties, yet who is somehow completely at home and in control despite his apparent vulnerability. He is so at home in the aridity of the western landscape that the community turns to him for survival rather than the other way around. He has become like the landscape, hard and dry, unable to be tamed, and the town needs such wildness to combat the villains who are equally wild. Tompkins notes that "To be a man in the Western is to seem to grow out of the environment, which means to be hard, to be tough, to be unforgiving" (73). Yet, unlike the western land that resists settlement, the wild,

³⁰ John Beck has written that Americans think of southwestern deserts as waste spaces in part because those famous open spaces are paradoxically used to hide "open secrets" of American culture and history such as internment camps, waste repositories, and atomic weapons development. Given Beck's argument, it seems fitting that the genre Western's hero—a character sometimes described as a "good bad man"—disappears into all that arid, openness that is used to hide so much.

untamed hero of the Western works *on behalf* of civilization, even as he rejects a place within western communities.

An interesting example of this environmental paradox is found in Dorothy Johnson's short story "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance." The story contains a flashback that begins with a tenderfoot character (Ransome Foster) stranded on the desolate plain, thirsty, without water and in need of help. Foster is rescued by a character who is revealed to be a traditional individualist Western hero (Bert Barricune). Later, Barricune rescues Foster again when he shoots the villain Liberty Valance, even though Foster is given credit for the shot. Over the course of the story, Foster becomes a hero of the community; he marries Barricune's love interest (Hallie) and is elected to the Senate. Yet it is Barricune who is hero of the story's title, the same Barricune who saved Foster from thirst in the desert and died with very few friends as a symbol of the closing frontier. At Barricune's funeral, Hallie brings prickly pear cactus blossoms in lieu of flowers, symbolizing Barricune's connection with the arid spaces away from town rather than the town itself. Unbeknownst to those in the community, it was the individualist, the master of the arid landscapes, who saved the town from the villainy of Liberty Valance and enabled Foster to reach the pinnacle of communal fame and fortune.

In Western film, this paradox is perhaps best encapsulated by the image of a lone rider (often played by John Wayne) in Monument Valley, the location of many Westerns since John Ford filmed *Stagecoach* there in the 1930s. According to the Arizona Department of Water Resources, Monument Valley receives an average of about four inches of rainfall annually, owing to its location on the leeward side of a mountain range, which creates a "rain shadow" that dries out the air as it crests the mountains (Arizona Department of Water Resources). Despite or because of this extreme aridity, Monument Valley appears in multiple John Ford westerns as

well as Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* and in ad campaigns featuring the Marlboro Man. If a man watched only Westerns (and I have known some that do), he might be forgiven for thinking that Monument Valley was peopled by various Western heroes.³¹ This insistence on locating the Western hero in such an extremely arid environment tells the reader that the Western hero thrives where civilization cannot take hold, a place so dry as to be uninhabitable except by Western heroes who find civilization itself to be intolerable, even as they are pivotal to civilization's expansion.

The paradoxes related to water and aridity in Westerns are an example of what Karen Laura Thornber calls "ecoambiguity," which is characterized by "contradictory interactions between people and environments with a significant nonhuman presence" (1). Thornber finds that arguments and representations that extol a culture's relationship with nonhuman nature are often contradicted by actions or assumptions that undermine a healthy relationship with the land and the nonhuman. These ambiguities grow out of several factors: a lack of knowledge about the nonhuman, confusion about environmental conditions, and ambivalent and contradictory motivations and ideologies among the inhabitants of a place. Literature offers a window into these ambiguities in part because literature allows itself to disregard logic and precision while embracing devices like irony and paradox. Thornber writes that literary genres such as fiction and poetry provide a better view into environmental ambiguities than a genre such as documentary filmmaking because "Literature's regular and often blatant defiance of logic, precision, and unity . . . enables it to grapple more insistently and penetratingly than many other

³¹ A recent film that parodies this trope is Joel and Ethan Cohen's *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, which opens with the singing cowboy title character on horseback riding through Monument Valley, a trail of dust rising behind him, as he plays his guitar and sings "All day I face / the barren waste / without the taste / of water, cool water" (00:01:50-00:02:15).

discourses with ambiguities in general and with those arising from interactions among people and ecosystems in particular” (6). Thornber’s argument here rejects the New Critics’ focus on universal truth and organic unity to suggest that literature’s *disunity* and contradiction reveal the convoluted and sometimes broken logics that govern human cultures and those cultures’ contradictory relationships with the lands they inhabit.

In order to “grapple more insistently” with these ambiguities, we must recognize their existence and examine their structures in the genres and texts that define relationships with the land. The genre Western defaults to paradoxes and contradictions so often because it traffics so frequently in conceptual absolutes. While ideas such as “wilderness” and “civilization” have been problematized and complicated by ecocritics in the last several decades, such complication is often missing from the Western. This is because the genre’s underlying metanarratives—the story of Westward expansion as a symbol of the nation in microcosm, the West as individualist paradise—were a given in American culture for so much of the twentieth century. In other words, because the Western stands in as a national narrative for twentieth-century Anglo-Americans, and because the Western is a story told almost exclusively from the Anglo-American perspective, the genre resolves the inconsistencies that arise from absolutism by embedding paradoxes that leave the mythic definitions of these concepts in place rather than questioning their construction, compromising, or blurring the lines between binaries. Lee Clark Mitchell writes that popular genres such as the Western achieve popularity by “appearing to resolve cultural dilemmas in a way that satisfies disparate groups with opposed interests” but that the Western “is a form not committed to *resolving* these incompatible worlds but to *narrating* all those contradictions” (16, 27; emphasis Mitchell). As such the ecoambiguity of the Western—which primarily manifests itself as paradox—goes unquestioned, unresolved. To do otherwise

requires its readers to question longstanding cultural narratives associated with America as a nation. This tendency toward environmental paradox is especially evident in one of the most well-known Western novels and films of the twentieth century: Jack Schaefer's novel *Shane* and the corresponding film adaptation directed by George Stevens.

The Communal Individualist and the Definition of Resources in *Shane*

While the genre Western is built on a series of unresolved paradoxes, the cultural contexts surrounding these paradoxes and the way paradoxes are aligned and executed in various instances of the genre fluctuates. By extension, the meanings available to readers of specific Westerns is always in flux. For example, there are a series of similarities between Owen Wister's *The Virginian* and Jack Schaefer's *Shane*. Like many Westerns, both novels address Turner's ideas about the closing of the frontier and both novels' title characters are southerners who have abandoned the region of their birth and found a kind of home on the closing frontier outside the purview of the East. In addition, both novels are set in Wyoming and use the late 1880s Johnson County War as the rough inspiration for their central conflict, although neither of the novels attempts any kind of historical realism in regard to the famous range war. Both novels use the paradox of having their individualist hero work primarily to establish communities, even though these same heroes fled communities of the South—along with the shadow of slavery and the South's defeat in the Civil War—for the West in the first place.

However, these similarities also serve to highlight the differences between these two Westerns. Most distinctly, the two texts back different sides in the range war. Wister's novel employs its hero in service of the large cattle operations in the area—rich capitalists who lynched small operators that they claimed were rustling range cattle. Alternately, the title character of *Shane* fights on behalf of the small farmers and ranchers, especially a family (the Starretts) who

lead the small community that Fletcher (the novel's villainous open-range cattleman) wants to stamp out before it can take root in the valley. The two novels also take different sides of the progressive vs. populist arguments present in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. *Shane* argues for smaller farms and livestock operations, a position held by populists of the period. Joe Starrett argues that Fletcher's use of the open range is inefficient, producing thin range cattle while using massive amounts of rangeland. This method uses: "Too much space for too little results" and is "poor in terms of resources" (8). Starrett claims that dividing the range up into small cattle ranches and farms and focusing on producing fewer but heavier cattle and cash crops is a more efficient way to use the land rather than allowing it to be ruled by cattle barons. This conflict—open range vs. small homestead—is at the heart of the novel and seems relatively straightforward. Indeed, the small operator vs. cattle baron trope has been repeated in the genre Westerns for decades, as recently as 2003 in the Kevin Costner film *Open Range*. However, Murray and Huemann show that this binary is a false dilemma as it relates to environmental health. Both open-range cattle ranching and small homestead farming have poor environmental track records in the American West (27). Genre westerns like *Shane* have placed the two practices in conflict with each other rather than questioning the frontier narrative upon which the genre is built (Murray and Huemann 24).

My reading of *Shane* in this chapter examines how the metanarratives of frontier conquest and individualist paradise work together to allow the novel to elide questions about environmental conquest and ecological communities. Rugged individualism and frontier expansion create a series of paradoxes in the novel and ultimately an oversimplification of the concept of "resources" and the role of water in an arid landscape. Many of the novel's paradoxes revolve around the binary of the individual and the community. Within the novel, Shane is the

individualist hero. The novel opens with the title character riding alone into the Wyoming valley in which the action takes place and it ends (in the film) with Shane riding away from the valley into the formidable mountains from which he arrived. However, the story that takes place between these two images of a lone rider and the extreme landscape he calls home privilege—at least partially—the concept of community over the concept of individualism. The homesteaders, led by Starrett, are clearly the more sympathetic party in the free range vs. small farmer conflict and they endure violence and harassment at the hands of Fletcher. Starrett’s argument about a community of small farms being better users of the land is compelling and reasonable to all who hear it in the novel, including the title character. And yet the homesteaders cannot defeat Fletcher by simply having logic and numbers on their side. Instead they rely on Shane to fight for them. Shane’s story is the paradox at the heart of the novel and the genre—the rugged individualist who escaped civilization in the South only to fight violently on behalf of civilization again in the wilderness West. The novel contradicts its own argument for community by making that community utterly dependent on individualism. While this paradox, which matches up with Slotkin’s argument that the frontier metanarrative is a story of regeneration through violence, guides the novel, additional paradoxes around community and individualism are present, especially in regards to the interplay between water and land in the novel.

Shane’s position as an individualist is compromised by his need for water in an arid landscape. In the novel’s opening, after the narrator (Starrett’s son Bob) describes Shane’s entrance into the valley and onto the Starrett land, Shane decides to interact with the settlers he encounters because they have the “resource” that he needs: water. When Bob describes Shane’s

all-seeing manner³² of surveying his surroundings, several of the items Shane notes are items that signify control over water—the “new pump” and “the trough beside it” (3). When Shane asks to use the pump, Joe Starrett’s first line of dialogue in the novel welcomes a stranger to the community and offers unlimited water: “Use all the water you want, stranger” (4). This first interaction casts Starrett as the communal figure who helps others, is established on the land, and controls the water. Conversely, Shane is cast as a stranger, a lone rider and individualist, whose primary attribute is movement and a lack of access to water. Community and settlement are associated with water while individualism and movement are associated with aridity and thirst.

Fletcher, the novel’s villain, also represents a kind of individualism. He is, in fact, similar to Shane. In the film adaptation, Shane tells Riker (Stevens changed Fletcher’s name for the movie) that “your kind’s days are over,” to which Riker responds, “My days? What about yours, gunfighter?” Shane’s response: “The difference is I know it” (01:51:15-01:51:25). Shane doesn’t dispute that the two characters are of a kind, both rugged individualists, but he sees the difference between them in his own recognition that the communal West is at hand. Fletcher is unwilling to surrender his status as western individualist. The novel tells us that Fletcher was “the big man in the valley,” having been there longer than the other citizens, surviving droughts and terrible winters and outlasting even the miners who were “the first people there” (56).³³ In

³² Mitchell traces the Western trope of a hero whose sight is preternaturally good back to the Cooper’s “Hawkeye,” noting that moral stature is often correlated with the ability to see one’s surroundings in Cooper’s novels and the Western (see chapter 2 of Mitchell’s *Westerns*). This holds true for *Shane*.

³³ Schaefer’s novel doesn’t dispute that indigenous groups inhabited the land prior to the miners mentioned here. Rather it indicates that to be Indian is to be less than human. Bob spends his free time imagining himself as an Indian hunter and jokes with Shane about scalping Indians while the homesteader Ernie Wright is goaded into a duel with the gunfighter Wilson when Wilson suggests that Wright’s mother was an Indian (107).

the movie, Riker (Fletcher) cites his rugged individualist bonafides, arguing that his work in fighting Indians and surviving in the wilderness have given him a right to the land.

Yet Fletcher's status as an individualist is complicated by his use of range land. The western range was a commons, a communal land. Despite his position as a rugged individualist, Fletcher doesn't own much of the land on which he runs his cattle, rather—having been wrested from indigenous populations by the U.S. Army as part of the Indian wars—it belongs to the community. Parcels of the land can be claimed for individual ownership by homesteaders like Starrett. Fletcher sees himself as having been a party to this conquest and feels he deserves to continue to use the land despite the fact that property law favors the homesteaders.

Paradoxically, Starrett and the communal group of homesteaders rely on the laws that favor individualism. By owning private property along the river, Starrett and the other homesteaders take advantage of access to the water. Fletcher's only options are to buy them out or intimidate them; he tries a combination of the two. The irony here is twofold: the individualist (Fletcher) relies on the use of the communal public lands while the community of homesteaders benefit from the way that American laws encourage capitalist self-interest and individualism. Fletcher's dependence on the commons make him susceptible to the national laws that favor yeoman farmers. Bob tells the readers: "the land was ours by right of settlement, guaranteed by the government" (55). Yet government oversight is unavailable in the West and Starrett must turn to power of rugged individualism to protect his rights. The real difference between Shane and Fletcher is that Fletcher has tied himself to the land in a way that Shane has not. Shane rides in and out of the story alone because he is free from the communal/capitalist system completely, except when and where he chooses to interact with it. Shane has only routes. He has no land, no livestock, no roots, a concept I will return to near the end of this chapter. Fletcher wants the

freedom to do as he pleases that Shane enjoys, but he is not willing to sacrifice his wealth or his history in the valley to do so. Shane uses his freedom to assume the role that government would play—he protects the fledgling community from a strongman who would rob them of their lawful property.

In both the novel and film, Fletcher recognizes that his primary conflict with the homesteaders is not about land, of which there is still a considerable amount, but about access to water—the resource that both parties require but which is limited in an arid landscape. In the film Ryker (Fletcher) complains about the homesteaders' use of water: "They fence me off my range and fence me off from water. Some of them like you plough ditches, take out irrigation water. And so the creek runs dry sometimes and I got to move my stock because of it" (01:09:04-01:09:21). While Riker makes this speech, standing in the Starrett's yard, Shane ladles himself a drink of the Starrett's water then watches the gunfighter Wilson—his rival in the film's climax—get off his horse and get himself a drink of the Starrett's water only to pour the last of his cup onto the ground. The text and the context in this scene are concerned with access to and control over water. In the novel, Fletcher (Riker) tells Starrett "I can't let a bunch of nesters keep coming in here and choking me off from my water rights" (120). These complaints suggest a kind of paradox about water rights themselves, at least in how they are envisioned in the novel.

Wyoming—where the novel is set—allocates water using the doctrine of prior appropriation, meaning that water users who begin using water for a beneficial use (farming and ranching would both be deemed beneficial) have priority for the allocation of water over users who began using the water later. The doctrine is often explained as "first in time, first in right." If Fletcher indeed has inhabited the valley longer than the other citizens and ran cattle using water from the river during that entire period, his water right should take priority over the homesteaders. If the

settlers are diverting water to ditches and running the river dry, Fletcher would have a legal case against the homesteaders. Yet this argument is never made in the novel or the movie. Unlike Bob's statement about the land, the water is not guaranteed to the settlers by the government. Prior appropriation³⁴ is meant to protect those who come first, pioneers like Fletcher. Indeed, the novel describes the townspeople revering Fletcher for his long history in the valley, a kind of cultural prior appropriation.

Because the novel is invested in the communal³⁵ West rising as the old, individualist West fades, the doctrine of prior appropriation—both culturally and legally—are either ineffective or silent in *Shane*. In terms of land use, the novel is about the inefficiencies of the individualist West versus the efficiencies of farming and ranching communities. As such, it makes a kind of case against prior appropriation by leaving the doctrine out of the text. By remaining silent on prior appropriation, *Shane* effectively imagines a West in which water is allocated by the most beneficial or efficient use rather than by who came first. Hence, Starrett's argument that Fletcher's practice of running large numbers of cattle on the open range is inefficient becomes the justification for bleeding the river dry by funneling the water into ditches for farming. As if water that goes unused by humans is also somehow "wasteful" (9).

³⁴ Environmental historian Leisl Carr Childers notes that in the early twentieth century in particularly arid bioregions—such as the Great Basin region of Nevada and southern Utah—ranchers filed for water rights on streams in the public domain to ensure their right to graze on the public range. This practice was the closest thing to private land ownership found in such areas because ranchers could neither afford to purchase the land outright nor homestead the especially arid sections of the public domain. Water rights assured early users of the public domain a stake in the land going forward, but also brought them further under the wing of the federal government than they often would have liked.

³⁵ The historian Robert Athearn argues that irrigation itself tended to undermine the individualist tendency of the West. Irrigation communities in the West were more like eastern farm communities than the Western homesteaders that attempted dryland farming alone on the plains (34-36).

Such thinking is itself paradoxical because, while open range cattle ranching has proven to be environmentally problematic,³⁶ Starrett's system of small ranches and farms is no more efficient when considered in light of water use, which is the "resource" that actually requires conserving in the story. When Shane first arrives at the Starrett ranch, Bob speaks glowingly of the fields planted with corn and potatoes and the alfalfa growing in the "north forty" that will be fed to the cows Starrett wants to fatten up in contrast with Fletcher's skinny range cattle (3). These three crops—corn, potatoes, and alfalfa—all require significant applications of water to grow in arid landscapes, with corn and alfalfa being especially thirsty crops (Cooley 4; Opie, Miller, and Lang 6 and 242). Given that Starrett and the other homesteaders are farming such water-intensive crops, it is no surprise that the creek is running dry. While Starrett sees Fletcher's use of range land as wasteful, he fails to see any waste in his own processes because his definition of waste is focused solely on profitability rather than ecologically friendly land use. Hence, allocating water based on Starrett's definition of efficiency does not necessarily preserve the resources of the arid valley once one considers water a resource. Similarly, Fletcher's complaint about the use of water is rooted in his ability to water his cattle rather than the potential environmental consequences of drying up a river in an arid landscape. While both characters express a fondness for the land, neither approach considers the long-term health of the landscape as even worth factoring into their calculations. The choice between the open range and the small farm is a false dilemma because neither choice is good for the land. Neither choice looks to the land itself as a partner in the process and adjusts behaviors accordingly, adapting to

³⁶ See Worster's "Cowboy Ecology" for an overview of the environmental impacts of nineteenth-century open-range cattle ranching.

aridity itself. Both open-range ranching and irrigation farming are judged entirely on a standard of economic efficiency in the novel rather than a standard of ecological health.

In this way, both Starrett and Fletcher can both be read as individualists in that their actions don't consider the larger, bioregional and ecological communities that they belong to by inhabiting the western land. Starrett is dedicated to the other small farmers and ranchers in the valley, but not dedicated to the land itself. If resource use is predicated on a gospel of efficiency, each drop of the local river must be used. This concept drove the "conservation" movement of the early twentieth century. To conserve water (and natural resources in general) meant saving them for human use rather than allowing them to function in a way that benefitted the larger ecological community.³⁷ This philosophy—which is inherent in Starrett's argument about land use—fueled the movement toward dam building in the West throughout the first two-thirds of twentieth century. If Starrett's logic about waste is extended to water, it would almost certainly have resulted in the homesteaders (or, more likely, the federal government) damming the river. If the community functions around the philosophy of maximizing profits by improving how efficiently it turns natural resources like land and water into consumable goods, then any water that escapes the valley is wasted and must be stored up behind a dam,³⁸ waiting to be channeled down ditches and—eventually—into industrial-scale sprinkler systems to water crops such as potatoes, alfalfa, and corn.

When *Shane* was published in the 1940s and adapted into a film in the 1950s, the Bureau of Reclamation was at the height of its dam-building powers. Starrett's argument that the land of

³⁷ See chapter 9 of Patricia Limerick's *Legacy of Conquest* for a detailed discussion of how this philosophy affected twentieth-century land and water policy in the West.

³⁸ A rough estimate using Google Maps reveals approximately 25 reservoirs currently in Johnson County, Wyoming.

the West ought to be divided into small farms had been a big part of the argument in favor of building dams all the way back to the early debates about the Reclamation Act, even though—as environmental historians have shown—many of those dams failed to produce the communities of small farmers that they promised. As the century progressed and the dam-building mania swelled to include proposals for flooding the Grand Canyon, Americans began to consider the environmental and cultural costs of dams. Environmentalism as a philosophy began to rise in the decades following the success of *Shane*, especially after the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. Among the advocates of ecological thinking was Jack Schaefer himself whose later work suggests a sincere environmental ethos and a consideration of the indigenous ideas about land use that is missing in *Shane*.³⁹ When he spoke to the Western Literature Association in 1975, Schaefer expressed regret that his titular hero was advancing the tide of settlement, “giving his push to the accelerating onrush of the very civilization I find so deserving of contempt” (quoted in Nott xiv). In the same speech, Schaefer admits that *Shane* is written with an “innocence” regarding the West that he could not return to in his later years.

But by the time Schaefer made those remarks the cultural impact of *Shane*'s devotion to individualism in the name of community could not be undone. The movie was especially popular. *Shane* allowed Americans in the 1950s to see the West as both individual and communal through the paradox of individualism in the service of community building. It also served to describe the farmer as the man who controls water and uses the land (if not water) efficiently, all while ignoring the environmental impacts of both farming and ranching in the name of efficiency. While the novel and the film are filled with a series of paradoxes regarding

³⁹ For a discussion of Schaefer's environmental writing, see Fred Erisman's article in *Western American Literature* from 1978.

community and aridity, such paradoxes didn't undermine the story for an audience committed to the frontier metanarrative as a tale of national identity, rather they allow those readers to selectively interpret the text in ways that ultimately reinforced the conquest of the Western landscape in the name of what Wyn Wachhorst calls "The National Nostalgia" (12). They allow readers to see Starrett as a man who cares for the land, even if his small group of homesteaders is bleeding the only river in an arid country completely dry in the name of agricultural efficiency.

Among and Against Nature: Kelton's *The Time it Never Rained*

Among those likely impacted by *Shane* was a West Texas writer who trafficked in Westerns. Elmer Kelton was a newspaper reporter in the 1950s and he had covered a nearly decade-long drought in West Texas during that decade as a reporter for the San Angelo *Standard-Times*. He published *The Time it Never Rained*, set during the drought, in 1973, after he had gained a readership and some capital among critics for his popular novel *The Day the Cowboys Quit*, published in 1971. Kelton's novel adopts the argument in *Shane* that the small rancher/farmer is the best user of the land, but it attempts to wrestle with the complexities of land use in ways that *Shane* (perhaps due to the "innocence" Schaeffer identified in 1975) doesn't really approach. Because of this complexity—and the lack of traditional genre elements such as the late nineteenth-century setting and a climactic shootout, the place of Kelton's novel as a genre Western is not readily apparent. However, I suggest that reading *The Time it Never Rained* as a Western reveals that the novel relies on the use paradox and ecoambiguity not unlike what a reader will find in *Shane*. Kelton's novel manages to elide reckoning with its own internal contradictions in regard to land use and drought itself by retreating to the safety of paradox.

From the time of its publication to the present, some readers and critics have viewed the novel as transcending the typical tropes that mark genre Westerns. Writing in the *New York*

Times in 1986, Robert Reinhold argues that Kelton's hero, Charlie Flagg, doesn't fit the conventions of a Western hero because he is "overweight, aging and a little paternalistic toward his Mexican-American help, but full of integrity and tenacity." Similarly, in his 1974 review for *Western American Literature*, James V. Holleran argues:

Elmer Kelton's new novel, *The Time It Never Rained*, is one of the best American novels of the year. I deliberately used the term novel rather than "Western" because even though the book deals explicitly with the problems of contemporary west Texas ranchers in a period of prolonged drought, Kelton implicitly raises fundamental issues which probe dramatically beneath the parochial concerns of cowboys. (251)

Holleran goes on to argue that Kelton's hero Flagg has "dignity and courage" that transcend the violence of "so-called, popular western literature" (252). The irony in regard to both of these reviews is that similar arguments have often been made about genre-Western heroes in dozens on novels and films, including Wister's *Virginian* to Schaeffer's *Shane* and Joe Starrett. It is paradoxical to argue that *The Time It Never Rained* is not a Western because its hero has dignity and courage and because the novel transcends parochial concerns when the genre Western has long been concerned with depicting heroes that respond to seemingly large questions about what it means to be a man by performing their own versions of dignity and courage.

Contemporary readers find themselves trying to reclassify Kelton's novel as well. One Amazon reviewer from 2013 writes: "Kelton knows how to create characters more human, more genuine than you will find in most westerns" (Bazzett). Another writes: "I would not call it a "western" in the usual sense" (gammyraye). One review from 2005 is titled: "A Lot More than a Western!" and argues: "While it's considered a western it's far from a 'shoot'em up'" (Dixon). Why do reviewers continually try to argue that this novel is somehow "more" than a genre

Western? Certainly, there is the sense here that the Western as a genre—with its lineage of dime novels and formulaic plots—is somehow not literary enough to contain Kelton’s Charlie Flagg and his description of drought in West Texas. But if we think beyond the conventions of the genre to its literary and rhetorical purpose, we find that Kelton’s novel fits neatly into a long line of genre Westerns, including Jack Schaefer’s *Shane*.

Rhetorical theorists have identified genre not as a series of repeating conventions but as a response to similar and recurring contexts or situations. Carolyn Miller defines genre as “typified rhetorical action” (24). Miller is building on the work of the rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer who argues that rhetoric always takes place within a context called a rhetorical situation. One attribute of the rhetorical situation is what Bitzer calls “exigence,” which he defines as “an imperfection marked by urgency” (6). In other words, a situation’s exigence is the problem that rhetoric is attempting to solve. For Miller, texts that respond to the same (or similar) exigencies, using textual approaches that are also similar, can be classified as being part of the same genre. While Miller’s work isn’t directly linked to literature, it provides a theoretical framework for the work Lee Clark Mitchell has done regarding the genre Western because Mitchell finds the genre attempting to solve a recurring problem (or, in the words of rhetoricians, responding to a recurring exigence). As I noted earlier, for Mitchell, this problem is the meaning of American masculinity.

In the same Amazon reviews that argue *The Time It Never Rained* is somehow more than a Western, we find the reviewers responding to Flagg’s performance of masculinity in ways that are entirely consistent with Mitchell’s analysis of the genre Western and the concept of genre as a rhetorical action. In one Amazon review from 2011, the reviewer writes: “Charlie teaches us the true meaning of being an honorable man” (Mac). The Amazon reviews are filled with praise for Charlie Flagg, with reviewers often comparing him favorably to men they know

and love. Kelton himself has said that Flagg is an amalgamation of several West Texas ranchers he has known (people he calls “the *true* heroes” in the book’s introduction) including his own father, to whom the book is dedicated (xii; emphasis Kelton). While *The Time it Never Rained* may avoid traditional Western motifs such as the shootout on main street or the schoolmarm and the cowpuncher love story, the novel clearly responds to the same exigence that drives the genre Western: the meaning of American masculinity.⁴⁰ Because Kelton chooses to do so by setting his novel against a backdrop of drought and grapples with the intersection between rugged individualism and land use in an arid country, this novel serves as a unique literary text for understanding how water and aridity transect individualism and community. In addition, Kelton’s novel follows in the tradition of genre Westerns in that it is riddled with paradoxes. Indeed, the title itself is a paradox. *The Time it Never Rained* is an event that can only be described by what did not happen. Similarly, the title describes a condition (a persistent lack of rain) as an event (“The Time”). More importantly, Kelton’s title frames a lack of rain as an outlier when dry days are actually the norm in the Southwest (and the West at large). In this way, Kelton’s title is like the term desert, which Tom Lynch has noted defines a place by what it lacks rather than by what it possesses: “Deserts are deserted. Something that seemingly *ought* to be there is missing. The word itself encodes an absence, not a presence, and implies that deserts are inherently and by definition deficient (33; emphasis Lynch).” Kelton’s title makes the same move. It creates rain as a standard that the events of the book fail to live up to. This framing creates a false expectation of rain that the Western landscape will never live up to. It is this failure to deliver that Kelton casts his characters as doing battle against.

⁴⁰ Many critics do recognize the novel as a genre Western, evidenced by the fact that the novel won the “Spur Award” for “Best Western Novel” the year it was published (Western Writers of America).

The paradoxes continue in Kelton's introduction to the novel. In this section, Kelton describes individualism as the key requirement for living in an arid country. He calls the Anglo settlers who managed to survive beyond the 98th meridian an "individualistic breed . . . and almost militantly independent" (x).⁴¹ In the introduction, Kelton builds on Herbert Hoover's definition of rugged individualism and equates individualism with a healthy anger toward government and freedom from government intervention. He notes that West Texas residents are skeptical of "regulations," a term he seems to conflate with subsidies and drought aid programs. The irony here is that these rugged individualists are described entirely as a collective. They are united by their "militant" independence, suggesting that they perhaps are not so individualistic after all. Instead, Kelton describes a community that has formed through a shared romanticizing of *the idea* of individualism (how individualistic can a group of people be if they all worship the same ideal?) and a shared enemy (government intervention). Kelton even describes their behavior as communal: "people who still retained an old frontier heritage of fighting their own fight, testing one strategy and when it failed trying another, but above all simply enduring and enduring" (xii).

Despite his invocation of history in this passage ("an old frontier heritage"), Kelton's argument that aridity requires individualism is, in some ways, ahistorical. It ignores the fact that Native American communities, many of which were extremely communal rather than "individualistic," survived for centuries in the same arid landscapes (and similarly arid landscapes in Arizona and New Mexico) without the rugged individualism Kelton argues is

⁴¹ The phrase "militantly independent" used in regard to how Westerners feel about land use and government oversight takes on new meaning in 2018 when one considers the actions of the Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy and his son Ammon Bundy, who have taken up arms against government agencies to preserve what they see as their own version of rugged individualism.

required for survival. Similarly, nineteenth century Mormon settlements in the Intermountain West and the Great Basin were especially communal and used these communal ties to their advantage in creating irrigation works in the Salt Lake Valley to survive in a landscape with scarce water. In addition, Kelton ignores the fact that the federal government helped settle the West by fighting wars against and displacing Native Americans; fighting a war against Mexico; supporting the hunters who destroyed the buffalo that inhabited the plains; building railroads, roads, and dams; and handing over land to those Anglos who would settle it 160 acres at a time. These federal activities are intertwined with the “frontier heritage” Kelton valorizes and created the very market structures that allows Kelton’s individualists⁴² to profit from the land. In Kelton’s novel and his introduction, these activities and other federal and communal factors remain invisible, helping to idealize the rugged individualists that Kelton celebrates as “*true* heroes.”

In Kelton’s novel, the embodiment of this idealized individualism is Charlie Flagg, the novel’s protagonist. Like Kelton’s introduction, Flagg is a series of contradictions. He often expresses an appreciation for the landscape of west Texas, remarking early in the novel that “It was a comforting sight, this country” (9). He recognizes that he has both “shaped” the land and been “shaped by it” (11). Yet he wages war against the coyotes, the prickly pear cactus, and the mesquite trees—all native species who have also both shaped the land and been shaped by it (94). Flagg is caught between the Turnerian concept of a man of doing battle with the frontier

⁴² This is not to downplay the real struggle and perseverance that plains settlers displayed in the arid West during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Kelton’s admiration for these plains farmers and ranchers is well-placed. However, Kelton specifically here and the genre Western in general have presented rugged individualist characters as existing in simplified historical contexts as a means of romanticizing individualism and hiding the colonial forces that made individual settlement possible.

and the bioregional idea of being a part of a biological community rather than bending nature to human will. He expresses a deep love for the land itself in one instance before describing human survival as a war against the very land he professes to love. Late in the novel, in the heart of the drought period, Charlie sees a section of land that has been overgrazed—destroyed by both humanity and the elements. He reacts by personifying the land as a friend: “the land was a sacred thing. To see it bleed now brought him grief. It was like watching a friend waste away with terminal cancer” (277). This language is directly in contrast to Kelton’s introduction, which depicts the relationship between the ranchers who inspired his creation of Flagg and the landscape they inhabit as one of unending conflict: “They are quiet but determined men and women who stand their ground year after year in a fight they can never finally win, against an unforgiving enemy they know will return to challenge them again and again so long as they live” (xii).

In addition to the tension between bioregional identity and frontier metanarrative, this contradiction can be explained by a desire to separate the landscape from the climate. In the novel’s prologue, the drought is referred to as a “cancerous blight burning a scar upon the land” depicting drought as a sickness rather than a natural weather pattern that has cycled through the southwest in various forms for thousands of years (xiii). Near the end of the novel, Flagg’s banker describes the aridity in terms of a fight, arguing that “I’ve been hearing that for six years. . . . Face up to it, Charlie. It’s whipped you; It’s whipped us all” (317). The pronoun “it” seems to be a reference to the drought itself rather than the land. Similarly, the narrator tells us that: “Outlasting this eternal drouth⁴³ had become the only thing that mattered anymore to Charlie. All

⁴³ Kelton uses the word “drouth” in his novel, which has the effect of a kind of onomatopoeia in that it seems to sound drier than the word “drought.”

else faded from importance; it was a vendetta” (265). For Charlie, the enemy is drought, not the land. But to separate the climate and the landscape is, of course, illogical. The land’s character is a product of the climate (among other factors) and the primary attribute of the climate in the novel is aridity. Wallace Stegner writes that “the western landscape is more than topography and landforms . . . It is, most fundamentally, climate . . . Aridity, more than anything else, gives the western landscape its character” (Bluebird 46). Similarly, the weather is formed at least in part by the land itself: the dry wind picking up speed over the flat ground, the lack of mountains contributing to the lack of rain, and the mountains that are present creating rain shadows like the one in Monument Valley. While the 1950s drought was “the Southwest’s worst drought of the twentieth century” according to the environmental journalist William deBuys, it was not an event that was unprecedented in the region; drought and aridity are standard features of a desert climate (42). Kelton himself recognizes this in the introduction when he writes that “dryness has always been the normal condition in the western half of” Texas and remembers his own father only being able to recall only four wet years during in his 75 years of life in the region (ix). To wage war against drought in a dry country is to wage war against the landscape itself. Yet, as Tom Lynch has noted, Americans have a tendency to use drought to refer to standard weather cycles (a tendency Kelton recognizes in his introduction). This tendency “configures normal weather patterns as abnormal, and even as immoral, as something to be struggled against and endured rather than adapted to” (Lynch 33-34).

The inclination to separate the climate from the landscape can also be thought of as a byproduct of idealizing individualism, as if each component of a place is a separate entity that can be manipulated and changed rather than an integrated part of a larger ecological community. If the genre Western uses rugged individualism as a way to erase colonial history, it is also using

such individualism to erase the ecological dependencies that make up a specific bioregion. Such thinking is a result of viewing the landscape using the kind of absolutes that are so common to the genre Western. Rather than imagining the landscape as interconnected, complex, and inseparable from the climate that has helped to form it, Kelton's novel imagines the land itself as friend dying from cancer while the climate is an enemy that can never be defeated. This adherence to absolutes and the paradoxes they create relieves Charlie of having to fully grapple with the complexity of environmental systems and the environmental damage that comes from viewing one's relationship with the climate (and by extension the land) as a fight.

The closest the novel comes to exploring the complexity of the human-landscape relationship takes place when Charlie argues on behalf of individualist farmers and their treatment of the land. Midway through the novel, many of Charlie's fellow ranchers have signed on to receive federal aid to help them through the drought. This aid is not working in the way that many expected or hoped. Charlie, remaining true to his "almost militant independence," has refused any government aid and is angry about the program generally because it has affected the price of cattle and hurt even those ranchers who are not participating in the program. This anger boils over in an interview with a newspaper reporter. This interview captures the crux of Charlie Flagg's philosophy on individualism and ranching in the arid West. Because his philosophy is mired in the absolutism of the genre Western, Flagg's ideas constitute more paradox and contradiction even as he recognizes that ranchers have not always been good for the land. When the newspaper reporter notes that the land itself has been damaged by ranchers and farmers during the drought trying to squeeze every penny out of their farms and ranches, Charlie launches into an unusual rant, which—like Kelton's tendency in the introduction—casts the individualist ranchers and farmers as a heroic collective:

We've done the best we know how, most of us. Nobody goes in there on purpose to do damage to his country. We've grazed it too hard—we've made mistakes—but it wasn't because we meant to. It was because we didn't know enough. We had to guess sometimes and we guessed wrong. We had to take chances sometimes, and we taken the wrong ones. But we've tried to do right. We will do right when we know how. (288)

First, note that Charlie's individualism here gives way to a kind of communal responsibility; Charlie uses the pronouns "we" and "us" a total of 14 times in this passage. For Charlie, the paradoxical community of individualists must be defended, even as many of the ranchers who "grazed it too hard" were forsaking the tenets of individualism and accepting government relief from the drought. Second, Charlie's speech here elides the possibility that individualism (and capitalist self-interest) have caused the ranchers to take chances that caused harm to the landscape. Instead, his argument is that a lack of knowledge is the sole cause of any errors and that lack of knowledge should not overshadow the good intentions of this collective group of individualists. There is also no acknowledgement that capitalist self-interest and its relationship to individualism might be tempered by regulations (a concept Kelton disparages in the introduction) that could protect the land during dry periods and droughts. When done well, regulations can represent a kind of collective wisdom—the very knowledge Charlie admits the ranchers are lacking. But for Charlie, such ideas are unexplored. Any mistakes can be overlooked because of good intentions.

Yet the novel engages in paradox and contradiction again when Charlie does an about face in regard to good intentions during the same interview. After the newspaper reporter questions Charlie about his refusal to take part in the drought relief programs, Charlie argues that such handouts turn good ranchers into the equivalent of lazy housecats who can't kill mice.

Charlie falls back on individualism, arguing that communal assistance hurts people more than it helps them, even during times of extreme drought. He describes those who take government assistance as “snarlin’ and snappin’ at each other like hungry dogs, grabbin’ for what we can get and to hell with everybody else” (289-290). For Charlie, this is the opposite of the community of individualists who did their best but suffered from a lack of knowledge. Instead, it is a group of communalists practicing self-interest without caring about anyone else. The fact that ranchers who overgrazed their land during the drought might have done so as an act of “grabbin’ for what we can get and to hell with everybody else” is not considered. Similarly, when it comes to drought relief, Charlie isn’t convinced by good intentions the way he is when it comes to farmers and ranchers. When the reporter asks Charlie “doesn’t it give you some satisfaction to know the government at least had good intentions?” Charlie answers: “The road to hell is paved and bridged with good intentions” (290). Although he feels the good intentions of ranchers and farmers should outweigh any environmental mistakes they were making in the name of self-interest, two pages later he is unwilling to make the same concession for the good intentions of a government drought relief program. The primary difference here is that the first instance continues to valorize the idealized form of individualism that Charlie worships while the second sacrifices such individualism. In both cases, Charlie Flagg adheres to the absolutism the genre Western encourages rather than considering the complexities and nuance (and similarities) at the core of the two scenarios.

Even though Charlie imagines himself as a friend of the landscape and trying to heal it, the health of the landscape is ultimately sacrificed to the ideology of rugged individualism. Because Charlie’s paradoxical philosophy goes unchallenged in the novel, readers can ignore it and view Charlie as both an advocate for the land and an advocate for individualism, even if the

evidence suggests that individualism in the novel has been bad for the land on the whole in the face of the drought. Besides overgrazing, the drought brings in self-interested agribusiness interests who buy up cheap land with the plan to use it up in the name of profit. Flagg's neighbor (a farmer) sells his land to a corporate farm that plans to wear out the land and drain the aquifer in the name of profit then leave the ruined, waterless land behind for their next venture. Flagg is told this approach is justified because "Farming is a business, you know. Just a business, and nothing else" (330). Charlie is repulsed by this idea (which isn't that much different than "grabbin' for what we can get and to hell with everybody else"), but he doesn't challenge it nor does he connect this form of capitalist self-interest to his own worship of rugged individualism. If, as Kelton notes in the introduction, individualism is about the rejection of regulations, then the agribusiness that is destroying the land is drawing on the same commitment to individualism that Charlie is so devoted to. Such behavior is only curtailed by a set of communal values and behaviors that the community agrees to adhere to; these values and behaviors are codified in things like regulations for land and water use. Adhering to individualism at the expense of all else serves to sacrifice the land as a means of protecting romantic notions of rugged individualism. While regulation and individualism don't necessarily need to be mutually exclusive, they become that way in the logic of the genre Western with its insistence on absolutes that devolve into paradox and contradiction. Rugged individualism as the *idea* of the West becomes more important than the actual land and water that comprises the West; the metanarrative governs Charlie Flagg's response to aridity more than his interactions with the physical realities of aridity. Similarly, Charlie's adherence to rugged individualism makes him a hero in the eyes of the novel's readers, as evidenced by the more than 150 reviews of the novel on Amazon, the majority of which speak glowingly of the novel's protagonist.

Certainly, *The Time it Never Rained* attempts to recognize the complexity inherent in the human-landscape relationship of the arid West more than many genre Westerns do. Kelton's novel depicts a more complex relationship with the land and with aridity than the "innocence" that Schaefer depicts in *Shane*. Flagg finds fault with his fellow ranchers (including his own son) who overgraze the land during the drought, noting that drought conditions require more care for the land rather than less. He argues against the presence of an oil rig in the area at least partly on environmental grounds. He attempts to adapt to drought conditions by replacing his cattle with goats,⁴⁴ an animal more suited to the conditions. By the end of the novel he recognizes that the land has declined under his care and he vows to restore it for the sake of "the land itself" (327). Charlie recognizes a kind of bioregional history of his land, viewing himself as the latest in a long line of caretakers of the land from the Native Americans, to the first cattle ranchers, to the man he purchased the land from. In addition, Charlie's philosophy occasionally flirts with a kind of post-humanism when he argues that "*man* has got to be considered part of Nature's balance too" (94; emphasis Kelton). However, this argument is made in the service of killing a coyote (a native species) to keep it from killing sheep (an introduced, domesticated animal that exists primarily to serve humanity). Despite his efforts to view humanity and himself within nature, his commitment to individualism—to every species for itself—means that he sees humanity as working both among and against nature. This is, of course, another paradox—a contradiction that goes unchallenged in the novel for the most part. Charlie never interrogates his absolute

⁴⁴ Charlie's adoption of goats is one of several attempts at adaptation and is the adaptation that succeeds most clearly. Ironically, Charlie nearly rejects the idea—which comes to him from his banker—because it offends his cowboy sensibilities. It is only when "Big" (the banker) *forces* him to take on the goats (a sort of regulation, the very thing Kelton sees as being antithetical to rugged individualism in the introduction) by threatening to cut off his capital that Charlie begins raising goats. This portion of the novel serves as another paradox—the rugged individualist succeeding because of communal help—that goes mostly unnoticed by Charlie himself.

commitment to individualism as unregulated, unsubsidized free-market capitalism. As a result, the ecological community that he seems to value also becomes the enemy that he constantly fights against. Charlie Flagg wants “man to be considered part of nature’s balance, too” so long as man can dictate the terms of that balance. Kelton’s protagonist operates with such certainty, such an absolute belief in the correctness of individualism that he fails to truly appreciate the consequences of individualism on the bioregional community that Flagg inhabits. For all of Charlie’s commitment to it, individualism in the novel seems more like a fantasy than a reality given the inability to remove oneself from the communities of place and ecology, which include aridity and drought.

For all of the integrity that Kelton’s reviewers find in Charlie Flagg the character, his individualism and his contradictory relationship to the land suggest that being a man—to return to Lee Clark Mitchell’s argument about the genre Western—is about staying free from the communal ties that true landscape stewardship require. It’s about a man bending the land to his will and viewing drought in a dry country as a terminal disease that must be fought tooth and nail right up until the moment of one’s own death. While Charlie might love the land, he does so with a kind of paternalism⁴⁵ that robs the land itself of any kind of agency, any natural predilection for existing on its own terms without being engineered by humanity for humanity’s sake. Charlie Flagg suggests that being a man means placing one’s national identity as a tamer of the wilderness over a bioregional identity as a member of an ecological community.

⁴⁵ The novel explores the idea of paternalism in regard to the relationship between ranchers such as Charlie Flagg and the Mexican American families who work for them. Kelton presents this relationship as complex and depicts Charlie himself questioning his tendency to act paternally toward the Latino family that lives on his land. This same uncertainty is missing in the depictions of Charlie’s relationship with the landscape, which falls back on the absolutism so common to the genre Western.

Fighting Roots to Establish Roots: Bioregional versus National Identity

As I mentioned previously, paradoxes that recur in many genre Westerns—including *Shane* and *The Time it Never Rained*—can often be traced back to frontier mythology. For many thinkers throughout the twentieth century, this metanarrative and the story of westward expansion that it creates explain national identity. Central to this identity is the idea that the wilderness (and its inhabitants) must be conquered. When Charlie Flagg struggles to reconcile his love for the land with the tendency to view his relationship with aridity as a battle in which there can only be one winner, we see the frontier metanarrative in play. The tension here comes in part from Charlie's desire to be a member of a bioregional community coming into conflict with his desire to assume the national identity of frontier individualism. The frontier metanarrative requires Anglo settlers to replace those who inhabited the land previously. Kelton's novel makes this convention explicit with its references to a lone Comanche warrior who purportedly died on a hill on Charlie's property. In *Shane*, the references to Indian fighting and Native Americans appear throughout the novel, but the novel's primary "replacement" is Starrett's band of communal homesteaders replacing Fletcher and Shane himself, the Indian-hunting individualists of a time gone by. However, both *The Time It Never Rained* and *Shane* also depict a kind of environmental replacement in which native trees are destroyed through human intervention and replaced by the introduction of agriculture.

In *Shane* this convention begins with the relatively famous stump scene. Shane and Joe Starrett spend all day chopping roots and digging a massive stump from the ground. Before the work starts Starrett calls the stump "the millstone around my neck. That's one fool thing about this place that I haven't licked yet" but then suggests that he has "worked up a spot of affection for" the stump (16). Similarly, when the two men finish the removal—after cutting and chopping

through countless roots with their axes and then prying the stump from the ground—Starrett “walked to the stump and placed a hand on the rounded bole and patted it like it was *an old friend* and he was perhaps a little sorry for it” (31; emphasis mine). This language is strikingly similar to Kelton’s description of Charlie Flagg thinking about the land as an old friend dying from cancer. In both cases, the landscape features are central to a paradox; they are somehow both friend and enemy.

Central to the stump scene and the idea of replacement in the novel is the concept and image of roots. Shane begins the process by slicing into roots with his axe and Bob tells the reader that his father—when he had battled the stump in the past—approached those roots with anger. Near the end, the two men think they are finished until they encounter a taproot—a long central root that goes especially deep—that Shane has to cut while Starrett holds the stump aloft. This focus on roots resurfaces at the end of the novel when—as Gordon Iseminger has noted—the stump’s roots are replaced by the fence posts of the new corral Shane constructed for the family. With Shane having left the valley in the wake of the gunfight that secured the valley for the community of small farmers and ranchers, Starrett is bemoaning the loss of his friend. His wife, Marian, convinces Starrett that Shane is not gone, that he remains because his own posts cannot be removed like the stump was removed: “We have roots here now that we can never tear loose,” Marian tells her husband (147).

Marian’s invocation of the idea of rootedness is born of a metaphor that it is pervasive in many cultures and often used to refer to national identity. George Lakoff and Mark Turner describe the base metaphor that underpins rootedness as PEOPLE ARE PLANTS in their book *More than Cool Reason* (12-15). This base metaphor appears in *The Illiad*, *Macbeth*, and *the Book of Job* among other places. If PEOPLE ARE PLANTS, then we see how a root system can

be used to connect them to place. In his book on narrative, cognitive science, and nationalism, Patrick Colm Hogan notes that the concept of a person having “roots” in a national landscape is especially present in nationalist rhetoric and literature, in which “roots” are described as a person’s ancestors. Heidegger was especially interested in the idea of rootedness and it was central to his idea of “Being” in a place, a concept that some critics have linked to his own radical nationalism.⁴⁶ In nationalist rhetoric, the logic of this metaphor implies that those who have “deep roots” in the land have a greater claim to a nationalist identity. Hogan challenges this thinking, writing that “the metaphor of roots encourages us to think that ancestry has . . . consequences for national belonging. However, it does not provide us with any rational reason to take up this view” (149). For Hogan, if one citizen is the child of immigrant parents and another is the child of immigrant great-great-great grandparents, both have equal claim to national identity, even though the metaphor encourages us to think otherwise.

In *Shane*, this concept of rootedness is linked with the idea of replacement that is inherent in the frontier metanarrative and in settler colonialism generally. The fence posts that Marian sees as being symbolic of their family roots serve to replace the tree stump. These posts are a symbol of efficient, Anglo-American agriculture. However, the tree can be read as an adaptation to the specific bioregion that the characters inhabit and serves as a useful symbol of the kind of adaptive, bioregional existence that is being replaced. The stump that Shane and Starrett tore from the ground was an “old burr oak” (16). The burr oak (or bur oak, as it’s referred to by the U.S. Department of Agriculture), is especially well-adapted to dry conditions. The tree is distributed from New England to eastern Wyoming, where Shane is ostensibly set. A bur oak

⁴⁶ See Jonathan Bate’s *The Song of the Earth* for a summary of Heidegger, nationalism, and dwelling.

might survive for as many as 450 years and the species is “one of the most drought resistant of the North American oaks” (Row 3). A large part of this resistance to drought is the taproot, which is a large root that bores especially deep into dry prairies in search of water. It is this taproot that allows the bur oak to survive alongside prairie grasses and shrubs in the arid bioregions of the Great Plains. In the novel, Shane cuts through this taproot last, destroying the tree’s final connection to the land. In addition, the bur oak’s sheer size makes it resistant to fires that often destroy smaller trees, thereby reducing the bur oak’s competition for water. For Starrett, the stump’s size is what makes it so problematic, he describes it as a “millstone” on his property, but this size would have protected the tree during fire seasons for centuries. Removing the stump renders invisible its place in the bioregional community, and its status as an especially old resident of the valley, one that has lived there longer than even Fletcher himself. The symbolism of the fence posts replacing the stump represents national roots replacing an adapted, bioregional connection to place.

A similar effort to replace natural, drought-resistant trees takes place in *The Time it Never Rained*. Scattered throughout much of Kelton’s novel are references to the constant war that Flagg wages against mesquite trees. Near the end of the drought Flagg is poisoning a hundred mesquite trees each day with kerosene:

He figured if he could kill a hundred a day for a year, that would be 36,500 less mesquite trees. In a little less than three years, a hundred thousand. Someday perhaps, given rain, he could restore this range and make it appear as it must have been to draw the last Comanche back here for one final look. (327)

This passage is rife with conquest imagery, both in the form of conquering nature and the indigenous people displaced by colonial conquest. Yet current scientific understanding of the

southwest plains reveals that the neither the story of the mesquite tree nor the story of the Comanche is as straightforward as Charlie Flagg would like it to be. In *A Great Aridness*, William deBuys explores the ongoing changes in the grasslands of the desert southwest. Despite the efforts of Charlie Flagg-style individualists all over the West, mesquite trees continue to thrive in the region. Part of the reason is that this native tree is especially well adapted to arid bioregions. Like the bur oak, mesquite trees have a taproot. The mesquite taproot “penetrates eighteen feet or more into the ground to harvest deep water” while the tree sprouts “aggressive laterals, spreading far beyond its crown, to harvest water in the upper levels of the soil” (103). The tree’s ability to find water is what makes the mesquite so hated by ranchers, who would prefer to use the water for grass and cattle. But ranchers may have been unwittingly responsible for the mesquite trees’ proliferation in the southwest. deBuys writes that some researchers believe the grasslands of the southwest were created by aboriginal populations who used mesquite trees for fuel, ate the mesquite seeds for food, and raised domesticated turkeys that also ate mesquite seeds. These turkeys ate the beans that fell from the mesquite trees, which had propagated themselves when they were eaten by large mammals such as bison but could not propagate after being chewed up into fine dust by the gizzards of turkeys or ground up and eaten by humans. Between the birds and the people, mesquite forests were generally turned to grasslands over centuries; these grasslands are what colonial explorers encountered in the seventeenth century, and what led ranchers in the 1860s to begin raising cattle.

But these same cattle—along with the displacement of indigenous populations—allowed the trees to re-take the grasslands. When cattle and horses eat mesquite fruit, deBuys explains, the beans are mixed in with the manure and carried to grass-heavy areas where mesquite trees sprout and take root. When ranchers developed the land to make room for more cattle—by

building wells and windmills—“the industry inadvertently encouraged the dispersal of mesquite beans over the whole landscape” (104). Furthermore, when cattle ranchers and the federal government systematically poisoned prairie dog populations on over 95% of prairie dog habitat (with the mistaken idea that the prairie dogs were overgrazing the grass that was meant for cattle), they destroyed one natural method of keeping mesquite populations under control. Prairie dogs, which thrived in open lands overgrazed by cattle because they could see predators coming, often destroyed mesquite trees that sprouted near their homes. Once prairie dogs were mostly gone, mesquite thrived in the lands that had been overgrazed by cattle. These examples show the futility of seeing oneself as an individual whose actions can control or remain separate from the ecological communities that humanity is truly a part of.

Such failed efforts to control or remain separate from one's own landscape is a common tale in western American environmental history. The environmental historian Mark Fiege coined the term “hybrid landscape” to describe the fact that humans who wish to conquer the landscape and turn it to their will often end up contributing to a kind of half-conquered landscape that is also influencing and changing human behavior. This process repeats itself until one cannot separate the civilized or the cultivated from the wild and the natural. Fiege writes: “we try to arrange our land and water to suit our objectives. And again nature circumvents our plans. Back and forth it goes, a process of alteration, intermingling, and layering, the result of which is a landscape” (9). This is the kind of landscape in which Charlie Flagg wages war against the mesquite trees. He sees himself as an individual waging war against a foe. He thinks of himself as not unlike the forces who displaced and destroyed the indigenous peoples he romanticizes. But, paradoxically, efforts of ranchers to control nature have ended up increasing the presence of the very species they hoped to eradicate. Instead of a series of individual components operating

autonomously, the landscape itself is a kind of community, one that thwarts the efforts of individualism by revealing the inescapability and the complexity of ecological communities.

The frontier metanarrative begins with an escape from civilization, an escape back to nature where life is not so complicated and unholy. It is this pastoral simplicity that Charlie yearns for in his desire to keep civilization (i.e., government) out of his individual affairs. Leo Marx has argued that this pastoral metanarrative underpins much of American literature, including Cooper's novels that gave birth to the Western, Thoreau's *Walden*, and Huck Finn's desire to "light out for the Territory" (Twain 296). But the complexity of the mesquite tree and Charlie's inability to bend the mesquite tree to his will reveals that the rural landscape is not simpler than that of the city. Dana Phillips argues, in fact, that what Charlie calls "nature" is in fact more complex than an urban environment because its complexities are unmapped, less a result of engineering and more a result of biology and ecology (*Truth of Ecology* 18). The idea of pastoral retreat is built on this irony, another contradiction within the frontier metanarrative that thrives on contradiction.

Charlie's war against the mesquite tree is emblematic of his own internal paradox, his attempt to both inhabit the frontier as a part of the landscape while simultaneously conquering the landscape and bending it to his will. What is striking about Charlie's efforts is that he never seems to consider that these two identities—a member of the bioregional community and an archetypal American rugged individualist—might be in conflict with one another. He is unaware of his own ecoambiguity. Similarly, the communalists in *Shane* fail to recognize that their own devotion to efficiency in regard to land use might be entirely inefficient in regard to water use. In both cases, the characters see their own actions as separated and individual, in line with the national identity of rugged individualism. And yet Fiege's work makes clear that one cannot

truly remove oneself from the biological and ecological communities of a place. Attempts to remake landscapes in the image of individualism result in unintended consequences: a proliferation of mesquite trees rather than a reduction, a dry creek, more dams, and, eventually, more government oversight rather than less. In the arid, twentieth-century West, the absolutism with which Westerners embraced the frontier metanarrative and the genre-Western sometimes—paradoxically—led to outcomes that subverted the identity of individualism rather than reinforced it.

Chapter 4 – “Beyond the Irrigation Ditch”: Contact Zones and Aridity in *Wind from an Enemy Sky* and *Winter in the Blood*

In *Individuality Incorporated: Indians and the Multicultural Modern*, Joel Pfister shows how the conception and rhetoric of individuality were appropriated by a variety of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers and groups to support their causes. Pfister suggests that this appropriation was made easier because the meaning of the term “individual” and the corresponding concepts of “individualism” and “individuality” are difficult to pin down (10). Because of this ambiguity, references to individualism are a powerful and adaptable rhetorical trope especially when combined with the fact that individuality is associated with Anglo-American concepts of national identity. One group that capitalized on this power was late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century white reformers who sought to assimilate Native Americans into Anglo-American culture through a process of individualization. This “individualizing” (as Pfister terms it) was present in the curriculum of Indian boarding schools, which sought to destroy connections to indigenous cultures in an effort to re-birth Indian children as American individuals (12).

Individualizing was also present in the logic and rhetoric of the Dawes Act, which broke up communal tribal lands into individual allotments in an attempt to convert American Indians into American private property holders and participants in American free-market capitalism, which (as I noted in the previous chapter) is associated with rugged individualism. According to Eric Cheyfitz, the purpose of the Dawes Act was to

compel Indians to become *individuals* (competitive and acquisitive people pitted against one another in a market economy) through the socialization process of property

ownership. Or, to borrow some words of Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* . . . to compel Indians to displace words like "we" and "us" with "I" (16; emphasis Cheyfitz). The irony of such individualizing—as I have also noted in the previous chapter—is that these endeavors employ individualism as a means of claiming group membership. Contrary to the seeming freedom of identity inherent in the term "individualism," efforts such as the Dawes Act and boarding schools were not meant to increase the agency of individual Native Americans or give them a variety of ways to live their lives so much as they were to assimilate those Native Americans into the larger American community (and economy). Pfister notes that assimilationist reformers were interested in creating a very specific kind of individual, one that would become a cog in the machine of American industry: "worker-individuals who would labor even if they did not like it or felt that they were being exploited" (13).

Such efforts to mold Indians in a way that suited national goals intersected with efforts to mold the landscape. Projects designed to remake the Western landscape in the image of the East were seen as another avenue for remaking American Indians in the image of Anglos. Donald Pisani notes that the Dawes Act "provided both the justification and the revenue to construct irrigation systems on Indian land. Providing water to the reservations would drive up land values" (*Water and Government* 156).⁴⁷ American Indians were put to work constructing canals and dams and paid (minimally) for their labor. The idea behind this policy was that increased property values would lead the Indians to be more selfishly motivated. In the American, free-

⁴⁷ The Dawes Act also provided a legal means for selling off large chunks of Indian land. The increased land values Pisani describes here were a motivating force for Anglo Americans to buy up Indian land and the Dawes Act increased the rate of such sales by failing to allot much of communal lands to individuals and selling off the extra parcels. Historians have noted that allotment primarily succeeded in taking more lands from Native Americans. Between 1887, the year of Dawes Act, and 1934, the year of the Wheeler-Howard Act that annulled allotment, Native American lands decreased by more than 65 percent (see Cheyfitz 23).

market West, the best way to make land more valuable (and to stimulate self-interest) was to link it to water. An editorial from a periodical in 1903 succinctly makes the case for the link between water projects, colonialism, and assimilation, stating that irrigation was “one of the greatest factors for education and civilization of the American Indian” (quoted in Pisani, *Water and Government*, 157). Walter Graves, a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) project manager who oversaw some of these water projects specifically linked these efforts to the ideology of individualism and private property: “It is remarkable . . . to see how quickly the ideas of *individuality*, in responsibility, in ownership . . . are growing among them” (quoted in Pisani, *Water and Government*, 156; emphasis mine). This quote lumps the idea “individuality” in with the concepts of “responsibility” and “ownership,” suggesting that there is—ironically—only one specific type of individual, an individual that conforms to national values of daily labor and property ownership. That such a process would lead to casualties among Native Americans was accepted as part of the cost. Pisani notes that many of the leaders of the BIA saw this policy as a mix of “faith in material progress with social Darwinism” (*Water and Government* 158). BIA commissioner of Indian affairs Francis E. Leupp noted that, during the course of converting Indians into Anglo-style farmers, “many individuals, unable to keep up the pace, may fall by the wayside and be trodden underfoot” (quoted in Pisani, *Water and Government*, 158).

This chapter examines how the long-term costs of these approaches are depicted in two twentieth-century Native American novels: D’Arcy McNickle’s *Wind from an Enemy Sky* and James Welch’s *Winter in the Blood*. These two novels have important differences that provide a varied picture of the ways that efforts to individualize Native Americans had dire consequences for specific Native Americans and their tribal communities. For instance, the two novels are set decades apart and differ in their scope, with McNickle’s novel focusing on the failed

relationships between communities in the 1930s while Welch describes the alienation of a nameless narrator in the 1970s.

More important, however, are the similarities found in these two texts. Both novels explore the relationships between individuals and communities in landscapes that have been manipulated for irrigation farming in the name of individualizing Native Americans in the name of colonialism. Both texts suggest that efforts to assimilate Natives into American “individuals” do not necessarily result in the abandonment of a native culture for Anglo-American culture. Instead, McNickle and Welch frame attempts at assimilation as modernist depictions of loss—loss of community, loss of land, and the failure of nationalist ideologies. These losses ultimately lead to alienation, which ironically *is* a kind of individualism, but not one that is generally used to stoke national pride. Instead of viewing the West as an individualist paradise as assimilation ideology would suggest, these authors narrate the West as a site of alienation, a land of colonial conquest in which individual characters have been isolated from traditional communities and from the land itself. In both novels, manipulated waterways and the sites of irrigation technologies are liminal spaces, boundary places of division and conflict that alienate by leaving individuals stranded between cultures, communities, and families.

Deconstruction, Modernism, Aridity, and The Native American Novel

Thinking about the American West as a colonial site allows us to view the waterways in the West as examples of what Mary Louise Pratt has called “contact zones . . . social spaces where cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in the contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths” (34). For native writers, water in the arid American West—especially water that has been manipulated in colonial attempts to remake the landscape through “reclamation”—often exists in contact zones in which

the power relations are asymmetrical. In these zones, relationships and uses of water are read as signs, symbols of how each culture views its relationship with the land. However, because of the nature of contact zones, signs tend to be read in varying ways depending on who is reading and who is writing. Pratt notes that some of “the perils” of writing in a contact zone include “miscomprehension, incomprehension,” and “absolute heterogeneity of meaning” (37). The explanation for this miscommunication can be understood through Derrida’s theory of deconstruction and the play of language: the space between the signifier and the signified is especially unstable in contact zones because signification itself cannot rely on shared elements of meaning to center interpretation and organize a common understanding.

The interpretation of signs—such as water policy, novels, dams, and irrigation ditches—are predicated on those signs’ differences from other signs within a language system, as well as the contextual relationships between signs. These differences include the differences between past, present, and future as well as differences related to space and the proximity of signs to other signs. For instance, we make meaning about the current state of the Colorado River based—among other things—on its contextual relationships and differences with the known history of the river, the characteristics and conditions of other western rivers (and eastern rivers), and our expectations about the river in the future. Derrida noted that any “element” of signification “retains the mark of the past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to future elements” (287). For Native American writers, the differences between the past, present, and future are especially distinct. Native conceptions of the present, history, and future of the Colorado River might differ significantly from conceptions that center Anglo-American history as the dominant history of the West as a region. In other words, the web of meanings that Native characters might draw on for interpretation are located in different cultural contexts than

the web of meanings that Anglo characters might use to interpret similar or the same signs. An irrigation ditch will mean differently to different cultures because of the relationships and differences that each culture is using to “read” the ditch do not overlap in significant ways. Multiple cultures and communities can inhabit the same landscape and the same present, they can encounter the same signifiers, yet draw on different differences to make meaning from those signifiers. To use McNickle’s term from *Wind from An Enemy Sky*, each culture draws on a different “map of the mind” when interpreting signs, including the signs that signify water and aridity (125). Such disconnects in meaning are prevalent for the characters in *Wind from and Enemy Sky* and *Winter in the Blood*.

In her discussion of contact zones, Mary Louise Pratt suggests that such places often produce what she refers to as “autoethnographic text” or writing by the colonized in a genre the colonizer uses as a colonial tool. Given this definition, it’s worth considering American literature, and especially the American novel, as a contact zone. James H. Cox writes that the novel provides “the most diverse and extensive examples of European American storytelling about Indians” (7). Throughout much of American history, these representations have been characterized by absence or the process of vanishing. American novels have been used as colonial tool that has been to justify settler colonialism, westward expansion, and the large-scale manipulation of water in the arid West. American literature has written Native Americans by erasing their presence (and their present) into the myth the of the vanishing Indian. However, the American novel also fits Pratt’s definition of an autoethnographic genre. Cox notes that novels by Native American authors provide “the most diverse and extensive Native revisions” of European American stories about Indians, and that native authors have often used the novel as

genre “to challenge hostile colonial texts” (7, 8).⁴⁸ For Cox, Native American novels qualify as an act of what Gerald Vizenor has called “survivance.” Vizenor writes that native stories constitute an act of survivance when they privilege the presence of native peoples over their absence. “Native survivance,” writes Vizenor, “is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories” (85).

For McNickle and Welch, stories continue by adopting the colonial genre of the novel. While these Native American novels can certainly be read as what Pratt calls autoethnographic texts, it’s worth noting that the novel is not a single, monolithic genre but an amalgamation of subgenres that overlap and influence one another. When McNickle began *Wind from an Enemy Sky* in the 1940s, the modernist novel was an important literary genre at the height of its popularity. James Rupert notes that McNickle is a member of “Lost Generation” of the 1920s Paris and that his diary suggests he was “struggling against a changing society that seemed soulless and unaware of its own possibilities,” a description that would fit more than a few modernist writers of the period (9). Recently, critics⁴⁹ have begun to consider Native American

⁴⁸ Cox is especially interested in how Native American novels represent writing. In *Wind from an Enemy Sky*, Cox focuses writing as a colonial tool: the paperwork that governs the work of Rafferty, the marketing materials and contracts that control settlement among farmers (Anglo and Indian) in the river valley, and Adam Pell’s text-based “discovery” of Indians in both Peru and Montana. Thinking about water and aridity we can also assume that Pell’s work as a dam engineer and the resulting “reclamation” of the valley are primarily done through writing and text. Plans for the dam itself and surveyor’s maps that have been split into the square sections that Pell finds so offensive on the landscape would have been written artifacts that imprinted the Anglo world over the top of the Little Elk World, creating through writing the very contact zones that the novel dwells on in the form of the dam and the fences that line the valley.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Kirby Brown’s 2017 article in *Texas Studies*, which examines several authors that have read McNickle as a modernist. One of the articles Brown reviews is Leif Sorensen’s examination of the McNickle’s “Reservation Modernism” in *Modernist / Modernity*, which finds in *The Surrounded* a tension between Western Regionalism and an attempt to use a cosmopolitan style. Brown’s article is part of an issue of *Texas Studies* dedicated to locating Native American literature within the study of modernism.

texts generally and McNickle specifically within the context of modernism. Much of the work related to McNickle is reading his novel *The Surrounded*, but *Wind from an Enemy Sky*—with its intense focus on loss and the failure of institutions such as allotment, assimilation, and other individualizing programs—can also be read as modernist. The novel’s primary loss is the community, both human communities and the communal connection to the land for the Little Elk people. Loss of community leads to alienation in the novel, and alienation is common theme in modernist American fiction of the twentieth century.

Such alienation is also one of the primary attributes of Welch’s *Winter in the Blood*. Welch’s novel, with its fractured narrative and alienated, nameless narrator captures not only the themes of modernism, but the spectacle⁵⁰ that is often associated with modernist literature and art. Kenneth Roemer has argued that the fragmentation and juxtaposition in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* place the book in the modernist tradition while serving as “much more accurate visual and textual representations of the assault on Kiowa culture, especially during the nineteenth century” (397). A similar argument applies to the fragmentation, lost time, and juxtaposing storylines of *Winter in the Blood*, which amplify the narrator’s disorientation, alienation, and severed connection to his own sense of identity. While Welch’s novel was published late in the twentieth century and could reasonably be read as a postmodern novel, examining it as a modernist novel along with McNickle’s work adds an important strand to a variety of narratives surrounding aridity and water in literature of the American West.

⁵⁰ Michael Levenson has argued that modernism is primarily defined by spectacle and novelty—“arresting artistic events, which fascinated, and often appalled, a rapt audience”—as well as a desire for nostalgia (3). Given this definition, one might argue that during the twentieth century Native authors that depicted indigenous peoples as present and—like the narrator at the end of *Winter in the Blood*—looking to the future rather than doomed to extinction or romanticized into the American past were writing literature of spectacle and novelty while challenging narratives of nostalgia associated with the vanishing Indian.

One way to think about modernism and its relation to Native American authors such as McNickle and Welch is to adopt the broad definition of modernism put forth by Michael Whitworth. For Whitworth, modernism is not defined by a shared set of artistic or literary conventions, but rather by a shared exigence: “‘Modernism’ is not so much a thing as a set of responses to problems posed by the conditions of modernity” (3). Whitworth notes that critics don’t necessarily agree on the definition of “modernity” but various scholars have suggested that it includes conditions and events such as the rise of large cities and the increased “comfort of modern life” through technology, the foregrounding of “an inflexible form of rationality,” the First World War, and the holocaust. Modernism, then, defines the artistic response to the conditions and events of modernity. This definition suggests that Native American novels such as *Wind From an Enemy Sky* and *Winter in the Blood* fit easily into the category of modernism because modernity as a condition is tied up in the history of colonialism. Such a reading might even foreground indigenous voices because few authors are better positioned to write about the “problems posed by the conditions of modernity” than those authors whose cultures have been displaced, relocated, and nearly destroyed by the Euro-American quest to achieve modernity.

However, reading these novels as modernist is a critical act that requires care as it threatens to push Native writers too far into colonial literary traditions and render their Native attributes and the colonial history that influenced their creation invisible. But Roemer, like Cox, argues that readings that contextualize native writing in Euro-American literary traditions are ultimately important because they reveal how native authors “reinvented the conventions for their tribal and Pan-Indian purposes” (392). In the case of Welch and McNickle, these reinventions highlight the cost of water manipulation and individualizing programs to Native communities by using modernist conventions of loss, alienation, and fragmentation. The use of a

colonial genre like the modernist novel also serves to highlight the role of colonialism in the process of artistic creation and the production of Native American literature as a commodity. Louis Owens has argued that Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*—another native novel that can be read as modernist—took on the conventions of the American literary elite (and subsequently captured the imagination of the American literary elite) because the industry of literary production required such acquiescence from Native authors as a price of admission. “Momaday so successfully mimicked the aesthetics of the center,” Owens writes, “that he was allowed access” (“As if an Indian” 22). Such access required the “extensive education of its author—all the way to a doctorate from Stanford University” (“As if an Indian” 23). To put it another way, Owens argues that Momaday learned enough about signification in elite American literary culture to use the language of the culture; he was no longer operating with a separate system of cultural symbols. Like Momaday, McNickle spent time in elite universities and at the centers of Euro-American culture, studying at Oxford and then in Paris among modernist artists and musicians. He moved to New York to be at the center of the American publishing industry and worked within that industry. Similarly, Welch studied at the University of Montana where he worked closely with the well-known American poet Richard Hugo. In both cases, the authors adopted conventions of American literary culture and while also having those conventions imposed on them. Robert Dale Parker has argued that Native American literature has been constructed or “invented” out of a mix of native traditions and Euro-American preoccupations about what it meant to be Indian (3). To borrow and paraphrase the title of Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird's recent anthology of native literature housed in Euro-American genres, McNickle and Welch reinvent the enemy's language and they use that language to tell stories of failed

signifiers, an inability for signs to be interpreted. In order to do so, each author—like Momaday—ventured into the colonial capitalist apparatus rather than away from it.

Like Foote's gothic stories and the paradoxes of the Western, modernist novels about aridity and water are not determined by their genre but allow readers to see the both aridity and individualism through the spectrum of modernism itself. Rather than the romantic, heroic story of rugged individualism conquering the wilderness (and its inhabitants), Welch and McNickle provide readers with narratives of fractured existence and fractured communities, with the sense that alienation and distance—between signifier and signified, between people, between communities, between an arid region and those who seek to occupy it in ways not adapted to aridity—cannot be engineered out of existence while simultaneously arguing that Indians will not be “individualized” out of existence.

Boundaries between Worlds in *Wind from an Enemy Sky*

Written over the course of three decades and published in 1978, D'Arcy McNickle's *Wind from an Enemy Sky* is set on a Western reservation among a fictional nation of American Indians called the Little Elk. The story begins with Bull, who leads a Little Elk band that has moved into the mountains and away from the BIA buildings and their allotment programs in the valley. Bull climbs to a mountain ridge with his grandson so that he can view a dam that has been built to divert the stream that runs through the reservation. What Bull sees—a newly formed lake that has flooded a place of spiritual significance to Bull and his people, a massive cement and boulder structure holding back the water⁵¹—is so foreign to him that he feels small

⁵¹ John K. Donaldson has noted that the image of obstructed water is found in a variety of twentieth-century texts by Native American writers and seems to begin with McNickle's 1954 young adult novel *Runner in the Sun*, although it's worth noting that McNickle began writing *Wind from an Enemy Sky* in the 1940s even though it was not published until the 1970s.

and powerless. “Who is this creature who built that thing of rock and stopped the water?” Bull asks, “Is he two-legged like other men? Or is he a monster man who decides things his own way?” (7). Bull’s reaction to seeing the dam is the first of many examples in the book of incompatibility between the culture of the Little Elk people and that of the Anglos who built the dam and oversee the reservation. Over the course of the novel this incompatibility is illustrated through a series of interactions—primarily conflicts and failed attempts at understanding—between the two cultures culminating with a final, fatal confrontation in which Bull kills the engineer (Adam Pell) who designed the dam and the BIA agent (Toby Rafferty) who had been attempting to both reform the Indians and understand them. Bull is then killed by “The Boy,” an Indian who works as the tribal police chief.

Critics have often focused on what Daniel Duane calls the “ideological dividedness” or the inability for signs to translate across cultures in the novel (26). Karen Piper suggests that the novel’s depiction of the inability of Anglo characters in the novel to understand Little Elk culture and history should be read as an example of how native texts, when read by the colonizer, become “an allegory without the decoding key” and that *Wind From an Enemy Sky* should be read as “a critique, or disassembling of white culture—a threat to western notions of identity and agency” (83). For Louis Owens, this inability to communicate across cultures is the primary theme of McNickle’s fiction, especially the two novels that bookend his career: *The Surrounded* and *Wind from an Enemy Sky*. Owens examines McNickle’s novels in light of a conclusion Rafferty draws from his interactions with the Bull and other members of the Little Elk communities: “we do not speak to each other—and language is only part of it. Perhaps it is intention, or purpose, the map of the mind we follow” (125). Owens argues that McNickle is primarily focused on describing the ways that maps of the mind between Indian cultures and

Anglo cultures “simply do not match: the compass orientations are different, the landmarks point in different languages toward different destinies” (“Map of the Mind” 275). Owens tracks the way these diverging maps are thrown into contrast by the failures to communicate in *Wind from an Enemy Sky* and *The Surrounded*.

Building on these readings that foreground the novel’s primary theme as the inability of signs to cross cultural boundaries, I propose that McNickle’s metaphor of different maps extends beyond communication in *Wind from an Enemy Sky* to the ways that characters construct reality and place and how they respond to aridity and the manipulation of water in a landscape shared by two cultures using different mental and cultural maps to interpret the same geographic area. An especially elastic word in the novel is a spatial term: “world.”⁵² Two Sleeps, the spiritual leader of Bull’s band of the Little Elk, uses “world” to lend a spatial aspect to the differences between cultures, describing a different physical world for each. Speaking of the BIA agent Rafferty, he says: “He comes from a big world where his power is in a machine . . . we live here in this small world and we have only ourselves, the ground where we walk, the big and small animals” (123). This depiction of competing worlds fits conceptually with the idea of a “map of the mind” where the map serves as means of interpreting the world. But McNickle expands the idea when Two Sleeps argues that the Anglos are attempting to “make a big world for us, like theirs” (124). Later, when Bull is told that his group is subject to the laws of Anglos, he responds “Who is this white man who comes here and tells us what the law is? Did he make the world?” (89). In their clearest moments, McNickle’s characters are aware that the novel’s two cultures are using different histories, logics, and value systems to understand the material world, and that

⁵² McNickle uses “world” in a similar way in *The Surrounded*. Early in the novel, when Archilde returns to his family, he notes “When you came home to your Indian mother, you had to remember that it was a different world” (3).

these differences create tension because the two cultures that inhabit the same material geography. The maps of the mind that describe the two “worlds” are ways of ordering reality, both the land itself and human relationships.

However, the clarity or the awareness of the inability to transact across the divide is fleeting and inconsistent. For instance, the engineer Adam Pell recognizes his own lack of knowledge when he admits that he has no idea how the Little Elk people will respond to his offering of a gold statue from an indigenous culture in Peru. Pell proposes to substitute the Peruvian statue, a sacred object for an indigenous culture thousands of miles away, for the Little Elk people’s lost sacred medicine bundle. However, his recognition of the inability to forecast how the Little Elk people will make meaning from this foreign artifact does not increase his ability to understand Bull and the others and it doesn’t keep him from offering the statue. Instead, Pell attempts to engineer a solution to an unsolvable problem by falling back on a kind of monolithic definition of indigeneity when he assumes that Bull and his people will recognize some kind of commonality with the statue because both the Little Elk people and the Peruvian who created the piece are part of what Pell calls “the great Indian race” (253). He fails to consider that such a conception is Eurocentric and has no place in the Little Elk “world.” Rafferty recognizes this and counsels against giving the statue to the Little Elk people. He thinks to himself in the moments before the final shootings: “Because of [Pell’s] place *in the world*, his success, he assumed he could restore a lost *world* by a simple substitution of symbols” (249; emphasis mine). The confusing double use of “world” in this passage reinforces the difficulty the two cultures have in trying to cross the chasm that separates them and reinforces the aptness of the spatial metaphor. Rafferty sees that symbols themselves work differently on the two maps of the mind that the cultures use to interpret the same event and the same landscape. Symbolism

itself functions in ways that are incompatible between the two cultures. The maps are written not only in different languages but they describe different landmarks and use different scales to measure different distances and even time itself.

The novel also uses “world” to describe the ways that characters hold their realities together. In the novel’s first sentence, the narrator states that Bull’s trip to view the dam “became a journey into the world” (1). In the novel’s last sentence, after Bull has been killed, the narrator tells us that “*no meadowlarks sang, the world fell apart*” (256). This last is italicized because it is part of a “death song” that Two Sleeps is singing. It echoes the language used to describe another song the old man sings early in the novel in which he describes: “A time when the plover cried and the song of the meadowlarks wove the world together” (30). There is an idea here that the world is constructed, woven together by story and song, the narratives cultures use to make sense of experience. Both the first and the last sentences of the novel suggest that humanity—and especially Bull—are a part of the world and are necessary to hold it together. A world becomes not only a reality but a kind of interlocking system in which actions, relationships, land, language, and humanity “fit together” (which is the phrase Rafferty uses to describe the “teepee world” he encounters when he visits Bull’s dying brother) (125). When Bull’s grandson, Antoine, sees Two Sleeps begin to cry, he has no way to make sense of the experience and, consequently, the system he uses to order reality momentarily fails to fit together. The narrator tells us at this moment that “the world shattered into many pieces” for Antoine (219). Such moments—when the logics that control the master narratives that characters use to order reality no longer make sense—the world itself is in danger of becoming an unstable series of signifiers, a series with no unity, a place that no map can describe. Such moments occur most often in the novel’s contact zones as the conflicts between the two worlds threaten to break the respective

systems of world construction completely apart, which is exactly what Two Sleeps reflects in his death song after the final, tragic confrontation. The broad use of the term “world” to describe reality, language, land, relationships, and culture emphasizes just how inextricable these concepts are. The inability to separate something like culture or masculinity from land use or water manipulation mirrors the ways that such concepts are wrapped up in historical issues related to “the world” or the American West.

Given his life experience, it is perhaps no surprise that McNickle would write about Anglo efforts to reform Native Americans and the various ways the two groups fail to understand each other, especially in regard to water. McNickle was born⁵³ on the Flathead Reservation in 1904 to a Salish mother and an Irish father. His parents divorced when he was young and McNickle—like the character Antoine in *Wind from an Enemy Sky*—attended an Indian boarding school in Oregon. He returned to the Flathead Reservation before leaving first for the University of Montana and then, after selling his allotment, for Oxford in 1925. After years in Paris and New York struggling for success as a writer (*The Surrounded* was published in 1936 but didn’t

⁵³ Unless otherwise noted, McNickle’s biographical information in this paragraph and throughout the chapter comes from Joan Thompson’s 1994 dissertation and the *Western Writers Series* pamphlet on McNickle written by James Rupert.

sell well), he took a job with the BIA under John Collier.⁵⁴ McNickle worked with the BIA for 16 years in a variety of jobs, several of which involved dams and water projects on Indian reservations. In his afterword to the University of New Mexico Press edition of *Wind from an Enemy Sky*, Louis Owens notes that McNickle connected the history of land theft through allotment and dam building that Adam Pell discovers in Chapter 23 of *Wind from an Enemy Sky* directly to the history of the Salish people on the Flathead Reservation. However, Joan Thompson found that McNickle also cited the Hidatsa located on the Berthold reservation in North Dakota (a group McNickle had worked with in his duties for the BIA) as an influence to the Little Elk story, specifically the construction of a dam that flooded sacred ground and the loss of a medicine bundle. During his time with the BIA and in his writing outside the agency, McNickle was involved with several water projects that included dams on reservations.

Perhaps due in part to McNickle's experience as a native presence inside the BIA, *Wind from an Enemy Sky* fixates on moments of interaction between the Little Elk people and the colonial forces that surround them. The novel describes the two cultures as primarily living apart.

⁵⁴ Collier was appointed the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1933 after writing editorials criticizing individualizing programs like the Dawes Act in the 1920s. Collier was instrumental in passing the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, which attempted to reverse course from the allotment program. In *Wind From an Enemy Sky*, the Indian agent Rafferty is ostensibly depicted as Collier-style reformer in that he is not attempting to individualize the Little Elk people, rather he is dealing with the fallout from past individualizing programs. Collier saw American Indian culture as a communal ideal. However, Pfister argues that Collier's monolithic romanticizing of native culture caused as many problems as it solved. This view is supported by the ambivalence that American Indians displayed in their opinions of Collier and his programs. This diversity of reactions suggests that Indian cultures were much more diverse and complex than Collier imagined. The maps of the mind were greater in number than Indian agents might expect and never easy to read, as Rafferty learns in *Wind from an Enemy Sky*.

Specifically, Bull and his band are consciously avoiding the Anglo world. A passage in the novel's first third describes the segregation:

The Indian families lived in the foothills, wherever water came from the ground in pools, and where timber gave them shelter. The white men who came to the valley at the government's invitation took their homesteads in the flats, where the silty soil ran deep and stoneless and thirsted for water. The summer sun blistered their pink faces and the shrill winters turned them blue. (53)

This passage suggests that the two worlds remain separate in part because they do not overlap geographically. However, the passage also implies the location of the borders or contact zones where they will come together. The first is the dam itself, which opens the novel and hovers over it throughout, the scene of violent conflict and a symbol of the contrasting ways the two cultures view the land and water. The lack of water on white homesteads ensures that water itself will be a contact zone where the two cultures must meet as settlers attempt to move water away from the foothills onto the arid plains. The second boundary area implied by this passage is the location of fences. The white homesteads are not communal lands but private property that is ordered according to the logics of the Anglo world. Unsurprisingly, the novel is filled with references to fences, most of which are described as alienating from the perspective of Indian characters. Both the dam and the preponderance of fences are contact zones, sites of liminality where the two worlds unavoidably meet and expose their differences, the place where signification often fails but also the only places where signification between cultures could succeed. Characters who seek to cross cultural boundaries, move from one world into the next, have to navigate these liminal spaces. In doing so, they primarily face alienation unless they reject one world in favor of the other.

Bull is alienated by the dam because it threatens his position in his own community and renders him foreign to his own people. In the opening scenes of the novel, when Bull sees the dam and impotently fires his rifle at it, his grandson Antoine finds Bull almost unrecognizable because of his encounter in the space between worlds: “Antoine saw this happen in bright sunshine, and while he could not understand all of it, he knew how terrible it was. A man *alone*, with bare hands and a gun. And the man was his grandfather. He could not look at him” (7; emphasis mine). Bull’s response in this moment, to wonder aloud at whether the builder of the dam was a man or a monster, reveals the dam as a place of liminality. It is here that Bull is exposed to the Anglo world and he perceives it as an “other” that is so alien to him as to defy humanity. Bull also recognizes that the world that would create such a dam prioritizes (human) individualism over (ecological) community, a concept that he finds as foreign as the dam itself. Reflecting on the dam, he asks: “How can a man know what a stream wants to do? How can he decide this *by himself?*” (24; emphasis mine). For Bull, the decision to dam the river is as foreign as the dam itself because it represents a decision that doesn’t consider all those who might be affected by it. It elevates the needs of the individual over the needs of the community.

Caitlin Gersdorf argues that early colonial settlers who encountered the arid West reacted to the landscape as if they had entered into a “confrontation with an Other” (14). One response to that confrontation was to build dams like the one Bull encounters. Such dams produced a kind of cycle of “othering” because they are as alien to many indigenous inhabitants as the desert was to Anglos who only knew humid environments. This cycle serves to increase the distance between “worlds” even as the indigenous peoples and colonial settlers inhabit the same landscape. Bull’s encounter with the dam is the opening scene in McNickle’s novel and his violent confrontation with Pell (the dam’s engineer) ends it. While there are moments in the novel that suggest

characters may be able to move between worlds and that the two worlds could coexist as a plurality of cultures, those hopes are dashed by the tragic violence in the novel's closing, which seems likely to perpetuate cycles of othering rather than breaking them.

One character who attempts to cross (or at least understand) the boundary of the dam and irrigated water in the novel is the engineer and museum director Adam Pell. As a dam engineer, Pell is emblematic of attempts to manipulate the landscape in the name of American progress. Progress, Pell says, is "how I make my living" (191). As such he operates in the mode of individualism that Bull finds so foreign as he considers the dam. When describing the dam project Pell says: "I had no knowledge of this background when I went out there. It was just a job of construction and my company built a good dam" (192). This explanation seems to be the answer to Bull's question about deciding to build the dam "by himself." Pell doesn't require a knowledge of the region, the watershed community, the consent of the Little Elk people, or an assessment of environmental impact because his role as engineer does not ask for such things. He has a contract to build a dam, and that's enough for him. The world that Pell operates in reinforces such decisions by moving the designing of dams away from the local into the Federal dam-building system and the capitalist, self-interested economy.

In his role as dam engineer and individualist, Pell acts in ways that benefit the novel's Anglo world. But his fascination with Indians, even though it is ultimately misguided, occasionally serves to alienate him within that world. As he becomes aware of the history of the Little Elk people and their experience with individualizing programs such as his dam, he attempts to bring the problem to the attention of powerful men. But he is "exposed" in this effort as a "romanticist" (191). In this scene, when Pell talks to his friend, a judge, at an elite eastern

men's club,⁵⁵ he feels uncomfortable with his own community and their unwillingness to listen. Similarly, his desire to meet and talk with Indians in Montana strains his relationship with his sister. Finally, Pell's awareness of his part in building the dam renders him helpless and guilty. His unfamiliarity with the consequences of own actions causes him to seek out a solution—to offer the Peruvian statue to the Little Elk people—that makes little or no sense to anyone involved. Having been faced with the liminal space of the dam and the irrigation policies that surround it, Pell is unable to reconcile the two worlds. He attempts to bring them together with what Rafferty calls a “substitution of symbols” or the exchange of cultural signifiers between “worlds” without the associated culture, history, or relationships with other signifiers that would allow the exchanged signifier to make meaning in its new context (249). In doing so he merely worsens the conflict. As Two Sleeps has prophesied, Pell's attempts to participate in both worlds eventually destroy Bull's band of the Little Elk.

Similarly, Pock Face—who mimics Bull's actions by shooting at the dam but kills a dam worker in the process—has his own place in the community threatened by his encounter in the liminal space. Bull recognizes that Pock Face was applying the logic and signification of the Little Elk world in a contact zone, and that such action is dangerous because Pock Face's action is so unlikely to be interpreted as intended in such a space: “For surely it was mischief that sent him up to that dam, and mischief in his heart that fired a gun. But no one could laugh about it or even tell a white man how it happened to go that way” (133). Bull's fears prove correct. Pock

⁵⁵ The scene in *The Harvard Club*, in which Pell discusses the history of the Little Elk people with his friend the judge, is especially interesting to read in light of Christine Bold's book *The Frontier Club: Popular Westerns and Cultural Power, 1880-1924*. Bold documents how the Boone and Crockett club, which was founded by Theodore Roosevelt and others and has its roots in elite eastern men's clubs such as the Harvard Club, had an underappreciated role in how Americans viewed Western lands. It's fair to say that some of the logics that govern the “world” of Adam Pell are elucidated in Bold's book.

Face must answer for using Little Elk ideas in an Anglo world when he becomes the center of an investigation that threatens Rafferty's attempts to find a bridge between the two worlds. While the conclusion of Pock Face's trial is left untold, it seems unlikely things will go well for him after Bull has shot and killed both Pell and Rafferty in the novel's final scene. In short, the characters who recognize the dam as liminal are also drawn into violent confrontations that originate from beyond their own world. The dam's liminality leads to violence, a fact that is underscored by the Little Elk contention that the dam has "killed the water" (169). Pell describes this idea as an enormous "misapprehension," but that term assumes that the two groups have a common ground from which to make meaning (169). Eventually, Pell comes to the conclusion that he is the one misapprehending, that the dam has indeed killed the water. But his attempts to make up for that death lead only to more death.

While they are less directly related to water and aridity than the dam, fences in the novel also represent an interesting site of liminality. The fence is linked to the dam and to water management in the West in that the fences are boundaries that surround and connote the private property of settlers for whom the dam was built. They also serve to imprint the logic of the Anglo world onto the land itself. Pell refers to the way fences and the dam render the world unfamiliar for the Little Elk when he states that he wants to give them the gold statue "for my part in transforming their world into an alien land of fences and diverted water courses" (234). Similarly, when Pell tours the reservation near the end of the novel, after he has become ambivalent about the dam, the narrator describes the land that he encounters: "From the vantage point of the hilltop, it was possible to see a large expanse of the valley, all of it cut into squares and rectangles by fence lines. Only the irrigation canals had a way of their own" (229). Pell "reads" and interprets the fences as signifiers by linking the "squares and rectangles" directly to

the Anglo world and to the individualizing program of allotment: “I read about this but I had to see it to understand it. The idea of the grid survey is peculiarly American . . . Look at those fences! More than all the documents I read last winter about dividing up the common tribal land . . . this view is the most shattering” (229). Here Pell is recognizing the way that two worlds struggle to inhabit a single space. Yet his understanding doesn’t extend far enough to realize that he cannot unmake fences and dams by substituting symbols.

The fences also serve to make the Little Elk characters feel like strangers in a space where they once felt at home. The narrator describes the ways that fences limited mobility for people whose families had lived in the valley for generations; “those who stayed with the old style” moved into the timbered country that resisted farming and they rarely traveled across the valley because the fences required them to travel in squared routes along homesteaded sections (222). When they did make such trips, “they were reminded all over again that the country was no longer their own . . . to ride miles in one direction, then miles in another direction, following section lines, in order to arrive where they wanted to go” (222).

The Little Elk character who is most acquainted with fences is Bull’s brother, Henry Jim. Because of a rift between the brothers in their youth, Henry Jim and Bull are estranged when the novel opens. The rift revolves around Henry Jim’s decision to embrace the Anglo world of farming and ranching at the expense of his Indian culture. Henry Jim’s story illustrates how the two worlds in the novel force characters to choose between cultures rather than living within the borderland of a contact zone. Henry Jim has rejected Little Elk culture at the behest of BIA agents who are working to replace Native cultures with American culture through individualizing programs. Henry Jim’s choices make him a success story in the Anglo world. He has become an “individual”: a successful farmer who lives in an Anglo-style house and has little contact with

his brother who embraces Native ways of being. When he remembers his attempts to move from the Little Elk world to the Anglo world, he sees fences as being an important:

Men came from a far country . . . and said: “You must build fences. Four strands of barbed wire, stretched and stapled to cedar posts set sixteen feet apart. That’s a legal fence and you can prosecute for trespass if anybody lets his stock in on you if you have such a fence.” The words were a marvel of obscurity, but in the days of the telling they seemed important. (30)

This passage makes it clear that the Anglo world is made from boundaries that separate individuals and that the separation is one both of physical boundaries (fences) and language itself (words that are “a marvel of obscurity”). This separation is part of the individualizing process. But for Henry Jim it is a process of alienation. He doesn’t understand the language of the Anglo world and he is never really accepted, even though he is successful as a farmer and fence-builder. Instead, he is a kind of display-window Indian that the BIA uses to argue that the individualizing programs work. Henry Jim’s life inside the fences is a life of isolation. As the novel opens, he has realized this and attempts to repair the rift with Bull. When describing his life, he begins with the language of American individualism (“In those days I had the foolish idea that a man stands by himself . . . the government man said how it should be and I listened to him”) but eventually his individualism turns to alienation.

I didn’t notice it at first but one day I could see that I was alone. That first government man had said my people would be proud of me, but relatives didn’t like to come inside the big house. When they visited me, they waited outside, sitting on a horse or in a wagon. They said the house was cold, or they didn’t want to get it dirty. (117)

Of all the characters in the novel who attempt to live in both worlds, Henry Jim makes the sincerest effort, a decades long attempt to be in both the Little Elk world and the Anglo world described by the government man. But he is also the character most alienated from both worlds. For Henry Jim, the individualizing programs of allotment and irrigation farming don't result in assimilation but in isolation. As a literary device, Henry Jim is a retort to the idea that individualizing programs would serve as a social Darwinist weeding out. He doesn't fail at the Anglo programs; he excels. And yet one cannot help but feel he is a casualty in the process of assimilation.

Henry Jim's story is a microcosm of the story being told in *Wind from an Enemy Sky* as a whole and McNickle's other fiction. Like McNickle's novel *The Surrounded*, the characters in *Wind from an Enemy Sky* inhabit worlds that are geographically proximate but philosophically and spiritually distant. The Little Elk characters are surrounded by an Anglo world that they don't understand and don't wish to inhabit. Those characters that either choose or are forced into confronting the individualizing Anglo world face violence and risk alienation. McNickle doesn't depict the Little Elk as vanishing, but rather doomed to a life of despair and misunderstanding, constantly waging battles for spiritual and cultural independence in liminal spaces where the odds are stacked against their success, contact zones in which signification is unstable and the use of symbols seems to contribute to the chasm between cultures rather than bringing the two worlds together.

Alienation and Irrigation in Winter in the Blood

Henry Jim's struggle against alienation in *Wind from an Enemy Sky* is an interesting precursor for considering James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*. Welch's novel is primarily about the narrator's struggle against alienation. At one point in the novel, the narrator takes up

McNickle's "worlds" metaphor and locates himself outside of the various worlds within the novel: "Again I found myself in a world of stalking white men, but those Indians down at Gable's were no bargain either. I was a stranger to both and both had beaten me" (120).

Taking place over a week nominally in the 1970s, the novel tells a series of interwoven and fractured narratives about the narrator's life. He is a Blackfeet Indian who, in one of the novel's narrative threads, traces his lineage through a character named Yellow Knife to the Southern Pigeon tribe of the Blackfeet, a group consigned to the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana in 1888. However, the narrator lives with his mother on the Fort Belknap⁵⁶ reservation, which is the home of the Gros Ventres, a group that had an ambivalent relationship with the Blackfeet prior to the Anglo-American colonialism of the nineteenth century (Ruoff, "History" 169-170). In other words, as a Blackfeet on the Fort Belknap reservation, the narrator feels alienated from his heritage and his people. Other narrative threads in the novel also reinforce the feelings of alienation. These include the narrator's memories of his brother's death as a teenager, a strange encounter and foiled criminal plot with a white character whom the narrator calls "the airplane man," the narrator's failed attempts to reconnect with his Cree girlfriend who has recently left him, and episodes of ranch work with and for his new stepfather Lame Bull. Each of these threads explores various instances of alienation within the narrator's existence.

⁵⁶ While there are similarities between depictions of manipulated water and alienation in the two novels this chapter focuses on, that is not meant to imply that the native cultures depicted in the two novels are interchangeable. The Fort Belknap Reservation (where Welch's novel begins and ends) and the Flathead Reservation (where McNickle was born and which is something of a stand-in for the Little Elk setting in *Wind from an Enemy Sky*) are both located in northern Montana but are more than 300 miles apart. The history of the Blackfeet is a varied history in which several groups with different cultures came together, ultimately occupying multiple reservations. Similarly, the Flathead reservation is home to three groups, including the Salish, which is the indigenous tribe McNickle was born into. These groups have varied histories and spiritual traditions.

The narrator's feeling of isolation manifests itself in another spatial metaphor: the idea of "distance." The narrator senses distance between and within people, as well as between the people and the arid landscape of the American West that they inhabit. That distance serves as a form of alienation. He states early in the novel that alienation and the arid land are intertwined.

It could have been the country, the burnt prairie beneath a blazing sun, the pale green of the Milk River valley, the milky waters of the river, the sagebrush and cottonwoods, the dry cracked gumbo flats. The country had created a distance as deep as it was empty, and the people accepted and treated each other with distance. (2)

But for the narrator, distance does not originate in the land: "the distance I felt came not from the country or people; it came from within me. I was as distant from myself as a hawk from the moon" (2). These passages suggest that the narrator senses alienation between other people and "the country" but this distance is unlike the distance he feels. He is alienated even from the alienation of others. In *Winter in the Blood*, "distance" is a spatial metaphor that—like McNickle's "worlds" in *Wind from an Enemy Sky*—takes on a series of overlapping meanings. "Distance" from people seems to connote alienation that is compounded by the land itself and the equally ambiguous term "country," which could mean the immediately proximate land, the landscape characteristics of a specific bioregion, and the nation the narrator lives in.

Written during last half of the twentieth century, it is perhaps not a shock that *Winter in the Blood* should take up a modernist theme such as alienation. In addition, given the fact that distance and isolation dominate the narrative and are mentioned early and often by the narrator, it is no surprise that alienation has been an important topic for literary scholars writing about the novel. Just four years after the novel's publication, *American Indian Quarterly* published a symposium issue dedicated to Welch. This issue includes three arguments about the role of

alienation in the novel. Louise Barnett argues that alienation in the novel is a result of the narrator's inability to take part in rituals that link people to their landscapes and communities. A. Lavonne Ruoff contends that the narrator's alienation is caused by his relationships (and lack thereof) with the novel's women characters. Kathleen Sands links the narrator's alienation with the "broken" narratives of his life (a result of his father and brother's death) and his heritage. Other scholars have continued the conversation surrounding alienation in the novel. Stephen Tatum argues that alienation is logical for a narrator who desires meaning yet is faced with evidence that "we are fated to wander amidst signifiers that are . . . 'always in transit'" (75). Christopher Norden argues that *Winter in the Blood* illustrates the power of ritual in overcoming alienation. In response to these arguments and others, Sidner Larson suggests that interpretations of characters such as Welch's narrator tend to disregard the ways that colonization inherently leads to alienation. "Aftermath," Larson contends, "is signified primarily by absence" (277). The breadth of writing about alienation in the novel shows the complexity of Welch's character and the way the novel resists simple explanations.

Clearly, the narrator's alienation can be read in a variety of ways. I propose that the narrator's feelings of alienation can also be linked with the ways that water and aridity—and the technology that manipulates water in an arid country—serve to isolate the narrator from other characters in the novel and from his heritage. Like the trappings of irrigation and fences in McNickle's novel, Welch's narrator faces the dark side of individualism as irrigated waterways and the control of water awarded through individualizing programs such as allotment and reservation water projects serve to divide characters rather than bring them together. Images of irrigation technology serve to reinforce the novel's modernist theme of alienation and separation from a past that could potentially make the fragmented narrator whole.

Unsurprisingly given that the novel is set in an arid landscape that has been undergoing more than a century of colonization, the most common types of waterways in *Winter in the Blood* are products of irrigation. During the periodic flashback scenes, the cattle that the narrator and his brother are sent to bring in are found gathered around the muddy pools of nearly empty irrigation reservoirs (106-107). The most profitable hay lands are described as “irrigated” (13, 40), while the men that work those fields are described as “irrigators” (6, 40). The narrator’s injury occurs when he falls from the horse and “felt my knee strike something hard, a rock maybe, or a culvert” (142). Culverts are concrete structures used to funnel irrigation water beneath roads. Irrigation ditches are described frequently in the scenes on the reservation. The narrator follows and crosses irrigation ditches on his rides to visit Yellow Calf. Teresa refers to the borrow pit—a low spot along a road from which fill material was dug to construct the road and which collects water that runs off the road—where First Raise froze to death as “that ditch” (20). And the novel opens with the narrator urinating in this same borrow pit (1).

The depictions of irrigation are key to understanding the relationship between manipulated water and colonialism in the novel. Welch includes the modifier “irrigation” with nearly every instance of the noun “ditch” (of which there are more than a dozen). This pattern juxtaposes the ditches against water in the novel that has not been manipulated for irrigation, such as the slough, the river, and rain. The “irrigation” modifier is a constant reminder that the narrator’s “country” bears the marks of colonial manipulation and that much of this manipulation has been performed in the name of agriculture. The environmental historian Freida Knobloch notes that the terms “agriculture” and “colonization” first appeared in English together at about the same time—the late 16th and early 17th centuries—and that the term “colony” derives from the Latin word for “farmer.” Knobloch suggests that these terms are best understood at face

value: farming and ranching are a “culture” imposed on savage landscapes (4). In other words, agriculture is a form of colonization. In the American West, these terms are also intertwined with the omnipresent word “reclamation,” which I have examined previously but warrants another look in relation to colonialism. If agriculture is a form of colonization, then colonization is ultimately the goal of the Bureau of Reclamation, which attempts to colonize the West by “reclaiming” the arid lands of the West from aridity itself, primarily through irrigation and dam building. Yet Nancy Cook has noted that the term reclamation is not present in the bureau’s own glossary, leaving it open to interpretation even by the bureaucrats that run the agency. One implied definition, made partially explicit by the root of the word, “reclaim,” is to wrest control of land (and water) from Native Americans, whom Anglo-Americans assumed they could “civilize” along with the landscape using individualizing programs that relied on irrigation. Hence, the colonization of the Native Americans is nearly inseparable from the colonization of the landscape as it relates to conquering aridity.

In the Bureau of Reclamation’s role as chief colonizers of the western landscape, the agency often found itself working with (and sometimes conflicting with) the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Pisani notes that these conflicts generally resulted in the Bureau of Indian Affairs deferring to the Bureau of Reclamation primarily because the two agencies’ goals—the colonization of the landscape and the colonization of the Native Americans—were philosophically linked: “leaders in the Reclamation Service recognized that transforming ‘savage’ Indians into peaceful farmers had no less appeal than transforming the wilderness into a garden” (*Water and Government* 154-155). Hence, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Bureau of Indian Affairs built irrigation projects in Indian country with the explicit intent of colonizing and “reclaiming” both the Native populations and the arid lands.

Unsurprisingly then, irrigation ditches in *Winter in the Blood* are contact zones, boundaries between characters, classes, and cultures that amplify the distance the narrator feels. The narrator must cross a ditch when visiting Yellow Calf, an act that his horse “balked” at on the first visit due to the rotted bridge, a moment that symbolizes Yellow Calf’s place as somewhere altogether different from Teresa’s house, the narrator’s ostensible home even if he does not feel at home there (63). Similarly, the ditch serves as a boundary between Yellow Calf and the landscape beyond. The old man notes that “The deer come . . . to feed on the other side of the ditch,” casting the ditch as a colonial boundary between wildness, his past, and the “civilization” of the reservation (67). Consequently, Yellow Calf—whose memory stretches back to stories of the Blackfeet prior to the reservation—feels like a colonial prisoner. He connects his feelings directly to irrigation. When the narrator suggests that he need not worry about being caught breaking laws so far out on the reservation, Yellow Calf responds that he cannot relax: “Irrigation man comes every so often . . . he keeps his eye on me” (66). This passage is an echo of reclamation as colonization. The echo reverberates louder when a neighbor tells the narrator that his cousin used to bring Yellow Calf groceries “when he worked for Reclamation” and that he thought of Yellow Calf as “kind of goofy,” a phrase that emphasizes Yellow Calf’s otherness (163-64).

Similarly, When Yellow Calf proclaims that the earth itself is “cock-eyed” he seems to link the planet’s problems with colonial attempts to manipulate the landscape through technology, stating that “men are the last to know . . . Even with their machines” (68-69). It is likely that the “machines” Yellow Calf is most familiar with are irrigation pumps and equipment for digging ditches and canals as well as farm equipment. All of these examples—with either implicit or explicit references to irrigation—serve to separate Yellow Calf from the rest of the

novel's characters. This is important because Yellow Calf is the character who most represents the pre-reservation Blackfeet culture. For the narrator Yellow Calf is a link to his past, a link that has been broken and replaced by "distance." Yellow Calf's separation through irrigation is symbolic of the ways that irrigation was used as a tool of colonization and has continued to separate Native Americans from their pre-contact history.⁵⁷

However, ditches are not the only contact zones. We see similar attributes in the sites of irrigated agriculture. When Lame Bull marries the narrator's mother, Teresa, the narrator tells us: "Lame Bull had married 360 acres of hay land, *all irrigated*, leveled, some of the best land in the valley, as well as a 2000-acre grazing lease" (13; emphasis mine). Here, Lame Bull's marriage is not a union that is celebrated by the community or even the creation of a new family unit, but one individual acquiring the land-based property of another. Importantly, this land is irrigated and (not coincidentally) is prized because of its economic value rather than its aesthetic or communal value. Such a description is the logical endpoint for individualizing programs. When communal land is allotted, communal rituals such as marriage are individualized and viewed as market-based transactions. The novel presents Lame Bull as the individualized Indian. Like McNickle's Henry Jim, he is a product of individualizing programs for BIA and reclamation administrators. But unlike Henry Jim, the novel does not provide him with a native "world" to retreat to in the face of alienation and loneliness. Instead, he doubles down on what Homi Bhabha refers to as colonial mimicry.

⁵⁷ The process of converting Native Americans to agriculturists is described briefly in Welch's novel *Fools Crow*, set in 1870 near what is now the Blackfeet Reservation. In the novel, one band of Blackfeet describe interactions with white leaders who attempt to convince the Indians to "quit the trail of the blackhorns" (buffalo) and turn to farming (96). After one winter of "being hungry all the time" the group reassumes the nomadic lifestyle it had lived for centuries (96). By the end of the novel, life on the reservation is imminent.

Bhabha defines mimicry as the colonial subject who is “almost the same” as his colonial oppressor, “but not quite” (122). This definition applies to both Henry Jim and Lame Bull in their positions as “successful” participants in individualizing programs that have turned them into irrigation farmers. While Henry Jim’s ability to grow a successful wheat crop is unquestioned, he still feels like a stranger in the Anglo world. He achieves economic success but is not fulfilled spiritually by adhering to the tenets of individualism. At first glance, it seems as though Lame Bull has also achieved the colonial goal of life as a successful farmer and rancher. Just a few sentences after the narrator has described Lame Bull as having “married” Teresa’s irrigated land, he tells us that “At forty-seven, he was eight years younger than she, and a success. A prosperous cattleman” (13). As such, the narrator interprets Lame Bull’s relationship to the landscape as being fundamentally different than his own. When the two characters move Lame Bull from his own cabin into Teresa’s house, the narrator describes Lame Bull as “sniffing the sweet beautiful land that had been so good to him” (14). Contrast this description of the narrator’s own conception of the land, in which the country is plagued by signs of aridity that “had created a distance as deep as it was empty” (2). The narrator believes that Lame Bull does not feel alienated from the landscape. Instead, the narrator interprets Lame Bull’s success as an Anglo-style rancher as a deep connection with the land itself based on prosperity. But for the narrator, who is caught between these extremes, the landscape maintains its distance.

However, Lame Bull’s success is “not quite” the same as what a reader would expect from a “prosperous [white] cattleman.” When the two characters gather up Lame Bull’s things, we understand why he is moving into Teresa’s home. He has no electricity and his possessions consist of: “a chain saw, a portable radio, two boxes of clothes, a sheepherder’s coat, and the high rubber boots he wore when he irrigated” (14). One of the boots has a hole in it that Lame

Bull can stick his finger through. For the reader, these items don't seem to be the trappings of prosperity. They only signify prosperity in comparison to the narrator; they only mean through their *difference* compared to the narrator's lack of material possessions and the actual prosperity of Anglo irrigators. Compared to Anglo farmers and ranchers in the same region, Lame Bull is almost the same, "but not quite/not white" (Bhabha 131). He has embraced the call to assimilate and individualize, but his economic position reveals that colonial prosperity is, for the Indian, only a shell of what has been promised. Like Henry Jim's alienation, Lame Bull's mimicry reveals the limits of assimilation as a goal. For Bhabha, mimicry of the colonizer comes very near to mockery of the colonizer. However, other thinkers (such as Octavio Paz) see mimicry as "a sign of emptiness and self-loss" (Hiddleston 119). Both interpretations suggest that mimicry means not only because of its similarity to colonial culture, but because of its differences. Yet, to recognize those differences—to interpret Lame Bull as something other than a "prosperous cattleman"—the signs of actual prosperity are necessary. Lame Bull's mimicry is misread by the narrator as prosperity because of his unfamiliarity with the signification of prosperity away from the reservation.

Lame Bull's mimicry of colonial culture extends to an adoption of colonial roles. When haying, he operates the equipment (examples of the "machines" Yellow Calf mentions) "not because he was best at it but because it was the proprietor's job" (24). This action makes him appear to be a "huge man" even though he is shorter than the narrator (25). The narrator describes Lame Bull as "crafty," the same description he uses for "the white men of Dodson" (7). During the haying operation, when Long Knife quits before the work is complete (but not until after they have "crossed the dry irrigation ditch" into the last field), the narrator argues that Lame Bull has to pay Long Knife even if he is quitting early because "He ain't a slave, you know" (26,

28). This argument puts Lame Bull in the role of the colonial master while relegating Long Knife and the narrator to the roles of the colonized. Lame Bull does pay Long Knife, but does it in a way that cements the colonial roles. He crumples the bill and throws it onto the ground before punching Long Knife in the face and knocking him unconscious. In other words, Lame Bull has not only adopted the colonial relationship with the landscape itself (that is, a commoditized relationship), he has also adopted the colonial violence that maintains his hierarchal position.

Unsurprisingly then, Lame Bull is more certain and comfortable than the narrator with the water of the colonial landscape. When the narrator attempts to fish the river, but is left fishless and unable to see beneath the muddy water, he believes the river has been ruined by a nearby beet factory and manipulated by the “white men from the fish department” (6). He claims that positive reports about fish in the river come from “an irrigator perhaps” (6). Lame Bull, the story’s foremost irrigator, claims to “know these fish” and suggests the narrator fish with bacon (7). He reads the river with a certainty that the narrator lacks, as if the sign is meaningful to him in ways that elude the narrator. This moment is echoed several times in the novel when the narrator claims that the river has no fish, only to be told, mostly by white men from out of town, that the river holds a variety of fish. Similarly, Lame Bull claims a historical knowledge of the river that the narrator lacks. He refers to a past flood, then discounts the narrator’s claims that he also remembers the flood.⁵⁸ Here Lame Bull asserts a kind of authority over the meaning of the

⁵⁸ While it is unclear from the text, it seems likely that the flood Welch is alluding to in this passage is the flood of 1964, which decimated the Blackfeet Indian reservation and effected the Fort Belknap Reservation as well as the surrounding Montana towns. The flood was caused by immense early summer rainstorms that led to two failed dams—on Birch Creek and Two Medicine Creek. The failed dams were especially damaging to Blackfeet Reservation residents because many Blackfeet had built homes along the creeks in order to irrigate pasture land and gain access to the only source of firewood available, the trees that lined the riverbank. Thirty Blackfeet were killed, many of them children. Communication between the reservation and towns such as Great Falls was nonexistent for two days. In a 2004 article commemorating the

river and the meaning of water that extends from his role as an irrigator, as if he not only owns the river but is the only one who can tell the story of the river's past because only he understands what water means in a dry country—not unlike Said's description of Orientalism, which has the colonizers writing the history of the colonized. Similar to the passage about the "sweet land," the narrator describes Lame Bull's relationship with the river as being substantial and commodity based (Lame Bull speaks of eating the fish) rather than distant. Lame Bull's role as a successfully individualized Indian signals to the narrator that part of the distance he feels from the landscape stems from his own failures to integrate himself into Anglo culture. The colonization of the landscape has rendered it unreadable to the narrator, who is left distant by the effects of colonialism. Lame Bull, on the other hand, reads the land as a source of revenue. He is dismissive of the grandmother (the only character other than Yellow Knife who is a reminder of the pre-reservation era). Hence, in a colonial world Lame Bull feels comfortable reading the land and water as a kind of material text because he has adopted the colonial logics of the human-landscape relationship while rejecting the logics of the past. He doesn't seem to view water as a contact zone but as a colonial zone—a place where colonial systems of signification are the only systems that matter.

The distance that characterizes the contact zones of irrigation ditches and hay fields is reduced when characters are able to transcend cultural boundaries through imaginative work. During the narrator's second visit to Yellow Calf, the old man—who is blind—loses himself in

40th anniversary of the disaster, Aaron Parrett has examined the ways that media coverage of the flood, both national and local, "failed to make clear that the brunt of the disaster hit the reservation" (22). Most of the coverage implied that the flooding endangered and displaced local white residents, whereas discussions of damage and casualties on the reservation (which included all of the deaths and greater damage than any other community) was ignored almost entirely.

the landscape outside the boundary created by the ditch: “He wasn’t listening. Instead, his eyes were wandering *beyond the irrigation ditch* to the hills and the muscled clouds above them” (150-151; emphasis mine). It is only through imagination and the power of memory that Yellow Calf can escape the colonial boundaries that ditches represent. Up to this moment in his encounters with Yellow Calf, the narrator has found the old man interesting but just as inaccessible and alien as the other characters he encounters in the story. He has been especially reticent to look closely at the old man’s blind eyes and his face (“Something about those eyes had prevented me from looking at him”) (151). However, in this moment—when Yellow Calf’s unseeing eyes escape the boundaries created by irrigation through imagination and memory—the narrator feels somehow more connected, less alienated, even though distance remains: “But now, something else, his distance, made it all right to study his face” (151). While early in the story the narrator states that his feelings of alienation “came from within me,” this passage suggests that the landscape itself—scarred by ditches from years of colonization—is also contributing to the distance he feels (2). Once Yellow Calf transcends the colonial boundary that separates the two characters, the narrator is able to study him. In this instance, Yellow Calf’s distance serves as a way to form a bond with the narrator because the boundary of the irrigation ditch is no longer amplifying the logic of individual over community. Once Yellow Calf’s imaginative powers locate him “beyond the irrigation ditch,” distance becomes something that brings the two characters together rather than something that keeps them apart.

This moment of “study” is also significant because sight is an important motif in the novel, especially in the narrator’s flashbacks to memories of his brother Mose and his father. He remarks four times in the space of two paragraphs that his father “watched us” as he and Mose prepared to embark on the cattle trip on which Mose is killed (105-106). Conversely, in the

moments of Mose's death, the narrator questions his own sight and his own memory and describes the events leading up to the crash that kills Mose as a movie he watches from outside his own body. But in the remembering of his brother's death, he can't bring himself to even "see" the movie. "I couldn't have seen it—we [he and his horse] were still moving in the opposite direction" he tells himself and the reader (142). So when he does manage to look closely at Yellow Calf's face, as Yellow Calf models for him a kind of sight that is imaginative and rooted in memory rather than materiality, the narrator sees the land itself in Yellow Calf's face: "Beneath his humped nose and above his chin, creases as well-defined as cutbanks between prairie hills emptied into his mouth" (151). Here the narrator sees the land as being imprinted on Yellow Calf himself, and the land is a "cutbank" or the bank of a river, not an irrigation ditch. Yellow Calf sees beyond the irrigation ditch and so does the narrator in the way he "sees" Yellow Calf. He recognizes that "the old man's distance was permanent. It was behind those misty white eyes that gave off no light that he lived, a world as clean as the rustling willows" (151). The narrator sees in Yellow Calf a way to live with distance by rooting oneself in the memories of the past, in a "world" of one's own construction. This move is one that colors the novel as modernist: the escape from a technological wasteland into the world of memory and history. After this moment of clarity, the narrator learns the story of his family, his grandmother's banishment from the Blackfeet as they suffered genocide as a result of colonial advancement and the fact that Yellow Calf is his grandfather. He is given a past from which he might make a world to escape alienation itself.

Certainly, much of the action in the contact zones of *Winter in the Blood* and *Wind from an Enemy Sky* is characterized by misinterpretation, violence, and oppression. But both novels also depict moments such as this one, what Pratt refers to as "the joys of the contact zone,"

which include “moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom” (39). Neither novel suggests that understanding is inevitable—indeed there are moments when cultural pluralism seems impossible. But there is an ambivalence that is characterized by moments such as Yellow Calf imagining himself beyond the colonial boundaries he has been cornered into or the BIA agent Rafferty recognizing the intelligence and humanity of Henry Jim and Bull or even McNickle’s character “the boy” who is accepted into Bull’s community after years of serving as the tribal policeman and being viewed with suspicion. Such moments make clear that contact zones themselves are sites in which knowledge, meaning, interpretations of the past, and the probabilities of the future are always unstable, never fixed. This instability suggests that the failures of signification between cultures can be overcome as unstable signifiers open themselves up to reinterpretation.

The potential to overcome failed signification is perhaps best displayed in one ambiguous and ambivalent scene near the ending of *Winter in the Blood* when the narrator pulls a cow from a slough as the rain begins to fall, a scene which contrasts the aridity of “the country” with natural water and finds the narrator somehow changing the nature of his own feeling of “distance” that has haunted him throughout the novel. To understand this scene, however, one must begin with Teresa’s assertion early in the novel that “It never rains anymore. It never rains around here when you need it” (4). The narrator responds to this comment by considering how the lack of rain contributes to something as fundamental to quality of life as drinking water: “No rain since mid-June and the tarred barrels under the eaves of the house were empty. The cistern would be low and the water silty” (4). Here we learn that these characters are forced to count on rain, a condition that engineering and reclamation claim to have overcome. Reclamation was meant to turn the West into another version of the East and individualizing programs associated

such as allotment were meant to “civilize” and assimilate Native Americans into white culture. But *Winter in the Blood* finds its native characters always “needing” rain in a way that perhaps they did not prior to colonial contact because Native cultures had adapted to aridity through cultural behaviors such as mobility. In the late twentieth century, after decades of dam building, reclaiming the landscape through irrigation does not fully extend to the reservation. Even though Teresa’s land is irrigated, the family is not privileged enough to experience something as fundamental to the modern west as a city or county drinking water system; they are forced to capture rainfall that runs off their roof.

However, Teresa’s assertion that “it never rains . . . when you need it” is thrown into question throughout the rest of the novel in that rain plays a key role in some of the novel’s most important moments. So when, time and again, the skies of the novel either threaten to rain or deliver on the threat, the reader is left wondering about the paradoxical nature of Teresa’s statement. Lame Bull’s hay is damped by the humidity and the haying operation is undertaken as clouds gather. It is raining the night that the narrator drinks with the airplane man. The narrator recalls the sleet falling during his tragic cattle drive with Mose. Most importantly, it rains (after threatening for a couple of days) in the climactic scene when the narrator pulls the cow from the mud as he struggles to come to terms with his brother’s death. One question the novel asks is whether the characters need these rains. And yet, in a landscape as arid as the West, and in a place where families capture rainwater from their own roofs, these characters always need rain.

One way to view this paradox is to consider the way rain in the novel mirrors the boom-and-bust cycle in the colonial history of the American West. Because of aridity, the region has at times struggled to provide basic needs for colonial settlers and especially for Native American populations. However, in American culture, the West is the “geography of hope,” to borrow a

phrase from Wallace Stegner (*The Sound* 153). For Stegner, the boom-and-bust cycle is the motif of the American West in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is a recurring story arc in his novels *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Angle of Repose*. It is embodied by the history of Anglo expansion into the western plains, which boomed in the 1870s and early 1880s during years of heavy rain (giving rise to the notion that rain follows the plow), then shrunk back in the late 1880s and 1890s when the same region suffered a terrible drought (*Beyond* 297). Stegner famously called the western landscape “the geography of hope” then, years later, walked back that statement, saying that “the wrong kinds” of hope “in excessive amounts, go with human failure and environmental damage as boom goes with bust” (*Bluebird* xv-xvi). These ideas provide one way to read the scene in the slough.

In this scene, the narrator returns from visiting Yellow Knife (where he has learned of his heritage as a Blackfeet) to find the mother cow of a calf that they are weaning is trapped in the mud of the slough. Rain clouds are threatening to storm. The term “slough” has a variety of meanings and it is unclear from the text of the novel the nature of the slough, though most often in the American West the term is used for small, spring-fed bodies of water that have some swamp-like qualities. Early on, the narrator uses “slough water” for the horses, and suggests it is swampy, filled with “muck” (10). He chases the same mother cow “back up into the bend of the slough,” both foreshadowing the cow’s eventual fate and suggesting the slough is shaped a bit like a river or a ditch (11). The Oxford English Dictionary suggests that slough is a term used to describe ditches, though this seems unlikely in the novel, which is so intent on linking ditches to irrigation. Another OED definition is “a state or condition . . . in which a person, etc., sinks or has sunk” (“slough, n.1.”). This implies that the waterway can be read as a symbol of the narrator’s alienation, and his rescue of the cow from the mud is symbolic of the narrator’s

overcoming the condition into which he has sunk. Indeed, he wades into the muck to loop a rope around the cow's head and then uses his horse, the last link to his brother and father, to pull the cow free. During this process, the boom-and-bust cycle of Western history is referred to both explicitly and implicitly. As he struggles out of the mud, his injured leg aching, the narrator remarks "this country, all of us taken for a ride . . . this greedy stupid country" (169). Here the narrator uses the word "country" in a way that seems quite different from the usage early in the novel. In his initial usage ("It could have been the country, the burnt prairie beneath the blazing sun") the narrator seems to be referring to attributes of the land and climate. But in this final scene, the "greedy stupid country" seems to connote the nation itself. In a nod toward modernist disillusionment, the narrator sees the institution of the nation as failing and letting down "all of us." By invoking the nation, the narrator makes the slough a kind of contact zone. This reading aligns with the many definitions of the word slough and the "heterogeneity of meaning" that is present in the moment.⁵⁹

Once he finally mounts the horse and begins to pull the calf free, he notices the rain: "What I thought was sweat running through my scalp had been rain all along" (170). The rainwater—like the river earlier in the novel—is a site of misreading, misinterpretation, emphasizing the moment's instabilities in regard to signification. The narrator finds himself

⁵⁹ As further evidence of the heterogeneity of meaning found at the slough, critics have interpreted this scene in a variety of ways. Stephen Tatum suggests that the scene represents "a paradox of desire" and that the narrator desires to both overcome distance and strive for it (85). Sands argues that the scene shows the narrator has grown emotionally based on his interactions with Yellow Calf and his telling the story of his brother's death; now the narrator demonstrates "anger tempered by sympathy and passion he had not demonstrated before" (104). Barnett reads the scene with the calf as a merging of the past and present, a double for the accident that kills the narrator's brother and a moment that serves as "a rite of passage experience, the coming of age" (128). Nelson argues that the narrator's ambivalence—complaining one moment and reflecting peacefully the next—are an example of his reliance on his physical body, which is "his mode of interaction with the world" (308).

surprised by meaning. As the intensity of the rain increases and the cow is loosed from the mud, the narrator's spirits rise, invoking the boom portion of the cycle and the false hope of rain in a dry land. He notes: "There was only me, a white horse and a cow. The pressure of the rope against my thigh felt right" (171). Here the narrator's distance from other people is amplified—he is an individual not a member of a community, a veritable cowboy hero—but his isolation does not connote alienation because he doesn't feel alienated from the landscape itself. The "pressure of the rope" represents a literal and metaphorical connection between himself, his place, and his past (given that his memories of his brother revolve around horses and cattle). He explicitly links his feelings to both cultures of the American West prevalent in the novel: the individual, cowboy culture of *Lame Bull* and the communal culture of the horse-riding Plains Indian embodied by *Yellow Calf*.

But these meanings, these ways the narrator finds to interpret himself—like the booms of the West—prove illusive and temporary, unstable signifiers. "It all felt so smooth and natural I didn't notice that Bird had begun to slip in the rain-slick dirt" (171). The rain, which initially signals his connection with the landscape—something "needed"—serves to complicate things. The horse eventually slips and falls and the narrator is thrown to the ground. Lying on the ground, potentially injured with his horse dying beside him, the narrator contemplates his brother and his father whom have both died, his past, distance, and rain:

I wondered if Mose and First Raise were comfortable. They were the only ones I really loved . . . At least the rain wouldn't bother them. . . . they were that way, good to be with, even on a rainy day. . . .

Some people, I thought, will never know how pleasant it is to be *distant* in a clean rain, the driving rain of a summer storm. It's not like you'd expect, nothing like you'd expect. (172; emphasis mine)

As Stephen Tatum notes, the narrator's relationship with distance seems to have transformed from the opening passages of the novel (84). Now distance is "pleasant" and the rain reminds him of those he has lost, the only people he ceased to feel "distance" from.

But another difference between this scene and the opening descriptions of distance is the presence of water. On page two—in the passage where the narrator most explicitly describes the distance inherent in both the country and in himself—the landscape is dry and cracked and the images connect distance to the arid landscape. In the final scene, the landscape is wet; the rain and the distance are pleasant. A magpie squawks at the narrator in a way that is "almost conversational" and the calf that is being weaned (separated, made distant) "called once, a soft drone which ended on a quizzical high note" (172). The calf's sound is not unlike the narrator's thoughts of his lost brother and father; his "quizzical high note" is his wondering about their comfort. The narrator is no longer a lone rider, a rugged individualist, but fallen. He feels a connection to the landscape that makes it seem as if the distance from those he has lost and those he cannot connect with (such as Lame Bull and his mother, Yellow Calf for much of the novel, his Cree girlfriend) is not so insurmountable. This seems to be confirmed when, in the epilogue, he recommits himself to winning back his girl. Aridity and distance have receded enough for the American West to be a geography of hope for the narrator, even though logically we know that soon the landscape will again turn dry and the distance from those he seeks is unlikely to be remedied. Meaning will shift once again and the signifiers of aridity in a colonial landscape will remain unstable for those living with the aftermath of settler colonialism.

In this reading, the novel's ending asks a question about the novel: is it a story of redemption or a tragedy? Like other twentieth-century modernist novels, Welch provides as much ambiguity as he provides resolution. The reader can be only be sure of instability and aridity. The narrator's hope is dependent on the presence of water. The narrator here seems to be an example of mimicry. His hope is only the hope of colonialism. Adapting to aridity is not an option for him. In this way, his hope mirrors the hope of Anglo settlers who entered an arid land and yearned for a garden. It is not unlike the hope of reclamation. Yet *Winter in the Blood* and *Wind From an Enemy Sky* are writing from a future when reclamation seems much less of sure thing, much more of an uncertainty. The novel gives the narrator hope but leaves the reader unsure if hope is the correct response, anxious about the narrator's chances given the colonial history of the arid West.⁶⁰

The question of redemption or tragedy is the question of contact zones themselves. While the rain seems to have lifted the narrator, allowed him to exist more comfortably within the distance that plagues him, aridity is a fact of the West. Rain won't come often and people will continue to be separated by the region's famous open spaces. The status quo will only continue a boom and bust cycle and Native Americans will continue to be victimized by that distance in ways that are unique to American colonialism. Until contact zones offer more opportunities for common language in which adaptation to aridity can be interpreted and acted upon, characters such as Welch's narrator and McNickle's Little Elk will find themselves alienated by irrigation ditches, dams, and fences. Only an imagination like that of Yellow Calf which sees beyond the

⁶⁰ Christopher Nelson's article *Embodying the Indian* neatly captures the ambiguity of the novel, the sense of uncertainty that a reader is left with. Nelson argues that traditional readings of *Winter in the Blood* that focus on hopefulness and redemption are undermined by the novel's "ambiguity and stasis," which serve to critique the redemptive power of authenticity that critics have focused on when reading the novel as a redemption story (305).

ditch might lead to redemption and to the reduction of distance between cultures and between individuals by increasing understanding within the contact zones. Until then, Welch's narrator can only live with distance, alienated, hoping for rain.

However, dams, ditches, and fences aren't the only signs to be read among the contact zones of the arid American West. While these symbols of water manipulation often fail to unite or promote understanding across cultures or between individuals and communities in both *Winter in the Blood* and *Wind From an Enemy Sky*, the two novels themselves also serve also as contact zone texts relating to western water and aridity. Although the characters in the novels are often unable to communicate across cultures, these modernist novels are able to render the failed communication of the contact zone visible. They signify the existence of water as a contact zone and the conflicts of language and cultural construction that exist in such places. Importantly, they manage to communicate this message across cultures, making the case to readers from a variety of backgrounds. In this way, the novels as signs succeed in doing what the signs within the novels fail to do: they mean in a way that is somehow present on various "maps of the mind," even if the readers of those maps will inevitably read the two novels in ways informed by their various cultural backgrounds. By telling their stories of miscommunication among the contact zones of western water, these novels argue that, as long as such zones exist, so does the possibility of cross-cultural communication and the possibility of reimagining the meaning of water and aridity in the West. McNickle and Welch published their novels in the 1970s and the questions they raised—including the complexity of multiple maps for a single geography—remain important for Native American writers. Specifically, as the next chapter explains, Leslie Marmon Silko suggests that contact and the very recognition of difference that McNickle and Welch so deftly depict might be the key to survival in the changing climate of the arid West.

Chapter 5 – “Survival Depended on Differences”: The Communal in Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*

In Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, there is a two-chapter interlude in which a group of Yaqui people tell a story about the Apache man called Geronimo. Silko writes that the story is told in parts, with each group member contributing “some detail, or opinion, or alternative version” and that its telling “did not run for the horizon, but circled and spiraled like a red-tailed hawk” (224). In the story, the U.S. Army is desperate to catch Geronimo, but they are unaware that there are (at least) three different men who are using the name Geronimo, which isn’t really name at all, but a war cry the Mexican soldiers “made as they went into battle, counting on help from St. Jerome” (224). In their efforts to catch “Geronimo” the army has photographed the three men, but each photo shows the face of a fourth man—an Apache warrior whose origin “could not be determined”—instead of any of the three men who at times call themselves Geronimo (228). The story ends when a fifth man—named “Old Pancakes”—surrenders and tells the army that he is Geronimo (229). The army uses the confession as a chance to claim victory even though there is internal disagreement about Old Pancakes’ story. The two chapters of *Almanac* that comprise this tale are filled with interludes and conjecture about the nature of names and the inability of colonial soldiers to differentiate between Apache warriors as well as their inability to differentiate between rocks that might serve as landmarks while wayfinding.

The Yaqui are suspicious of the Anglo tendency to see a word like “rock” or “Geronimo” as describing identical items that all look the same rather than referring to a group of different rocks or people that have some common characteristics but also important distinctions.

The elders used to argue that this was one of the most dangerous qualities of the Europeans . . . to them a “rock” was just a rock wherever they found it, despite obvious differences in shape, density, color, or the position of the rock relative to the things around it. . . . To whites, all Apache warriors looked alike and no one realized that for a while, there had been three different Apache warriors named Geronimo who ranged across the Sonoran desert south of Tucson. (224-225)

This story contrasts ways of seeing both people and the land itself. In Silko’s novel, it is dangerous that names in colonial contexts often result in essentializing definitions that ignore important difference. This interpretive tendency recalls McNickle’s description in *Wind from an Enemy Sky* of how white characters like Adam Pell see indigenous people and groups. But the Yaqui philosophy of names, along with the communal method of storytelling, illuminates a way of seeing and interpreting that recognizes collectivism, commonality, *and* difference. The three “Geronimos” (as they are called) make up a collective noun phrase and the face of the Apache warrior that replaces theirs in photographs links them together as a collective unit with a common name and some shared experience. But they are also recognized as unique characters with their own individual characteristics that contribute to the group identity through their difference as much or more so than their shared moniker. Similarly, one of the things that can set one rock apart from other rocks in the passage above is its position relative to its surroundings. This conception defines a thing not by some shared essence, but by its location within a collective unit, a puzzle piece within a puzzle that helps to construct a collective, but not a replica of any other individual puzzle piece.

Silko explores a similar idea in her essay on landscape and Pueblo imagination, in which she writes: “Pueblo . . . oral narratives, never conceived of removing themselves from the earth

and the sky” (265). In the Pueblo imagination, Silko argues, humanity and nature are not seen as forming a binary that locates one in opposition to the other. Rather, landscape itself is a collection of individual items that create a whole (something the word “landscape” can at times obscure) and a person who is viewing a landscape is also part⁶¹ of that landscape, a component of it that contributes to the whole while being unique in all those same attributes that make an individual rock unique. In such a conception, the relationship between the human and the nonhuman is refigured as parts of a whole, members of a family, rather than opposites.

The tendency to see humans and nature as a dichotomy, according to the environmental historian William Cronon, is an “invention” of Anglo culture that (in American history) connects back to the ideas of the sublime, terrible wilderness—a common reaction to wilderness by early American colonists (a concept I explored in Chapter 2)—and the frontier that was crying out to be tamed—a conception prevalent in nineteenth century America that underpins the Westerns I examined in Chapter 3 (8). Sublimity and the frontier metanarrative separate humanity from nature (and civilization from wilderness) in ways that conceive of the actions of humanity as if they aren’t somehow governed or influenced by the environment in which humans evolved or the environments in which humans live. In addition, separating humanity from nature leads to the separation of civilization from wilderness—idealizing the latter while ignoring the former, creating the kinds of binaries so common in Westerns and perpetuating the myth that nature can be saved in the form of wilderness preserves and national parks while civilization runs amok within its own separate sphere.

⁶¹ Conceptions of landscape as a place in which people are not present have a long history. Dorceta Taylor argues that the pastoral terrain often associated with the word “landscape” when using it to describe a scenic view is intertwined with the “eviction” of poor rural farmers in medieval Europe from pastoral lands so that the “parks” could be used by the ruling class for private estates and hunting grounds (146).

For Silko and the Pueblo imagination, such binaries ring false: “Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on” (266). However, Krista Comer argues that Silko’s first novel, *Ceremony*, adheres to what Comer calls “the wilderness plot,” a storytelling formulaic of the American West that falls back on the binary of civilization vs. wilderness (“Sidestepping” 75).

The plot, in formula terms, usually contains the following: a love of wide open "wild" spaces, a penchant for the mystical that is also the "natural" American Indian, the suggestion of redemptive possibility, a disavowal of the industrial or technological, and representations of woman as nature. (“Sidestepping” 75)

In *Ceremony*, Comer argues, this plot leads the protagonist Tayo to the wilderness and a healing ceremony that redeems him from the horrors of war. While Comer concedes that *Ceremony* “deconstructs many of the myths of the Old West” it does not, she argues “deconstruct one of the most trenchant: the wilderness ideal” (“Sidestepping” 80). That deconstruction, Comer argues in passing, is part of the novel Silko published next, *Almanac of the Dead*. “One might even speculate,” Comer writes, “that Silko wrote *Almanac* in outraged response to critics’ “feel good” reception of *Ceremony*” (“Sidestepping” 80).

Ecocritics have examined *Almanac* as a seminal novel that describes intersections between social justice and environmental degradation. T.V. Reed argues in fact that *Almanac of the Dead* anticipates⁶² the environmental justice movement “years before the field was named, and that critics still need to catch up with Silko” (25). Graeme Finnie reads the novel as going

⁶² As I will note throughout this chapter, *Almanac of the Dead* manages to anticipate everything from canal-laden, European-style luxury resorts in the middle of the American desert to the rising deaths of migrants at the U.S. southern border. Reed notes that some have read Silko’s novel as “prophetic” in part because it anticipates the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico in 1994.

beyond nature writing to confronting how humans interact with and represent nature. For Finnie, *Almanac* “interrogates not only representations of the natural world but also the history and geopolitics that have contributed to the shaping of the cultural and geographic Americas” (117). Rebecca Tillett (who has written widely on *Almanac*) also suggests that the novel is an “explicitly and overtly political text” that is haunted by the sixty million indigenous people who “continue to howl” for both social and environmental justice (“Sixty Million” 14). While these readings and others have often focused on how environmental degradation is tied up in colonial ways of thinking and capitalist ways of exploiting environments (topics that I will also cover in regard to water and aridity in the novel), this chapter seeks to locate the novel within the tradition of western literature that is grappling with the balance between the individual and the community. Specifically, I am interested in the ways that Silko revises traditional Anglo-American conceptions of rugged individualism to offer an indigenous, communal way of inhabiting the arid West that is missing from much of twentieth-century American literature. This chapter picks up where Comer’s comment about *Almanac* leaves off and explores *Almanac of the Dead* as a novel that reconceives the traditional binaries of culture and nature, present and past, and even the particularly western dichotomy of roots and routes in regard to water and aridity in Silko’s novel and in the American West. In *Almanac*, the West is the homeland of diverse communities, a place where seeming opposites might serve to complement instead of swerving always toward conflict.

Silko herself has said that, while *Ceremony* is the story of “one person trying to recover his health and well-being, [*Almanac*] is about the whole Earth trying to save herself” (Coltelli 131). This quote suggests that *Almanac of the Dead* is an especially important text when considering community in the American West. Indeed, the novel resists traditional narrative

structures that are common to many American novels, especially those set in the American West. For instance, *Almanac* has no easily identifiable protagonist (i.e., the hero of Western novels), but rather weaves a tapestry of individual stories into the larger story of a place, creating a kind of communal narrative that centers on the border region both north and south of Tucson, Arizona. *Almanac of the Dead*, like Silko's description of Pueblo culture, foregrounds the "balance between" binaries in an effort to exist alongside or among the "vicissitudes of climate and terrain," a stark contrast to many of the texts I have analyzed in previous chapters, which often frame such binaries as battles for supremacy ("Landscape" 273). In *Almanac of the Dead*, this battle for supremacy is waged by colonial forces intent on erasing the indigenous west altogether and by a rise of an indigenous response to 500 years of colonial occupation. But I submit that in addition or in response to this conflict, Silko's novel offers a philosophy of community in which some seemingly dichotomous concepts exist in relation to one another, forming a system of habitation in which both the human and nonhuman might be valued *because* of difference, not in spite of it.

Like the authors I have examined in previous chapters, Silko houses her depiction of the arid West within the confines of an established literary structure. First and foremost, Silko uses indigenous storytelling approaches. Much of the book is comprised of embedded stories rather than a coherent chronological narrative. Characters tell each other stories or reflect on the stories of their past. Characters use these stories as a way of understanding the land and their own lives and they often pass this understanding onto others. Consider, for example, the many stories that Yoeme tells the twins, Zeta and Lecha, as well as the "Almanac of the Dead" itself, which is a collection of indigenous histories passed from generation to generation. In her essay on the Pueblo imagination, Silko describes such collections of narrators telling the stories of the land as

a “collective memory” that ancient Pueblo people used to “maintain and transmit an entire culture, a worldview complete with strategies for survival” (“Pueblo Imagination” 268).

In terms of American literary history, this collective approach places *Almanac* among the ranks of postmodern⁶³ American fiction. While previous chapters have explored responses to aridity that used the gothic, the Western, and modernism, each of these structures has relied on the dualism of separating humanity from nature and then responded to that dualism in a variety of ways. Postmodern fiction is characterized⁶⁴ by a tendency to subvert such dualism rather than reject it outright. Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodern fiction is a critique of modern conceptions of representation, but that postmodernism’s critique is also by definition “complicit” in the very hierarchies and ideologies that it criticizes (11). Building on this definition, Sara Spurgeon writes that: *Almanac* is “at once recognizably a Western and, simultaneously, radically opposed to the narratives of innocence most Westerns present” (103). For Hutcheon:

the postmodern enterprise . . . is a critique both of the view of representation as reflective (rather than constitutive) of reality and of the accepted idea of ‘man’ as the centered subject of representation; but it is also an exploitation of those same challenged foundations of representation (17).

⁶³ Categorizing Silko as a postmodern writer is not a new claim. An excerpt from *Ceremony* is included in *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology* and many critics (including Sara Spurgeon) have classified Silko as postmodern when analyzing her work.

⁶⁴ The defining characteristic of postmodernism might be just how difficult the term is to define. In this chapter, I am using postmodernism to refer to art, specifically postmodern fiction. Hans Bertens describes postmodern fiction as being characterized by “the move away from narrative, from representation. . . the turn towards self-reflexiveness” (4). This definition fits nicely with Hutcheon’s definition above, which stresses postmodernism’s critique of traditional modes of representation. Bertens’ work untangles the web of definitions around postmodernism while also tracing the connections between things that have been labeled postmodern. My use of the term does not explicitly refer to the poststructuralist connotation that is often associated with postmodernism, but (as Bertens notes) various postmodernisms have influenced one another and can be difficult to separate.

To move “man” away from the center of representation is a departure from the modes of representation I have examined in previous chapters, but aligns nicely with Silko’s own argument that the viewer is part of the landscape, a component of it rather than a center around which the landscape or the nonhuman is organized.

To examine Silko’s critique of representation in *Almanac of the Dead*, I will first explore the ways that the novel pits the land against the colonial laws that are used to govern that land. This approach—which is characteristic of the “destroyers” in the novel—defines the land (and especially the region’s water) as capitalist resources and creates a series of binaries. The second part of the chapter will examine Silko’s conception of what I am calling “the communal” in the novel, which replaces colonial law with the limits set by the land itself and seeks to subvert many of the binaries created by colonialism with a view that sees value in difference and imagines humanity living among and with aridity rather than constantly working to eliminate it or exploit it for the sake of development.

The Law not the Land

If, as Silko describes, *Almanac* is about saving the earth, one initial question is: what exactly does the novel see the earth as needing to be saved from? Sarah Jaquette Ray answers this question unequivocally: “The central problem in *Almanac* is US colonial appropriation of Native American land” (98). Indeed, in *Almanac of the Dead*, the earth needs saving from colonialism itself, the structural systems that keep colonialism in place, and the ways of thinking that colonialism relies on in regard to the human relationship with the nonhuman. For Ray, colonialism extends to the mythos that are overlaid upon the landscape in that colonialism “has substituted individualism for communalism” (98). As I have argued in previous chapters, individualism in twentieth-century American culture is often a stand-in for a version of free-

market capitalism that is especially suspicious of environmental regulation. As such, individualism dovetails with another way of thinking about the land and the West that the novel critiques—the land as a repository for individual wealth.

Viewing the land as a wealth-creating entity is one of the default assumptions of colonial expansion. The colonial laws imposed on the landscape in (and out of) *Almanac of the Dead* encourage an individualist view of the land as a colonial resource that provides wealth for individuals and serves U.S. nationalist desires rather than ecological concerns. Eric Cheyfitz has argued that federal Indian law provides a vocabulary and a lens through which to read Native American literatures because these laws elucidate the particularly unique (post)colonial⁶⁵ situation that Native Americans confront. Silko's novel suggests that laws beyond federal Indian law—such as laws connected to water rights and border policies—have a similar affect. Colonialism is enacted through colonial laws. Such laws encourage inhabitants of the southwest to view the land using colonial conceptions of nature, water, and aridity. Silko's novel suggests that these ways of thinking are in opposition to indigenous relationships with the same arid land.

In *Almanac*, colonial laws and ways of thinking ignore the history of place and the ecological consequences of wealth extraction. For instance, Yoeme's husband Guzman and Zeta and Lecha's geologist father see the landscape as a stronghold for wealth that requires conquest, a place for invasion and plunder. Neither character is concerned with long-term consequences as they relate to ecology or history. In this way, they are very similar to the real estate developer Leah Blue, who plans to profit from the landscape by building a European city in the desert American southwest. "Venice, Arizona" she says, will "revolve around water, lake after lake,

⁶⁵ Cheyfitz places the (post) in parentheses "because although U.S. American Indians became citizens by act of Congress in 1924 . . . [they] still remain under what I will analyze as the colonial agenda of federal Indian law" (5).

and each of the custom-built neighborhoods linked by quaint waterways . . . The amount of water needed for such a grand scheme was astonishing” (375). Leah chooses to obtain her water from “the deep wells she was going to drill” (375). Like Guzman and the geologist, Leah Blue invades the earth to mine water for her European style city. Each of these invasions are sanctioned by colonial law and invoke the title of Henry Nash Smith’s book *Virgin Land*, which explores the way the West was depicted in Anglo American culture. Here Silko is not-so-subtly raising the specter of colonial criminality. A “virgin” land that is penetrated by mines and environmentally dubious wells is a landscape being raped.⁶⁶ But the Pueblos don’t see the land as virgin; instead they see it as Mother Earth, which Leslie A. Wooten argues is the “central female symbol in the novel” (58). The rape, then, is the rape of the sacred and the rape of ancestry, not of the empty or the unspoiled.

The invasive pillaging of the landscape is also linked to theft in the novel. The Venice, Arizona drilling echoes a story from the “Snakes’ Notebook” that Yoeme claims is the “key to understanding all the rest of the old almanac” (134). The passage describes the “giant serpent . . . coming to live at the Beautiful Lake, Ka-waik” (135). However, the “neighbors . . . got jealous” and “broke open the lake . . . all the water was lost” (135). Read historically, this story foretells Europeans “jealousy” over indigenous lands and natural resources. For American Indians, much of the water has been lost and continues to be lost. Five hundred years after European contact,

⁶⁶ For more discussion of this metaphor in *Almanac of the Dead*, see Sarah Jaquette Ray’s book chapter from *Ecological Other*, which argues that the body is used as the primary symbol of environmental degradation in the novel.

American Indians are still fighting battles over drinking water⁶⁷ and oil pipeline construction,⁶⁸ fishing rights,⁶⁹ groundwater,⁷⁰ and irrigation.⁷¹ In Arizona, where Leah Blue imagines her city, the idea that “all the water was lost” is especially prescient because much of the groundwater has been depleted by overzealous pumping among irrigation farmers encouraged by the Reclamation Act and other important water laws. Marc Reisner writes that much of this pumping took place in the 1940s and 50s in what were “boom years in Arizona” in which farming and population were rising dramatically (259). To meet the needs of the boom, Arizona farmers pumped out millions of gallons of groundwater: “By 1960s, some farmers could drill to two thousand feet and bring up nothing but hot brine” (Reisner 260). Hence, Leah Blue’s “deep” wells must be drilled so deep that they will “destroy shallow wells throughout the valley” by lowering the water table beyond the reach of the remaining shallow wells (especially those on reservation land) and might lead to earthquakes or other seismic occurrences (*Almanac* 749). In fact, the wells “hit salt water at two thousand feet,” but Leah considers this a benefit; she believes the saltwater will add “authenticity” to her European canal city in the middle of the Arizona desert (660). Drinking

⁶⁷ See, for instance, drinking and wastewater struggles at various reservations described by Kaljur and Beheler in August of 2017 as well as an article by Sibyl Driver for Stanford’s *Water in the West* program related to the Gold King Mine spill in 2015, which exacted an especially heavy toll on the Navajo Nation.

⁶⁸ The most recent and well-known instance is the Dakota pipeline, which has been covered widely.

⁶⁹ Currently, native fishing rights are in jeopardy in Alaska (see Tepton), which is the latest in a long history of conflicts over fishing rights. For a review, see Shelley D. Turner’s 1989 article in *New Mexico Law Review*.

⁷⁰ See for instance, a recent article in the journal *Science* by Womble et al.

⁷¹ See the description later in the chapter describing the history of water rights conflicts among the Pueblo people for one example. Another recent example comes from California where the Winnemem Wintu tribe is fighting a project to raise the height of Shasta Dam, which is a project being proposed by California farmers near Fresno (Hickey).

water will be “bottled glacial water from the Colorado Rockies” (660). The communal value of the aquifer—given that damage to the aquifer goes well beyond a single person—is not protected by water laws in the novel. Rather, these laws encourage such water use because growth and development are central to rugged individualism and the economy of the American Southwest.

The centrality of growth and development is embodied by perhaps the most notable element of Silko’s depiction of the Venice, Arizona—the way it anticipates (as pointed out by Rebecca Tillet) real estate developer Sheldon Adelson’s Las Vegas casino and hotel “The Venetian,” a “45-acre ‘replica’ of Venice, complete with a ‘working’ version of the Grand Canal resplendent with gondolas and opera-singing gondoliers, in the heart of the Nevada desert (“Reality Consumed” 155). Adelson’s project realizes the colonial (and capitalistic) mindset that Leah Blue imagines for her own desert city:

No deserts in Venice, Arizona, not for an instant. . . . People wanted to have water around them in the desert. People felt more confident and carefree when they could see water spewing around them. . . . Market research had repeatedly found new arrivals in the desert were reassured by the splash of water. (*Almanac* 374-375)

The “people” in Leah Blue’s equation are “new arrivals,” i.e., the colonizers. The idea that “people” had lived in the desert southwest without fountains and canals to reassure them of their safety for tens of thousands of years isn’t part of the equation and is eschewed in favor of “market research.”

Silko depicts the Euro-American relationship to nature as being corrupted by capitalistic motivations and reinforced by the laws that favor capitalism and development over the land. Living with the land doesn’t qualify for consideration because it is not a path to colonial wealth. In addition, water is not conserved because more water can always be obtained through conquest,

specifically using the conquering forces of science and technology. Leah tells her husband as much when describing the fountains and canals of Venice, Arizona: “Tell me they are using up all the water and I say: Don’t worry. Because science will solve the water problem of the West. New Technology. They’ll *have* to” (374; emphasis Silko). This mindset is an example of what Tillet calls “the culture-nature separatism evident within the Euro-American science and industry taken to the extreme” (“Reality Consumed” 157). But I submit that it is not simply a Euro-American cultural ideal, but a convention of imperialism in desert landscapes. In *Rivers of Empire*, Worster notes that “agrarian” modes of water manipulation have historically sought to overtly control desert landscapes and then signify the success of that control by building gardens and creating greenery in arid landscapes (41). These colonial powers used technological expertise as a weapon against the landscape and its indigenous inhabitants. Worster quotes the epitaph inscribed on a ninth-century Assyrian queen’s tomb: “I constrained the mighty river to flow according to my will and led its water to fertilize lands that had before been barren and without inhabitants” (39). This is the logic underpinning reclamation for much of the twentieth century in the American West, irrigation technology that makes possible industrial farms that grow cotton in the Arizona desert.⁷²

Projects like Arizona cotton and Venice, Arizona (or Adelson’s hotel) are possible because colonialism continues to privilege the law over the land. Leah Blue’s project is contingent on Judge Arne ruling in her favor in a lawsuit where Native Americans are attempting to assert their water rights. Unsurprisingly, Leah has nothing to worry about: “Arne believed in states’ rights, absolutely. Indians could file lawsuits until hell and their reservation froze over,

⁷² Cotton is prevalent crop in Arizona’s Sonoran Desert despite its excessive water requirements. For more, see Lustgarten and Sadasivam.

and Arne wasn't going to issue any restraining orders against Leah's deep wells" (376). The invoking of "states' rights" in this passage connotes southern apologists for the Civil War claiming that the war was over states' rights rather than slavery. In addition, Arne's position locates him firmly among the rugged individualists in the American West who resent any control from the federal government in the form environmental regulations. The historian Patricia Nelson Limerick has documented the history of westerners taking federal funding and aid (much of which came in the form of dams and canals to aid western irrigation farmers, not to mention the "control of the Indians and the distribution of land") while simultaneously complaining about federal regulations and the federal presence in the West (82). But most importantly, Arne's comments reveal that American law is not contingent on variables dictated by the landscape. The law privileges the extraction of wealth over the land and against those who seek to work with the land.

In *Almanac*, the law's preference for wealth extraction suggests a skepticism even for laws that are designed to protect the rights of indigenous populations. For example, Reisner describes the way that water in Arizona might hinge on the water rights of the Navajo, which were guaranteed by the Supreme Court ruling known as the *Winters* doctrine in 1908. As described by Pisani, the *Winters* doctrine uses treaty rights to apply the idea of "prior appropriation" (which, simply translated, means the oldest claim for a water source gets the first priority to use that water) to preserve water use on the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana. For Reisner, this decision seems to put the Navajo reservation in a position to have water (because the treaty is older than the Colorado River Compact, which grants water to Tucson and Phoenix) at the expense of what are primarily Anglo communities. He writes: "The white man's cavalry had made beggars of them; now his courts had made them kings" (262). However, Pisani's

description of the *Winters* doctrine suggests that the legal positioning of American Indians as a result of the case isn't so clear. The Supreme Court ruling doesn't establish just how far back Indian claims on water might go and is ambiguous on whether those rights are upheld as part of federal rights that cannot be usurped by Judge Arne's precious "states' rights" (*Water and Government* 165). According to Pisani, "no Supreme Court water decision has raised more questions than *Winters*" and the decision "has proved to be a hollow victory for Native Americans" which "the Indian Office could find no practical way to apply" (*Water and Government* 165, 166).

The failure of the law to support native populations in issues of western water is exemplified by the history of Pueblo people in the southwest, including Silko's own Laguna Pueblo community. Fixico and Fixico have documented the history of court battles between the Pueblo and those who have attempted to use Pueblo water. The Pueblo people have inhabited the southwest for more than a thousand years, tracing back to the Hohokam, Mogollan, and Anasazi cultures, who developed irrigated agriculture along the rivers of the arid southwest for centuries prior to European contact (Fixico and Fixico 64). Pueblo culture has often focused on the community or the village and that village's relationship with land and water. Because of their location along rivers in an arid land, Pueblo villages have a long and often violent history with colonial agents. Although their water rights were guaranteed under Spanish law and thereby should have been protected under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the Mexican-American War in 1848, the Pueblo have found themselves defending their water rights in American courts since the 1870s. This process has seen the Pueblo lose large swaths of land (much of it along rivers) while Pueblo communities often descended into poverty in part because they lacked access to water that was "legally" theirs. In a scene that might have been at home in

Almanac, Fixico and Fixico write that “In 1921, violence broke out between the Pueblo, white Americans, and Hispanics when drought conditions compelled the Pueblo to demand their legal rights to the land” (70). The Pueblo history suggests that the *Winters* decision won’t protect native water rights because the law doesn’t protect that land, but rather is used to exploit it in the name of development and growth.

In *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko is unambiguous about just how well she thinks a law such as the *Winters* doctrine protects American Indian water rights in the event that they are brought into conflict with colonial efforts to invade and conquer the landscape in the name of accumulating wealth. When Calabazas tells the story of early Tucson, he describes how the “*Americanos* came in and set up their own courts—all in English” and filed for title on the land “where the good water was” (213). Even though indigenous people had land grants from the Spanish crown that should have been guaranteed under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to keep those lands with their original owners, “all the land and water was lost” (213). Similarly, when Leah Blue goes to court to secure water rights for Venice, AZ, the courts rule in favor the colonial project: “Thanks to the judge’s directed verdict, [Leah Blue] had all the water she wanted without interference from environmentalists or Indian tribes, and Leah Blue would be rich beyond imagination” (655). Silko’s judge is willing to side against the land even though he knows the decision put’s the landscape’s future at risk: “He had seen the evidence, the exhibits by hydrologists, in the water rights law suit. Arne didn’t care; he would probably not live to see it” (651). Judge Arne’s response is a kind of individualism taken to the extreme, a view that discounts not only the community of indigenous people, but also all future communities in the region.

By linking environmentalists⁷³ with Indians, then locating the two groups on the losing side of the novel's most important court case, Silko makes it clear that the law is in opposition to the landscape under colonial rule. For the indigenous characters of the novel, the law is a constant failure. Sterling is especially aware of this failing. He knows there are "instances when the law has nothing to do with fairness or justice," a phrase that specifically refers to his banishment from the reservation but is especially applicable to the water rights law suit (79). Similarly, Zeta and Calabazas see the breaking of colonial laws as a skirmish in a 500-year-old conflict: "All the laws of the illicit governments had to be blasted away. Every waking hour Zeta spent scheming and planning to break as many laws as she could" (133). For Silko, these laws are weapons of war used against indigenous peoples and the land itself.

The impacts of the law on the land and the people are not limited to water rights. The border itself is an attempt to impose a law on the land. Silko's novel makes clear that mobility in the border region is a historical legacy for indigenous groups. When thinking about the role of mobility in indigenous culture, *Almanac*'s master smuggler Zeta notes, "The people had been free to go traveling north and south for a thousand years" (133). Similarly, Zeta notes that the trails that smugglers use to cross the border are "far older even than the ranching and mining that had gone on in these mountains. The trails themselves extended out of another time" (177).

Indeed, Bonney MacDonald has argued that transience or mobility is "an ideal form of

⁷³ While indigenous populations and mainstream environmental concerns coincide in this instance, *Almanac* as a novel is ultimately ambivalent about the union between the two groups. Ray has analyzed the depiction of environmentalists in the novel and surmised that *Almanac of the Dead* critiques the mainstream American environmental movement, especially its interest in population control and its focus on purity, preservation, and biodiversity over environmental justice for marginalized human populations who face an uneven portion of the economic and infrastructure costs that result from environmental degradation. Ray writes: "Native Americans occupy a paradoxical place in environmental thought: they are simultaneously ecological Indians and other" (138).

adaptation to arid lands” and that the trails between places can be seen as a way of connecting those places to make a new place (499). In other words, dwelling and habitation are not static behaviors, but behaviors that involve movement. To use the terms of the anthropologist James Clifford, dwelling involves both roots and routes.

Neil Campbell has adapted Clifford’s ideas to the American West, arguing that “mobility and migration” are ever-present in the history of the region⁷⁴ from tribal migrations and relocation to the act of what John Steinbeck called “westerling” by Anglo Americans in the nineteenth century (Campbell 2, Steinbeck 224). However, for Campbell, representations of the West have often privileged the planting of roots (settlement) over the movement of routes. While much of western literature and representation has foregrounded movement, this movement has often been in the service of settlement and “toward the production of an essentially rooted American character” (Campbell 2). Settlement has been the key event in dominant narratives of the West, even if such settlement required travel (routes) for the process of settlement. Campbell argues that the study of western literature might focus on movement itself, not movement for the purpose of settlement, but movement as a means of bringing cultures into contact with each other, movement as means of extending cultures into territories where they have previously not been found. Similarly, discussions of water in the West have often focused on settlement and agriculture while aridity and water tend to complicate and influence travel in ways that are different from settlement, but no less important.

In the border country of Tucson, mobility is complicated by both aridity and the international border between the United States and Mexico, a legal construct that doesn’t

⁷⁴ In *The Rhizomatic West*, Campbell argues that “the West” itself is mobile given that the literature (especially films), stories, ideologies, and myths of the region have migrated out of the region and out of America itself to achieve popularity in many transnational contexts.

recognize the long history of mobility in the region. Ecologists have found that “borders” between ecological communities such as desert grasslands and desert scrublands in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona are gradual and at times nearly imperceptible (Morin 7). These borders are themselves mobile, changing seasonally and with cycles of drought and rain. However, the international border is immobile and in many ways antithetical to the region’s history of mobility and ecological realities. As with water rights, *Almanac* depicts the border in a colonial framework. The smuggler Calabazas sees “every successful [illegal] shipment or journey” across the border as a “victory” in “the war for the land” (178).

The relationship between aridity and the border began to change in 1993—two years after *Almanac* was published—when the U.S. Border Patrol launched a program called “Prevention Through Deterrence.” The anthropologist Jason De León has studied that ways that this policy has weaponized aridity and the desert itself—a law that serves to subjugate the land and use it for American purposes not unlike the water that piles up behind a dam as a result of the 1902 Reclamation Act. Prevention Through Deterrence was first launched in El Paso, where border patrol agents changed their focus from capturing border crossers who had already entered the city (often via a simple crossing of the Rio Grande) to securing the river and preventing crossings from Ciudad Juárez, located on the other side of the river. De León notes that this change in focus did not substantially reduce crossing, but has had the effect of moving those crossings out of the public’s view. Migrants have gone from the city (where both water and people are prevalent) to the desert (where crossers are less likely to be seen but must deal with a terrain in which mobility is complicated by aridity, heat, and the lack of human assistance that might otherwise be found).

Prevention Through Deterrence has had a great many consequences, even if most of those consequences are outside the view of the public eye. Most troubling among these consequences is that deaths of migrants have increased substantially (see De León 34). The instrument of death in these fatalities is the desert. De León writes of a flier produced by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that he encountered in the bathroom of a Mexican shelter. “The next time you try to cross the border without documents you could end up a victim of the desert,” read the warning (29). Importantly, here the law is usurping the land—border crossers only cross in the open desert because of a policy that forces them into that space—but the law is also shifting accountability for the consequences onto the migrants themselves and the land. De León writes: “Conveniently, this flier contains no mention of the tactical relationship between federal border enforcement policy and this harsh landscape” (29). If the desert is the instrument of death, Prevention Through Deterrence is the hand wielding the instrument.

Another consequence of Prevention Through Deterrence has been increased border crossings in the Sonoran Desert area depicted *Almanac of the Dead*. De León notes that, while the overall rates for apprehension of border crossers didn’t increase significantly in the seven years after Prevention Through Deterrence was implemented as a policy, the number of apprehensions in what’s known as “The Tucson Sector” (which might be viewed as the setting for the novel) went from 92,639 in 1993 to 616,346 in 2000. Many of these migrants come not from northern Mexico, but from humid countries such as El Salvador. As such, they are not prepared for the arid landscape that they face as part of this policy.

Almanac of the Dead anticipates this phenomenon with the story of Alegría, a Venezuelan architect who wants to cross the border to meet up with Sonny Blue. She purchases passage across the border with “a luxury bus cruise” that promises an easy crossing (666). The

group is told that the buses cannot complete the final portion of the crossing and they will need to walk “a short distance” across the border where they will find motor homes waiting for them on the U.S. side of the border (670). When she exits the bus, Alegría recognizes the difference in climate: “She was not accustomed to the dryness of the air or the chill of the desert night” (670). The walk turns out to be a scam; no motor homes await them as the group of migrants are soon abandoned by their guides and left to fend for themselves in the desert. The location of the border even remains a mystery, as the migrants see no sign of the boundary between nations, only the imperceptible boundaries between ecological communities of the desert itself. Alegría passes the corpses of those in her party who succumb to thirst and ultimately death. She spends a day in the shade of desert trees, drinks her own urine, and tries to generate saliva by sucking on a stone—a technique “she had read in a novel once” (675). The pebble fails to maintain saliva in her mouth, however, and she passes out, assuming she will die, looking into the green of an emerald she is carrying with her and imagining the green, lush jungle surrounding “pools of pure water,” a scene that echoes Leah Blue’s Venice, Arizona (677). Eventually, Alegría is rescued by a Catholic aid group.

In some ways, Alegría’s story isn’t representative of the increased migrant crossings in the Tucson Sector in the years after *Almanac* was published. She is distinctly upper class and so is much of her group, and she is unaware of the dangers of the desert or what the crossing will be like. She is not sexually assaulted, an occurrence that is incredibly common for women on the migrant trails that De León describes. But in other important ways, Alegría’s story *is* the story the migrant trails De León has written about. Many in her party die along the way, victims of the desert in the same way that migrants who are funneled into to the Tucson Sector through Prevention Through Deterrence are victims of the desert. Alegría is abandoned by her guides and

she is unaccustomed to the climate and the terrain of the crossing like many of migrants that De León writes about.

To read Alegría's story alongside De León's work suggests that the nationalism driving border policy enforcement is at odds with the pluralism and community that Silko's novel argues is required for "the whole earth to save herself." Indeed, the passages I have described so far in this chapter represent the mindset and approach to a human-nonhuman relationship that Silko's novel casts as a threat to the earth. At the heart of this mindset is colonialism itself, which views nature as a resource that can be extracted for individual wealth and also a weapon that can be used in the name of nationalist ideology. The remainder of this chapter examines the way that Silko's novel depicts an alternative to the colonial conceptions of nature, a kind of community that values both the nonhuman and the human, water and aridity, roots and routes, and even the past and present to draw value from difference rather than conflict. This communal approach might be best exemplified by the title of Part Six of *Almanac of the Dead*: "One World, Many Tribes."

"Not the Law, but the Land"

Central to the idea of the communal in *Almanac of the Dead* is an ability to both see and appreciate difference. Ray has written that the novel foregrounds this approach: "the key to both social justice and nonexploitative relations between human and nature is seeing and appreciating difference" and "the ability to appreciate difference is not only a matter of environmental justice; it is a matter of survival" (108, 109). In this section, my argument builds on Ray's observation. I propose that difference in the novel is not just about seeing and appreciating, but about cultivating differences into a communal whole, a community of differences. This community is

the community of the land itself, which exists and thrives—at least in part—because of difference rather than in spite of it.

The biologist and Pulitzer prize winner E.O. Wilson has written that “Biological diversity . . . is the key to the maintenance of the world as we know it. . . . This is the assembly of life that took a billion years to evolve. . . . and created the world that created us. It holds the world steady” (15). And yet biological diversity—and cultural diversity—are the enemies of the colonial project Silko describes in *Almanac of the Dead*. Leah Blue seeks to convert the arid, desert southwest into the humid, canal-filled Mediterranean. Meanwhile, American agriculture replaces bison with cattle, produces monoculture crops on a massive scale while pumping aquifers dry, straightens rivers in ways that remove them from their natural floodplains, and captures water behind huge concrete dams. Each of these actions reduces biodiversity and works against the billion years of evolution that Wilson argues “created the world that created us” (15). The ecologist Andy Dobson notes that ecology as a field is just beginning to understand how important biodiversity is to “the quality of human life,” while at the same time ecologists have determined that “we are losing biodiversity at around one hundred to a thousand times the normal background rate of extinction” (17).

This loss of biodiversity can be traced, at least in part, to colonial conceptions of land as a wealth-building resource. Rather than difference, colonial responses to the land seek simplicity and uniformity in natural systems (which is to say, colonialism seeks to create “unnatural” systems) to maximize the efficiency of wealth production. In an effort to achieve such simplicity, colonial efforts actively seek to destroy native species that complicate imperial expansion, industrial agriculture, and other wealth-building enterprises. Despite the efforts to simplify nature, nature fights back—as Mark Fiege and others have argued—and uniformity and

simplicity remain unattainable even in landscapes that have been profoundly changed by colonial efforts. Biodiversity, however, suffers. Ashley Dawson argues that early colonialism was characterized by “ecocide such as the destruction of the bison in the Great Plains of the United States and the wanton slaughter of big game in Africa” while later stages of colonialism relied on “massive mono-crop plantations” (141). The destruction of American Bison was tied up in colonial efforts to conquer Native American cultures who inhabited the Great Plains and relied on the buffalo for food while also revering the species in their cultures and cosmologies. Monoculture farms serve to reduce biodiversity in subtler ways than the shooting of bison from passing trains—native plants and animals are removed to make space for a single crop such as corn or wheat—but the end result is similar. Biodiversity—Wilson’s key to maintaining the world as we know it—is in danger of collapse.

The communities of differences that “hold the world steady” are often referred to as ecosystems and ecological communities. While Dana Phillips and others have noted that ecosystems and ecological communities are not the balanced examples of perfect, peaceful nature that early ecologists (and ecocritics) often portrayed them as being, biologists do agree that, in general, stable biodiversity is an important characteristic of functioning ecological communities and that a loss of biodiversity—which is often one result of large-scale agriculture—tends to destabilize ecosystems (Sutton and Anderson 271). The ecologist Edward T. Wimberley has argued that human interaction with these systems can itself be seen as a series of nested ecologies ranging from the personal to what Wimberly calls “the ecology of the unknown” (245). In this framework, the individual (or personal ecology) is nested within the community or social ecology, in which “the self [is] embedded within communities of communities” (35). For Wimberly, humanity must embrace difference in order to create

community. This argument is not unlike that of bioregionalists such as Michael Vincent McGinnis who argue that humanity—especially in the U.S. and Europe—has become separated from the community of the nonhuman within the bioregions people inhabit. This separation is characterized by lack of awareness about such things as the source of one’s water or food supply or the ultimate destination of one’s kitchen garbage. McGinnis argues that humans must “re-inhabit” the places they live, which requires a “renewed sense of place and community” (32).

Silko’s novel encourages the establishment of such communities in ways that also foreground environmental justice for populations that have been most damaged by the separation of humanity from nature. *Almanac* encourages the preservation of biodiversity and cultural diversity, allowing the two types of difference to complement each other. For Silko, this begins with setting aside colonial law and considering what behaviors the landscape allows and benefits from. “We don’t believe in boundaries.” the gangster Calabazas says in *Almanac of the Dead*, “Borders . . . We know where we belong on this earth. We have always moved freely. North-south. East-west. We pay no attention to what isn’t real. Imaginary lines . . . Written law” (216). The “we” in this passage refers to indigenous populations of the North American Southwest, who—like the land itself—had borders of modern nation-states imposed on them as part of colonialism. For Calabazas, the rejection of colonial boundaries is a means of reconciling the dichotomy between roots (“We know where we belong on this earth”) and routes (“We have always moved freely”) and serves to emphasize both a sense of place and a sense of community (“we”) over the colonial apparatus (“imaginary lines” and “written law”).

It is a sentiment that is similar to an argument made in Mary Austin’s essay collection *The Land of Little Rain*, published almost 90 years earlier. In the first sentence of Austin’s book, she refers to the arid desert landscape that the book sets out to describe as “the Country of Lost

Borders” (1). In such a country, Austin argues, boundaries are drawn by the landscape itself rather than national or political interests. She writes “Not the law, but the land sets the limits” (1).⁷⁵ One of Austin’s recurring arguments is that a culture cannot inhabit the desert without allowing the desert to dictate the terms of habitation: “a land forces new habits on its dwellers” (5). The ecocritic Laurence Buell locates Austin’s *ethos* in the history of the American West and suggests that the concept can be seen as both a justification for rugged individualist plundering of the western landscape as well as a description of the futility inherent in attempting to conquer a place that Anglos during Austin’s period generally didn’t understand.

What kind of polity does “not the law, but the land” suggest? It *could* suggest a free-for-all frontier culture where the strongest get the mostest. What better (and more commonly invoked) symbol than the image of a raw, empty landscape? Yet, of course, it is not the land’s vulnerability but its resistance to capture that Austin wishes to stress. The maladaptiveness of outsiders to the region pleases her . . . the desertwise speaker relishes the tricksiness of the intractable region and the legends about it. (176-177; emphasis and spelling are from Buell)

Buell’s analysis—like Hutcheon’s argument about postmodern fiction—alludes to dominant forms of “modern” representation (the idea of a “raw, empty landscape” that notably ignores the presence of indigenous populations). But, as Hutcheon argues, it also critiques that representation by setting it beside the myths and histories of indigenous populations, for whom

⁷⁵ Austin’s own philosophy in this regard isn’t always consistent. In his book *Dripping Dry*, David Cassuto analyzes Austin’s novel *The Ford*, which fictionalizes the well-known controversy between the city of Los Angeles and the residents of Owens Valley, California. Cassuto argues that Austin is ambivalent about water policy issues as they relate to conflicts between the rural and the urban, but that her philosophy of letting the land set the limits—and perhaps leaving water unused in the Owens River—is absent from the novel.

“tricksiness” is often embodied by the coyote, an animal that evolved within the arid landscape and alongside the cultures who inhabited it for thousands of years before Europeans “discovered” the mythical frontier and began trying to draw borders on the land.

If the western landscape “sets the limits” rather than some social entity, it is worth asking what role literature plays in recording such limits. Buell writes that books such as Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain* and Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* are attempts to relinquish the focus of representation, which has traditionally been trained on culture (or at the very least on culture’s relationship with nature), and allow the land to tell its own story. Leopold’s text in this context is especially interesting because its title suggests that the almanac as a genre is an attempt to capture the story of a landscape unencumbered by human constructs such as borders and laws, a means of decentering all its own. However, Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain* generally conforms to Cronon and Comer’s charge of wilderness idealizing, describing landscapes more or less bereft of humanity and imagining wilderness and nature not as places of human habitation, but rather escapes from civilization. Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*—which like Leopold’s book adopts the almanac as a genre—is an attempt to let the landscape tell the story of human and non-human habitation, a revised 500-year history of the landscape and its most recent human inhabitants, both colonial and indigenous. For Silko, “not the law but the land” is a means of establishing the communal in which difference is not policed or rendered invisible, but rather appreciated because of its role in establishing the very communities that ecologists and bioregionalists suggest are so fundamental to sustainable human-nonhuman relationships.

As if to underline the idea of an almanac as a genre that allows a place to tell its own story and make its own rules, *Almanac of the Dead* opens to a map that re-draws the lines of history, breaking down the boundaries between even time and space. This is a characteristic of

Silko's conception of the communal in the novel. Communities are not just people, and not just humans and nonhumans. Instead, community includes both the past and the present, the living and dead, time and space, root and route. Ann Brigham writes that the map

[D]efines geography as a story of chronology. Place names are overwhelmed by lists of characters' locations and movement. Traditionally reserved to indicate state borders or secondary roads, dotted lines here plot storylines . . . Rather than a model of precise calculation that assumes constant, objective, and mimetic understanding of the space(s) rendered, this map . . . suggests the ways subjects shape and are shaped by space . . . The landscape is both a moment and a space of tension (304-305).

Brigham writes that Silko views landscape as a resemblance of language itself and reads the novel as an intertwining between the ever-changing landscape and the ever-changing stories that it tells. This interpretation is borne out by Silko's essay on the Pueblo imagination in which she describes stories as maps that house the collective memory of a culture in regard to a place.

For Silko, these stories serve as connections in part because they create awareness; to know one's history and one's connection with the land is to reimagine oneself. The stories constitute existence rather than simply describing it. Consider, for instance, Silko's description of the importance of water and environmental balance in Pueblo culture and religion.

Natural springs are crucial sources of water for all life in the high desert plateau country . . . The spring also functions on a spiritual level, recalling the original Emerging Place and linking the people and the spring water to all other people and to that moment when the Pueblo became aware of themselves as they are even now . . . Not until they could find a viable relationship to the terrain, the landscape they found themselves in, could they *emerge*. Only at the moment the requisite balance between human and *other* was realized

could the Pueblo people become a culture, a distinct group whose population and survival remained stable despite the vicissitudes of climate and terrain. (“Pueblo Imagination” 272-273; emphasis Silko)

This passage serves as a way of explaining several of the most relevant tensions between cultures and landscape in *Almanac of the Dead*. The Pueblo emergence story is interwoven with water bubbling up and coming out of the earth. This story seems to be in direct opposition to the story of Leah Blue’s Venice, Arizona in *Almanac of the Dead*, which will fill canals in the desert using water pumped from wells drilled deep into the earth itself. Leah Blue’s water does not *emerge*, rather it is captured through *invasion* rationalized by colonial law. Similarly, Anglo history doesn’t see itself emerging from the landscape of the American West to live within the environment. Rather, the western landscape is an entity to be invaded and tamed or conquered.

For the Pueblo, life not only begins with the earth, but it ends with a complex relationship between the earth, the dead, and the living. When Silko writes that the dead will eventually dry up and go “back to dust,” she isn’t pining about the fragile nature of a life that slips away and is blown off by the wind (“Landscape” 265). Rather, she is describing the dead as becoming a material part of the landscape. “The dead become dust,” she writes, “and in this becoming they are once more joined with the Mother” (“Landscape” 265). In Pueblo culture, the Mother is the earth, and the sky is the earth’s sister (“Landscape” 267). Interestingly, the dead in Silko’s stories tend to be split between the earth and the sky, between dust and rain, between aridity and water, and yet while they are separate, they are not necessarily separated.

Early in *Almanac*, the dead are linked to the arid landscape. The arid southwest is a place where the dead remain, aided by aridity itself. When Seese first arrives in Tucson, she finds herself making this connection: “All Seese could remember was this place in the Peruvian desert

where the Indians had taken their dead. The mummies were kept in an extremely arid place. Relatives and loved ones could go there to talk to those long deceased” (64). She worries that if she is unable to locate her son, she will be a mummy herself, “suspended in one endless interval between gusts of wind, and waves of dry heat” (65). Similarly, when Zeta and Lecha’s father dies, his body is initially preserved by aridity: “The corpse had begun to mummify . . . because of the dry summer heat”; Silko then immediately uses a landscape simile to link his mummification with the desert climate: “as dry and shriveled as a cactus blown in a drought” (123). But even before his death, the father begins to dry up along with the landscape he is invading:

Yoeme said the veins of silver had dried up because their father, the mining engineer himself, had dried up. Years of dry winds and effects of the sunlight on milky-white skin had been devastating. Suddenly the man had dried up inside, and although he still walked and talked and reasoned like a man, inside he was crackled, full of the dry molts of insects. (120)

Each of these examples suggests that aridity somehow makes the dead more present for the living, invoking that idea that—instead of the frontier of a new, empty world (a construction that renders the dead invisible)—the arid southwest has a long and violent history. An almanac of the dead is an almanac of the place the dead inhabit and have become inextricably a part of. Hence, the relationship with landscape is a relationship not only with the sacredness of emergence and communal identity, but the individual lives that make up the communal past and present.

For the novel’s indigenous characters, the dead are with them as part of the landscape and stories of the past. Instead of an empty landscape, emptiness is turned on colonialism. Silko writes that Zeta and Lecha’s geologist father was himself without substance: “somewhere within

him there was, arid and shriveled, the imperfect vacuum he called himself” and “The white man had violated Mother Earth, and he had been stricken with the sensation of a gaping emptiness between his throat and his heart” (120, 121). Zeta worries that she too is empty inside, and that this emptiness stems from her father. She feels “an absence” inside her that echoes the “distance” Welch’s narrator feels in *Winter in the Blood* (121). After her father leaves the two girls to go off and die, she visits his old hotel room—which is devoid of furniture—and is “soothed by the emptiness” of a blank wall (123). These repetitions of emptiness suggest that colonialism alienates one from communal bonds, especially bonds to the land and the past. Emptiness is another way of depicting sameness, a lack of difference. A place that is empty contains only itself, it lacks the variety that comes with difference. The inability to create community from difference leads to isolation and alienation, a feeling of nothingness.

Even once the bodies of the dead are no longer preserved by aridity, the spirits of the dead inhabit the sky. Mosca describes the souls of the dead as being “out on cloudy days to bring rain” and “where clouds were found, so were the souls of the dead” (603). Yoeme also links the spirits of the dead to rain: “You may as well die fighting the white man . . . Because the rain clouds will disappear first . . . When the spirits are angry or hurt, they turn their backs on all of us” (580). These passages line up with Silko’s short story “The Man to Send Rain Clouds” from the book *Storyteller*. It is the story of the death of Teofilo, an old man who has died while tending sheep in the desert southwest. His family dresses him for a traditional Pueblo burial, but just before they bury him, they ask the local priest to sprinkle him with holy water. The priest initially refuses because it is not a “Christian burial” (176). However, he eventually relents and sprinkles the grave and the blanket covering the body with “water [that] fell through the light from sundown like August rain that fell while the sun was still shining, almost evaporating

before it touched the wilted squash flowers” (177). Leon, the character who asked the priest for this favor ends the story “happy about the sprinkling of the holy water; now the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure” (177). When thinking about aridity and ancestry in the West, the story is interesting because of the way it blends colonial and indigenous rituals. The characters prepare Teofilo for burial by performing their own rituals of face painting and throwing “pinches of cornmeal and pollen into the wind” (174). But they also ask the priest for the portion of the Christian rituals that they feel most embodies the landscape. They want the holy water, not the Last Rites or a funeral mass. Leon sees no problem with merging of the cultural rituals. His optimism suggests that Father Paul’s holy water is not out of place in the arid landscape. The fact that Father Paul does not force his will onto the Teofilo’s burial, but relents to the requests of Leon, suggest that it is not the color of his skin or his Christian beliefs that will dictate connection with the landscape, rather it is the actions he takes in locating himself in relation to the landscape.

In the Pueblo imagination (as Silko calls it), the lines between the past and the home place are blurred. This is a country of lost borders not only in terms of national and state boundaries, but in regard to memory and place. To inhabit the desert where the dead have turned to dust and become rain clouds is to see the past embody the present, to breathe in one’s heritage and ancestry with each dry breath. This geographic memory creates a human-place connection that renders the popular idea of “a sense of place” as understatement. The Pueblo conception is a sense of the past *as* place and place *as* past, which is why the book opens with a map that Brigham describes as “geography as a story of chronology” (304). Silko herself describes the map as “a map of the past five hundred years—that is, a “map” made out of narratives” (Coltelli 119).

Another dualism that *Almanac* subverts through its depiction of the communal is the separation between roots and routes. This is present in the border crossing of Calabazas but also in the background story and the depiction of the character Root⁷⁶—whose name evokes a conception of a physical connection to a place through ancestry, only for that conception to subverted and complicated. Root’s mother is the granddaughter of “the old Mexican Gorgon” who bootlegged whiskey and “kept the whorehouses and gambling halls” in Tucson in the 1880s (169). Root’s grandfather is an Irishman who followed the U.S. Army camps as they traveled throughout the southwest so that he could sell them Gorgon’s whiskey. This family tree—Root’s roots, we might say—is already complicating the very idea of roots and colonial conceptions of race. Calabazas refers to Gorgon as “the old Mexican” while Root’s mother tells him that Gorgon was “of “*Spanish* descent” not Mexican” (169; emphasis Silko). Silko’s narrator tells us that “Stories about old Gorgon were full of clues about Root” (169). One clue seems to be about the social construction of race as Gorgon’s racial modifiers shift depending who is constructing his identity by telling stories of the past. Similarly, Root is identified as white but after his accident—when his family has marginalized him—he feels a kinship to those who have, like him, been “othered.” He spends his time with his “Mexican and Indian second and third cousins” (221). While he is white, he is not seen as the normal or default against which others are measured. Instead: “Root liked to be the only gringo running with them. Root liked to be the only one people stared at or remembered” (221). Root’s backstory suggests that colonial conceptions of “roots,” which are often predicated on racial commonality, might be replaced by a community of difference cohered around shared values. Calabazas says of Root: “Despite his blue

⁷⁶ Root’s story is especially interesting to consider in light of the way “roots” are conceived in both *Shane* and *The Time It Never Rained*, a topic that I address in Chapter 3.

eyes and light hair, Root was a throwback” (221). His racial signifiers don’t connect Root to the history of the land, rather it is his behavior and his willingness to listen and consider indigenous points of view. He refuses to see himself as normal and others as somehow less than normal. When considering Mosca and Calabazas “Root realized they did not expect what white people might call “normal” or “standard.” There had never been any such thing as “normal” for them” (201).

Paradoxically given Root’s name, the behaviors and values that he learns from Calabazas and Mosca are often intertwined with routes. Several of the chapters that describe Root’s backstory take place in Mosca’s truck as the two men speed through the streets of Tucson. *Almanac* intermingles Root’s roots with Root’s routes. Root’s disability comes from crashing his motorcycle. He drags one foot and has trouble speaking at times in the novel. Because of his disability, his family marginalizes him and views him as “other.” He goes to work for Calabazas who employs him as a smuggler (in part because Gorgon once did the same favor for Calabazas). Once he begins working with Calabazas, Root is introduced to the world of routes. Root describes the “difficult and remote” smuggler’s routes that Calabazas takes him on in their early years together before suggesting that it is these routes that “had taught Root not to see things as “normal” (201). This lesson is delivered when Root comments obliquely that two boulders look “identical.” Calabazas stops the truck and tells them: “I get mad when I hear the word *identical* . . . there is no such thing . . . Stop and take a look” (201; emphasis Silko). The three of them—Root, Calabazas, and Mosca—pile out of the truck and march up and down an arroyo examining boulders in the darkness. It is during this journey that Root realizes how “difference” works to make both the desert and the border culture function.

Survival depended on differences. Not just the differences in the terrain that gave the desert traveler critical information about traces of water or grass for his animals, but the sheer varieties of plants and bugs and animals. . . . Being around Mexicans and Indians or black people, had not made him uncomfortable. Not as his own family had. Because if you weren't born white, you were forced to see differences; or if you weren't born what they called normal, or if you got injured, then you were left to explore the world of the different. Root always remembered the last remark Calabazas had made that night . . .

"Those who can't learn to appreciate the world's differences won't make it. They'll die"

(202-203).

This passage connects the differences of culture with the differences of biology—the communal includes both cultural diversity and biodiversity, two concepts that function by privileging or appreciating difference and using that difference as a means of survival. In the novel, this conclusion comes at the intersection of Root and routes. These communities of difference are the key to the earth saving itself.

The subverting of these dualisms stretches into the novel's depiction of water and aridity. There is no suggestion from Calabazas that the land is deficient of water, only that water has been destroyed or contaminated by colonial and capitalist ventures. Rivers that run clear at their headwaters are polluted within the towns. But Calabazas sees the value of water (he lives near the Santa Cruz River and names himself after the Spanish word for pumpkins, a vegetable that needs "plenty of water") and the value aridity (216). When he considers how the smuggling operation has managed to survive in the face of competition from eastern mafia crews that have come west, he concludes that the desert itself has sustained them.

Calabazas's people did their best work in the desert mountains, and on the vast burning miles between Tucson and Sonora. Because it was the land itself that protected native people. White men were terrified of the desert's stark, chalk plains that seem to glitter with the ashes of planets and worlds yet to come. . . . The old people did not call the desert Mother for nothing. (222)

Here the communal includes the desert. A place so arid as to be considered too harsh for habitation, a landscape that is weaponized by U.S. Border policy, is depicted as a protector, a Mother to all of the region's indigenous inhabitants. The binary of water and aridity is one more in a series of communal reconciliations, pairs of difference that fit together in a way that stabilizes by recognizing difference its inherent value through diversity—biodiversity and cultural. Silko's conception of the communal in *Almanac of the Dead* embraces what colonialism sees as both foreign and foreboding. Water and aridity in the same community along with roots and routes, the living and the dead.

“Forsaken by the Rain Clouds”: Climate Change in *Almanac of the Dead*

While a community that values difference is set up as the ideal land-ethic in *Almanac of the Dead*, it is also described as a way of being that is under colonial attack, especially in regard to the roles of water and aridity. Colonial approaches to land are depicted as severing the relationships that allow the communal to function, separating the human from the non-human and the past from the present.

Teofilo in “The Man to Send Rain Clouds” is found under a cottonwood tree, merging catholic and indigenous rituals while bridging the divide between the living and the dead. In *Almanac of the Dead*, the displacement of cottonwood trees serves as a symbol of colonial rule over the landscape and represent the fracturing of community. Yeome describes the cottonwoods

cultivated by Guzman, an indigenous character who is in league with the colonizing “white men . . . to find more silver, to steal more Indian land. To make their big ranches” rather than honoring the agreement he has made with Yoeme’s “people” (116). Guzman enlists slaves to carry the cottonwood saplings (which he has harvested from a distant river) “hundreds of miles . . . All water went to the mules or to the saplings. The slaves were only allowed to press their lips to the wet rags around the tree roots” (116). Cottonwood trees are indigenous to the North American West where they commonly line riverbeds. The roots of the trees pull water from the river. Edward Abbey writes that, in the West, the cottonwood “signifies water” (131). In *Almanac*, their displacement echoes the displacement of native people across the U.S., severing ties between indigenous peoples and the bioregions that they had inhabited for thousands of years. This connection is made more explicit as Yoeme tells young Leche and Zeta how Guzman’s trees were connected to the landscape before they were defiled:

Those trees . . . the cottonwood suckles like a baby. Suckles on the mother water running under the ground. A cottonwood will talk to the mother water and tell her what the human beings are doing. But these white men came and they began digging up the cottonwoods and moving them here and there for a terrible purpose. (117)

The “terrible purpose” is to hang Indians, whose corpses “had all dried up like jerky” (117). Yoeme’s response to this defiling of the trees is to cut the trees down (“you don’t think I was going to let that tree stand next to this house as long as I was alive, do you?”) and steal the silver Guzman has taken from invading the earth (the same sin as the twins’ father) before running off (118).

Similarly, Calabazas tells Root the story of Yaqui ghosts—the ghosts of those who were slaughtered by Mexican soldiers for refusing to pay taxes—traveling the banks of the Santa Cruz

River, hoping to reunite with relatives who left northern Mexico and settled in Tucson years earlier. This is a story of separation, the splintering of the past and the present. When these ghosts do arrive in Tucson—a word which Calabazas says means “Plentiful fresh water” in the language of the early inhabitants of the Sonora region—they find that there is no “plentiful fresh water,” that the place has been separated from the meaning behind its name (190). Here colonialism separates the past from the present and the human from the land features that have for centuries defined the human-landscape relationship in the southwest.

While the novel finds hope in the communal it also forecasts a foreboding future if such separations continue. In its final third, as the social fabric of the region Silko is describing descends into chaos, *Almanac of the Dead* begins to reference what was, at the time of its publication in 1990, a relatively new concept: climate change. A handful of the novel’s many characters note the changing climate in and around Tucson. Yoeme claims that Indians should “die fighting the white man . . . Because rain clouds will disappear” (580). Calabazas also notes a prophecy about changing climate linked to environmental destruction: “The old-time people had warned the Mother Earth would punish those who defiled and despoiled her. Fierce, hot winds would drive away the rain clouds; irrigation wells would go dry; all the plants and animals would disappear. Only a few humans would survive” (632). Like the cottonwood trees and ghosts along the river, this passage suggests that climate change is predicated on separation. Rain clouds are driven “away” and plants and animals “disappear.” Climate change is depicted as a colonial act of separation and displacement.

Calabazas also notes that, given the environmental damage, “Human beings could expect to be forsaken by the rain clouds” (628). He thinks wryly that Europeans “had laughed at indigenous people for worshiping the rain clouds, the mountains, and the trees” but that they had

no longer laughed as “all the water [was] dirtied or used up . . . White people were scared because they didn’t know where to go or what to use up or what to pollute next” (628). Similarly, Lecha notes that “As the prophecies had warned, the earth’s weather was in chaos; the rain clouds had disappeared while terrible winds and freezing had followed burning, dry summers” (718). These prophecies are predicated on the severing of communal ties. One definition of “forsaken” is “To abandon, leave entirely, withdraw from; esp. to withdraw one’s presence and help or companionship from; to desert” (“forsake”). Such a reading sees the community of differences as breaking apart, no longer being physically proximate. It is this abandonment—humanity abandoning its responsibilities within the community and then being abandoned by the community—that presages chaos and destruction in the novel’s closing chapters.

One of the most interesting passages discussing climate change comes from the poet Wilson Weasel Tail who argues that “Overnight the wealth of nations will be *reclaimed* by the Earth. The trembling does not stop and the rain clouds no longer gather; the sun burns the earth until the plants and animals disappear and die” (724; emphasis mine). The use of the term “reclaimed” here is interesting in contrast with the other ways the word has been used in writing about water in the American West. As I have noted previously, “reclaim” is the root for the term reclamation, which is the name of the U.S. government agency tasked with reclaiming the West from aridity itself. Historically, reclamation is about *improving* the item being reclaimed, with OED defining reclaim as “To save (a person) from vice, an undesirable state, course of action, etc.” and “to subdue, reduce to obedience; *esp.* to tame” (“reclaim”). But for Wilson Weasel Tail, the idea of “reclaiming” the land suggests that indigenous groups see the situation as exactly opposite of those who have colonized them. The landscape didn’t need reclamation because it wasn’t in an undesirable state. Similarly, Wilson Weasel Tail suggests that what will be

reclaimed won't be the land itself, but the "wealth of nations" which will be "reclaimed" by the "earth" (724). Here the idea of reclamation as conceived during the colonization of the American West is laid bare. The land was not being reclaimed to improve *its* condition or "undesirable state," but to improve the condition and state of those claiming it.

Instead of the landscape, western irrigation farmers and colonial settlers were the ones truly "reclaimed" by reclamation. Certainly dams led to cheap power in the West and created habitable landscapes and farms in places where people and farms couldn't exist in any significant way before the dams, but many of the irrigation farmers received an additional improved "state [and] course of action" through government subsidies in the form of interest-free loans, cheap electricity, and cheap water at the expense of a healthy regional ecology, the existence of native species, and the displacement and cultural and physical imprisonment of indigenous populations. This tradeoff was endorsed by colonial law and funded by the American federal taxpayer.

As climate change now exacerbates the effects of colonialism on the American West, water projects are proving unable to solve the problem. The Colorado River ("which provides water to one in eight Americans and supports one seventh of the nation's crops") rarely reaches the ocean anymore and an argument is raging about whether its many dams are doing more harm than good (Lutsgarten). A recent article in *The New York Times* notes that "Climate change is fundamentally altering the environment, making the West hotter and drier. There is less water to store, and few remaining good sites for new dams" (Lustgarten). Reservoirs behind the dams sit half full (or less) and billions of gallons of water evaporate. Less water also means less electricity from the hydroelectric dams. While the hordes of people moving away from the American West has yet to happen, the environmental vision described in *Almanac of the Dead* describes a region not unlike what climate change might bring. The sheer number of references

in the novel to changing climate characterized by warming temperatures and increased drought suggest that Silko is intentionally invoking climate change. Given that the novel took her nearly a decade to write (meaning she began work in 1980), the anticipation of the climate phenomenon is almost as impressive as anticipating Sheldon Adelson's Las Vegas version of Venice.

Research about mainstream newspaper coverage of climate change shows that it was rarely covered until in the late 1980s in the United States, with less than 200 articles in total nationwide for all of 1988. By 1990, the number had risen to somewhere between 250 and 500 articles. Certainly the issue wasn't described as the global catastrophe that it is today (Boykoff and Rajan 208).

More importantly, Silko's novel suggests that the correct response to climate change is to adopt a communal relationship with the landscape. In *Almanac of the Dead*, people begin to flee the southwest and the region's water problems are decreased due to the "rapid loss of jobs and the drop in population in Tucson and Phoenix" (660). When Sterling returns to the reservation, we learn that range of the buffalo is expanding as the Ogallala aquifer dries up and farmers move eastward. But besides simply exiting the West, *Almanac* opens itself up to a reading that we need to discard the European conceptions of taming or reclaiming nature and adopt a stance that sees humans as a part of nature. Miriam Schacht has argued that *Almanac* "refigures the colonization of the Americas in terms of the colonizers' abandonment of their homelands" (57). This reading suggests that colonialism is problematic not simply because European ideals are being imposed outside of Europe, but because the colonizers themselves lack meaningful connections with the place being colonized: "Mobility that lacks any connection to the land is dangerous because the connection of people with the land is primary and sacred" (57). In other words, routes that don't exist *with* roots lead to environmental degradation because there are no cultural structures in

place to protect the land, only structures that see the land as a generator of wealth. Schacht notes that European colonization stories depict the “abandonment” of European countries by Anglo American settlers as a necessity when “the gods of Europe turn their backs” on immigrants who left for the Americas; such stories “place agency somewhere other than with the colonizers” (58). Silko’s novel argues that, in order to solve the problems of colonization, the colonizers must recognize their own agency as well the agency of indigenous cultures and the land, insofar as it “sets the limits” of habitation. If the southwest develops a connection to the landscape in which it views humanity as a part of a community of difference, the region will be adopting a kind of indigeneity. Schacht writes: “Indigeneity is a belief and a power, not a fixed group. . . a connection with the land and the ancestors as well as an understanding of the global links between struggles, belief in the old traditions, and the willingness to accept new ideas.” (68).

This conception of indigeneity is enriched by characterizations of the concept from Kyle Powys Whyte, who suggests that we view indigeneity as having a layered definition. First, ecologists view indigeneity as “a species’ ecological nativeness to a place” (Whyte 143). This definition is overlaid with a definition that looks at human indigeneity as being tied up not only a pre-colonial presence but also in the relationships between nonhuman and human within a specific place. These relationships might manifest themselves in origin and migration stories like Silko’s description of the Pueblo people emerging into the fifth world in the sacred spring water. For Whyte, indigeneity often refers to “a more complex intergenerational system of . . . place-based relationships connecting humans and nonhuman beings (e.g., plants and animals), entities (e.g., spirits and sacred shrines), and systems (e.g., seasonal cycles and forest landscapes) in the region” (144). This conception of indigeneity relies on the same community of difference that Silko advocates in *Almanac*.

In the years since *Almanac* was published, the southwest has adopted some of these ideas in regard to water use. The land has set more of the limits than the law. Water law in the West has generally been governed by the Bureau of Reclamation—an entity that endorsed building more and more dams. But in the past 30 years, has not built a single dam. Historically, western water law has prioritized agriculture over cities. Reisner notes in *Cadillac Desert* that water problems in the West can often be traced back to the idea that the West ought to be an irrigated garden with cows, cowboys, and farmers growing eastern crops. For Reisner, the West doesn't have too many people, but too many farmers and ranchers with water heavy-crops and livestock who use an unreasonable portion of the water. In 1993 Nevada, for instance, the cities of Las Vegas and Reno were using only 10% of the state's water even though they accounted for 95% of the state's economy. The majority of the remaining water was being used by farmers and ranchers. Other states are in a similar bind: "California has a shortage of water," Reisner writes, "because it has a surfeit of cows" (516). If the West is to adopt indigeneity in its water usage, it needs to let the land rather than corn prices or other commodity markets set the limits. Recently, in the midst of a 19-year-drought, the seven western states that were part of the original Colorado River Compact agreed⁷⁷ to voluntarily reduce the water they use from the Colorado, preventing the federal government from imposing reductions on them involuntarily, although climate change suggests that these reductions are a beginning rather than an end even though the various states, irrigation districts, and other stakeholders spent years negotiating the deal. If the major

⁷⁷ This agreement is called the Colorado River Drought Contingency Plan and has been covered widely by news sources in the West and nationally. Schwartz provides a good overview that includes some historical context as well the looming shortages of the future due to climate change.

reservoirs on the Colorado continue to gather less and less water (and fill with silt), it's unclear whether the region's affinity for industrial and water-intensive agriculture will be sustainable.

Silko provides an image of a region that has adopted an indigenous relationship with nature and water—one that rejects water-intensive agriculture in favor of indigenous solutions—in the book's closing chapter. Sterling returns to his home and imagines the Buffalo returning to the plains. *Almanac* opens with Sterling arriving in Tucson, having been banished from his home place, but it ends with his return while at the same time crowds of indigenous people around the world and especially in the southwest are being reunited with the lands that have served as the communal homes of their ancestors. Amid these stories of return and reunion, Sterling positions himself within the landscape and considers the past, present, and future.

As long as Sterling did not face the mine, he could look out across the grassy valley . . . and imagine the land a thousand years ago, when the rain clouds had been plentiful and the grass and wildflowers had been belly high on the buffalo that had occasionally wandered off the South Plains. . . . as a matter of fact, the buffalo were returning to the Great Plains . . . The buffalo herds had gradually outgrown and shifted their range from national parks and wildlife preserves. Little by little the buffalo had begun to roam farther as the economic decline of the Great Plains had devastated farmers and ranchers and the small towns that had once served them.

This passage offers a strange mix of pastoral paradise and the economic ruin of the culture in America that popularized the pastoral as an idea. For a culture that has chosen to quarantine the wilderness from civilization and let civilization do as it pleases, the landscape has struck back. Sterling chooses not to face the mine, the colonial symbol of environmental invasion and think about free ranging buffalo—a native species that has evolved to survive on less water and prairie

grasses—rather than the colonial symbol of cattle and cowboys. The buffalo serves as a symbol of living with the land. Plains Indians were dependent on healthy buffalo herds for long-term subsistence. For the herds to “reclaim” previous territory is to see them expanding out of wilderness preserves set aside for them by Anglo culture.

It can be tempting to see this passage as a larger scale version of the wilderness ideal that Comer finds in so much literature of the American West. Sterling turns his back on civilization (the mine) to see the wilderness of the past, complete with the American Indian symbol of the buffalo. But Sterling isn’t journeying to the wilderness and abandoning civilization. Rather he imagines the wilderness is expanding while he stands still, a part of the scene in which he is present, a part of the landscape rather than separate from it. Sterling recognizes the colonial past (he doesn’t pretend the mine doesn’t exist, rather he purposefully chooses to turn away from it) while imagining how the future of the region (the buffalo in front of him) might be intertwined with the past (the West as indigenous homeland) all while living in the present. Such a move subverts the idea of the pristine, primeval wilderness untouched by human hands and recognizes the inseparability of place and time, of the human and non-human. What Sterling imagines is a place within nature, not free from human habitation or the consequences of human history, but a potential community that values difference.

Chapter 6 - Complexity and Aridity: Teaching American Wests in the American West

In his 2003 book *The Truth of Ecology*, Dana Phillips argues that early ecocriticism was too eager and too quick to discard literary theory. Early practitioners of ecocriticism relied on the idea that literature could serve as a mimetic representation of nature itself, and that good literature should do just that. Such an approach, argued Phillips, was a sign that these ecocritics were more interested in nature than they were in literature, which could only serve as a second-rate substitute for the material world. Theory, Phillips argues, is inescapable. We cannot interpret nonhuman environments, animals, or even the behavior of other humans without using theories—scientific and cultural—to do so. In other words, context is required to make meaning and context relies on our own theories of reality. So “raw nature” (the perfect union of text and world) is unattainable; humans are always mediating the nonhuman through the prisms of theories, ideologies, and mythos—and through our own bodies and senses—which filter and parse, keeping the “nature” of nature eternally at a distance, even as ecocritics and nature writers rightly remind us that humanity is inseparable from nature, a part of it. For Phillips, the idea that we can escape the trappings of civilization (i.e., theory and representation) and escape into mimetic nature on the page is a form of critical pastoral: “For many ecocritics, one of the oldest varieties of literary expression, the pastoral, has seemed to provide this reasonable alternative, not only as an object of study but also as a mode of scholarship” (16).

One of the principal arguments I have made in the preceding chapters is that depictions of water and aridity in twentieth-century fiction of the American West are entangled with the cultural filters and literary structures that fiction writers of the twentieth century have worked within. Water and aridity are portrayed as gothic captives and gothic monsters, as a worthy enemy to be conquered by the rugged individualists of the American frontier narrative and its

offspring the Western, as a contact zone dividing the alienated colonized from the colonizers, as a commodity for converting the alien desert into a symbol of decadence and mastery, and as a sacred member of a community that transcends time and space. These varying depictions of water and aridity reveal that ecocritical study continues to reveal as much or more about human cultures than it does about the nonhuman depicted in human texts. As such, the intertwining of ecocritical readings with humanist approaches borrowing from feminism, structuralism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism have been instrumental in my own understanding of these authors, their texts, and ultimately my (admittedly still limited) understanding of American culture's reaction to aridity west of the 98th meridian.

Aversion to theory is not nearly as present now in ecocritical circles as it was in 2003, in part because of Phillips' book. However, ecocriticism still has something of an uneasy relationship with theory in the literature classroom. In 2010, Greg Garrard writes that "early hostility between ecocriticism and literary theory abated many years ago . . . but place-based ecocritical pedagogy continues to betray little awareness of education theory" ("Problems and Prospects" 240). Garrard here is describing the tendency of ecocritical classes to abandon the classroom and wander into the very places that literature is describing. Place-based approaches to teaching literature were, as recently as 2008, a common subject for academic articles and book chapters⁷⁸ on teaching literature and the environment. Garrard notes that such location-based pedagogy doesn't have much empirical support that suggests increased learning. Still, the chance to abandon the trappings of civilization (the college campus) for a pastoral paradise away from

⁷⁸ One prominent example is Laird Christensen and Hal Crimmel's 2008 edited collection *Teaching About Place: Learning from the Land*, in which many of essay find the teacher and students leaving the classroom behind. Similarly, another 2008 edited collection from Christensen, Mark C. Long, and Fred Waage (*Teaching North American Environmental Literature*) includes several such essays in its "Place-based Approaches" section.

civilization can be a strong temptation. This can be especially true for those teaching the West in the West. Place-based pedagogies often focus on teaching local authors as a means of connecting students with the bioregions where they study. Such teaching is interesting and important, but may run the risk of focusing on the local at the expense of the global at a time when humanity faces a global environmental crisis that has risen as a result of some of the very concepts—colonialism and capitalism—that literary analysis is equipped to study.

One way that ecocriticism has increased its engagement with theory is in its interactions with postcolonial theory. These two schools share an important commonality of being focused on the human relationship with place and land, while also negotiating tensions that are inherent in the way ecocriticism and postcolonial critics have historically approached their work. Erin James writes that these tensions include the ways that ecocritical mediations on place can erase postcolonial narratives of displacement, the fact that the cosmopolitan and transnational focus of postcolonialism runs counter to ecocritical focuses on the local and the bioregional, and contrast between postcolonial critics focusing on the unearthing the consequences of the relatively recent history of colonialism while ecocritics often focus on the geological, deep history of a place or the “pursuit of a timeless, solitary moment of commune with nature” (61). James also notes that ecocriticism’s tendency for place-based pedagogy is difficult when one is teaching texts from the Caribbean, Africa, and India (to list only a few examples) at an American university. Still, ecocriticism and postcolonialism continue to find common ground and ways of negotiating these tensions, as recent publications⁷⁹ show.

⁷⁹ See Huggan and Tiffin’s *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2015, second edition) and Slovic, Rangwarajan, and Sarvesewaran’s *Ecocriticism of the Global South* (2015) for just two examples.

The negotiation of such tensions is an important role for scholars and teachers of western American literature. In a recent issue of the journal *Western American Literature* that considered the field 50 years after the founding the Western Literature Association (WLA), Randi Lynn Tanglen depicted the founding of the WLA as a response to cultural study of the American West being controlled and performed by the “northeastern literary and cultural establishment” (53). In the years since, scholars of the literary West have embraced both ecocriticism and postcolonialism, although the two theoretical schools have not always been considered alongside one another. Most narratives of the founding of ecocriticism as a discipline trace its origins to scholars working in western American literature who established the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992. At the same time, scholars of western American literature—along with the New Western historians of the same period—were reimagining the history of the American West within the context of colonialism, reconsidering the region as a site of settler colonialism rather than (or in addition to) its position of symbolic power in American history. With both ecocriticism and postcolonialism, Tanglen argues, literary scholarship serves to de-center conventional American conceptions of the West. In other words, the study of literature of the American West complicates easy interpretations of the region’s metanarratives and shines a light on the implications of such narratives. Scholars of western American literature have generally provided such complication by embracing a variety of theories and approaches to the region’s varied literature.

This chapter considers the role of teaching the literature of the American West in the American West with a focus on encouraging students to complicate their own ideas about the West, including thinking about the West as climatically distinct from the American East. In my work at a private religious college in southeastern Idaho, many of my students come from Utah,

Idaho, Washington, and California. These students arrive in a class focused on western American literature with a series of preconceptions about the region not simply because they are familiar with the expedition of Lewis and Clark or because they have watched western films, but because they live near or in the very places that the literature is describing. As such, these students sometimes have entrenched views of the region that are informed by the very metanarratives I have discussed in the previous chapters, which can be a barrier to teaching the kind of complexity that literary study seeks to encourage. But I argue that confronting and even embracing such complexity must be the goal of a course that asks students to consider how the rugged individualist West, the arid West, and the colonial West intersect, overlap, and inhabit the same landscape. In such a formulation, the land itself is an object that Americans have interpreted through literary and cultural texts. The variety and difference of these interpretations of the same physical landscape suggests that culture and environment are more complex than they initially seem and that such complexity can be teased out and even appreciated through close reading and careful study. Students who develop habits of mind that allow them to confront the complexity and contradictions of the very places they come from might then be open to examining how that complexity—and the tendency to ignore it—contributes to problems such as climate change and environmental injustice not just in the American West but globally.

Habits of Mind, Complexity, and the Discourse of Literary Studies

Education research suggests that college students are faced with two separate kinds of learning: mastering content and learning how to think. While many students have learned how to internalize content through careful reading, memorization, and repetition, the task of learning how to think is complicated by the fact that different disciplines “think” in different ways. Sherry Lee Linkon calls these different kinds of thinking “disciplinary habits of mind” (2).

Adopting such habits of mind is a trickier proposition than memorizing content because the habits—ways of thinking—are primarily accessible to students only through the models and opportunities that their instructors provide. The linguist and literacy researcher James Paul Gee theorizes that such habits of mind are wrapped up in what he terms “Discourses” (with a capital D), a combination of the way that a fluent member of a discipline works and thinks. For Gee, Discourses are an “identity kit” of “saying (writing)-doing-believing-valuing combinations” (278). Learning these combinations is a bit like learning a second language that requires not only the mastery of vocabulary and grammar, but also learning the values and belief systems associated with the Discourse. Gee argues that achieving fluency in a new Discourse (including the habits of mind we hope our students will take with them when they leave our classes) requires a kind of apprenticeship in which someone who is fluent in the Discourse can mentor someone new to the Discourse. However, unlike the memorization of content, Discourse acquisition requires students to practice speaking, writing, and “doing” in ways that uphold the Discourse’s values and beliefs. This makes teaching a Discourse particularly difficult. Gee writes “while you can overtly teach someone *linguistics*, a body of knowledge, you can’t teach them *to be a linguist*, that is to use a Discourse. The most you can do is to let them practice being a linguist with you” (279; emphasis Gee). When teaching literature to undergraduates, the goal is not generally to have them achieve fluency in the Discourse of literary studies, but we do generally hope that students will be more proficient in the discipline’s language (including improved writing skills generally) and will adopt some of the habits of mind and values that literary analysis encourages.

Gee suggests that this practice can be fraught and tension-filled when a new Discourse introduces values or beliefs or ways speaking and writing that are in conflict with another

Discourse the student has already mastered, such as a student's primary Discourse (the Discourse one acquires "early in life in the home and peer group") (279). Such conflicts can be present for students of western American literature who also live in the West and whose family and cultural histories are intertwined with the history of the region as a site of settler colonialism and an escape for religious refugees. Westerners, unsurprisingly, tend to have strong opinions about the meaning of the West and those opinions can be part of a student's primary Discourse. However, while the teacher of western American literature must approach potential conflicts between student Discourses with care, introducing complexity in regard to cultural and linguistic symbols is one of the values and beliefs that defines literary studies as its own Discourse. Hence, when teaching the West in the West, one should embrace complexity and the potential tensions that come with it, recognizing those tensions as moments when learning new ways of thinking becomes possible.

However, researchers studying the teaching of literature suggest that common ways of teaching literature can render the habits of mind and the values of the Discourse invisible. Nancy L. Chick has noted that one common approach to teaching literature may actually discourage students from adopting ways of thinking that embrace complexity. Chick calls this approach "Professorial Packing" and suggests that it is the "default" pedagogy in literature courses (41). This approach finds professors lecturing about literary texts in a way that suggests the professor's interpretation of the text is *the* interpretation. Even when such a lecture includes a painstaking examination of textual evidence that supports the professor's reading while ignoring other potential readings, it generally closes off—or packs—alternative interpretations rather opening up a text to multiple interpretations. Professorial packing also occurs when professors guide students to arrive at a predetermined or favored interpretation through leading questions or

instruction. This approach, which Chick suggests is so common because professors tend to mirror the behaviors of the literature classrooms from their own past, renders several important habits of mind and disciplinary values invisible. First, it doesn't ask students to grapple with the complexity of language and potential ambiguities (this work is done by the professor). Second, it places the professor on a kind of pedestal that suggests such an interpretation can only come from a professor's brain rather than a student's practice. Unbeknownst to students, professors have considerable contextual knowledge about the text that they are using to aid their interpretation. Chick notes that "we rarely admit to our prior contextual knowledge—knowledge that students don't have and don't realize we're using—that makes interpreting texts easier, we give the impression that the distance between our skills and theirs is insurmountable" (45). The results of professorial packing are often students who feel dependent on the professor when interpreting, leading to a series of papers in which students parrot back their teacher's interpretations. Students don't practice the habits of mind that literary studies should encourage and they remain unaware of the values and beliefs that the discipline espouses, no closer to learning the Discourse than they were before the class began and perhaps more convinced of its inaccessibility.

For Chick, the alternative to professorial packing is the kind of "unpacking" that the discipline actually values. She suggests that literature classrooms adopt the "signature pedagogy" that Gerald Graff calls "teaching the conflicts" in literature (48). This approach foregrounds and privileges the questions that a text asks rather than the professor's answers to those questions. In short, literature classrooms should be grounded in inquiry and inquiry should trump concerns such as course coverage, canonical consensus, and professorial preference. It's not that coverage or an instructor's reading of a poem aren't important or shouldn't be taught, but rather that

professors must ensure that such concerns don't overwhelm or short circuit a student's opportunity to practice being an interpreter of texts *with* the professor (to borrow Gee's phraseology). For Chick, this approach does reflect the discipline's values in a way that professorial packing does not:

This principle of teaching the conflicts, conversations, and questions speaks to how literary scholars view literature itself. First, it reflects the discipline's sense of the canon as a contested issue that invites critical evaluation and debate, *a conversation about* rather than a predetermined *list of* what literature we value and why. It also captures the discipline's approach to texts and what they mean: they are multiplicitous, layered, ambiguous, and influenced by contexts, rather than singular, flat, definitive, and decontextualized—as professorial packing erroneously suggests. In other words, rather than teaching that a text and its meanings are fixed or even dead, remains from a bygone era ready to be autopsied by contemporary readers, this element of a signature pedagogy teaches that texts are still alive, generative, and inviting of new questions, approaches, interpretations, and significance. (49; emphasis Chick)

Such an approach reveals the conversations behind literary analysis and the process a professor uses to arrive at an interpretation, which I suggest are fundamental to the practice of the discipline's Discourse.

So what does such a course look like and how might it be applied to literature of the American West? In some ways, these courses take seriously the contents of any Norton Critical Edition. Graff describes his approach as the process of explicitly exposing students to conflicting interpretations of a particular text, author, or cultural metanarrative. For instance, Graff teaches Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* along with traditional interpretations of it as a “contemplation of

universal truths about the human soul” (34). But in the same course he has students read Chinua Achebe’s criticism of *Heart of Darkness* and Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*, which serves as a counterpoint to Conrad’s depiction of Africa. To encourage even more complexity, he asks students in the same course to read essays by critics who disagree with both the traditional interpretations of *Heart of Darkness* and Achebe’s critique of the novel as inherently racist. There are many texts from the American West that might benefit from such an approach. Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* is one example of a “canonical” genre-Western around which scholarly debates have revolved in ways that can reveal complexity in what students might otherwise read as “just” a Western. Encountering the viewpoints of critics who read Wister’s novel in light of colonialism, gender, and free-market capitalism, and contrasting critical readings of the text with the immense popularity of the novel over the course of the twentieth century has the potential to encourage interest in the Western even as the genre itself is now rarely atop best seller lists and is no longer the same force in American culture that it was in the middle of the twentieth century. In addition, a text that serves as a counterpoint to *The Virginian*, such as a novel that can be read as a critique to the genre Western while also trafficking in Western conventions (such as Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*, Percival Everett’s *God’s Country*, or Annie Proulx’s short story “Brokeback Mountain”) can be a way to challenge the idea that a text is “just” a Western.

It is important to consider that focusing too much on scholarly debates runs the risk of turning professorial packing into critical packing. If students read scholarly interpretations before forming their own interpretations, interpretation itself will continue to seem like a kind of magic best left to the professionals. Similarly, arguments about whether a text is misogynist or racist can be worth having but they can also elide other forms of complexity that exist at the level of the word or the poetic line or the sentence, not to mention in the minds of readers from varying

cultures and places. In order to encourage habits of mind that we as a discipline value, students should begin by forming their own interpretations of a text, as free as possible from any kind of packing so that they can learn the methods of unpacking. Chick, Hassel, and Haynie describe one lesson that uses such an approach to read the poet Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz." In this lesson, students begin individually by writing an interpretive response to Roethke's poem, which students generally interpret to be either a nostalgic reminiscence about a lost father, or a veiled account of child abuse from the perspective of the abused. The students in Chick, Hassel, and Haynie's study generally interpreted the poem in one of these two ways. But, rather than transitioning to class discussion or lecture that might devolve into professorial packing, the instructor then asked the students to identify patterns or words associated with themes in the poem, while also identifying passages that failed to fit into such patterns and themes. Students were then organized into small groups and asked to annotate a group copy of the poem and present their annotations to the class. The idea here is to keep students "from dismissing what does not fit" and encourage "them to acknowledge these textual tensions" (Chick, Hassel, and Haynie 404).

The group discussions serve as an addition to Graff's scholar-based form of "teaching the conflicts" as the students themselves argue their own interpretations both to their group and the class, using textual evidence, while at the same time considering textual evidence that supports alternative—in some cases opposite—interpretations. The purpose is not to settle on a singular, definitive interpretation of the poem, but rather to move to "a more sophisticated understanding of language, of relationships, and of how they approach literary texts" (Chick, Hassel, and Haynie 404). I have done something similar but less formal in my classes by assigning each student to write a short interpretive response for each day of readings. These responses can then

be leveraged in a variety of ways. Students might be separated into groups at the beginning of class to compare responses and then report on what they discussed or individual students might be asked in an opening discussion to summarize their argument, followed by a request for a reading that interprets the text in an alternate way. I propose that this student-led, detailed attention to close reading with an eye toward complexity prior to the introduction of outside interpretations or context is especially important because close reading and the acknowledgment of complexity are values within the Discourse of literary studies. Once students have wrestled with the complexity internal to the text, they can and should be introduced to external complexities such as historical contexts and critical conflicts. These additional complexities can then be turned back toward the text, encouraging new and more nuanced readings. Graff writes that “Achebe’s critique pushes my students to a closer reading of the verbal and stylistic particularity of *Heart of Darkness*” because it gives them a definition of what they were not seeing when reading the text as an aesthetic rather than a political artifact (32).

To do all of this, however, requires some trade-offs compared to the traditional undergraduate literature classroom. First, students must be allowed to perform initial interpretations of a literary text, even if those initial interpretations lack the sophistication that we as teachers would provide through professorial packing. By putting students into small groups and asking the groups to reach a consensus, Chick, Hassel, and Haynie’s approach shifts the onus of interpretation onto the students, and those whose interpretations rarely pushed below the surface of the text learned from their classmates (rather than the instructor) that the text allows for different ways of reading. Professors might guide these initial readings using prompts or other tools, but the interpretive obligation should be with the student. Second, instructors may need to assign fewer literary texts. If students are going to perform an initial interpretation of a

text, discuss their interpretations, and be introduced to secondary sources that force them back into the text a second time, traditional coverage may be difficult to maintain without overwhelming students with reading loads that lead to cursory rather than close reading. Reducing coverage might be less of an option in surveys, but in classes in which outcomes focus on teaching analysis, theory, and/or research or that are focused on literary themes, genres, or individual authors, reducing the number of primary texts while increasing the complexity with which students engage with those texts is a worthwhile tradeoff for encouraging the habits of mind we hope to instill in students of literature and culture.

This approach—a struggle toward complexity using student-led interpretations and supplemented by secondary research—provides the theoretical foundations that inform my own pedagogy as a scholar of the literature of the arid American West. The remainder of this chapter explores and suggests ways of applying these ideas in classrooms using literature of the West. While my ideas about classroom implementation will sometimes refer to texts I have analyzed in the preceding chapters of this dissertation, I also consider other literary texts that are commonly taught in classes focused on or including literature of the American West.

Teaching Complexity using the Literature of the Arid American West

Because I teach undergraduates exclusively, my own approaches to teach complexity are focused on undergraduate classrooms and undergraduate students. Introducing undergraduates to complexity in the American West while teaching the literature of that region includes its own set of challenges, some of which I have hinted at already. The primary challenges, however, are not region specific but are common to many universities and classrooms. First, students struggle to understand just what analysis is and how to distinguish it from summary. Many textbooks provide methods for achieving this habit of mind, though they all have limited success, in my

experience. My preferred method for getting students to focus on analysis and close reading is adapted from the textbook *Writing Analytically* by David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen. This method encourages students to identify patterns and difficult passages in a text, and then perform an inductive reasoning heuristic that Rosenwasser and Stephen refer to as “10-on-1” (103). Students might pick a single passage (or even a single sentence) and then try to write ten different things about that one item of evidence. This activity forces a new kind of thinking for students unfamiliar with the discipline. If they repeat the exercise on other pieces of evidence, they will often detect a pattern as one or more of the ten items appear in multiple places. I try to perform different versions of this activity over the course of the semester for any literature class I teach. It works well when asking students to push below the surface of a passage related to setting or characterization in a novel or a particularly difficult stanza from a poem. It even works well with images such as John Gast’s 1872 painting “American Progress” for which students can often list dozens of interesting details and connections. Early in the semester I might select passages of text for students to analyze, but as the semester goes along, I want them to pick their own passages, and I encourage them to select passages that they find particularly daunting.

Among western American literature that deals with land use, I find that this activity works especially well with the following passage from Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* in which the novel’s primary narrator, Jim Burden, remembers his introduction to the landscape of the arid Nebraskan plains as a young boy in the late nineteenth century:

There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. . . .

There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. . . . I had a feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it and were outside man’s jurisdiction. (12)

This passage contains several words that are used in ambiguous ways (“country,” “nothing”) while also alluding obliquely to landscape features related to aridity (“no creeks or trees”) and highlighting the stark difference between Nebraska’s dry plains and the humid, green Virginia landscape where Jim lived before arriving in Nebraska. It evokes the idea of the sublime in which humanity is subsumed by the sheer size of the nonhuman environment. Cather’s words here also connote the history of westward expansion that is central to American history and the *mythos* of the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries along with the rhetoric of America as a “new world” and colonialism (“not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made”). When leading a class discussion on this passage, one must be careful (and patient) to let students recognize these and other elements of complexity, but given some gentle prodding and guidance they often will. This passage is also worth returning to when introducing the contexts and critical conversations of the novel. Mike Fischer analyzes the absences of this passage—specifically the missing presence of Native Americans—in his essay “Pastoralism and Its Discontents: Willa Cather and the Burden of Imperialism.” Looking for what is missing in a text is a skill that many undergraduates don’t develop until they are near graduation, so Fischer’s argument gives them an early exposure to this kind of analytical move while also serving as a counterpoint to critics who are quick to extol the inclusivity of Cather’s novel in regard to its treatment of immigration and American identity.

However, Fischer’s essay is also a text that undergraduates struggle to understand or engage with if they are new to reading literary criticism and scholarly texts in general. This brings me to the second challenge we face when encouraging complexity in our teaching of undergraduates: selecting secondary sources that are accessible. Scholarly sources by definition are not written with undergraduates in mind as a primary audience. Some scholars, of course, are

more accessible than others. But one can also consider which scholarly genres to assign. One option is to begin a course by laying a theoretical foundation that introduces students to several of the key concepts the course will be cover using “keyword” essays. For instance, when teaching a class focused on the literature of the America West, I propose beginning the course with Krista Comer’s essay on the keyword “West” from NYU Press’s book *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. This four-page essay is short and accessible but also spends its four pages analyzing the various ways a single term, “West,” has been used to make meaning in American culture and beyond. Comer analyzes the history of the word, its use as a modifier in “Western Civilization,” the status of the West as a region (and a direction) in American culture, and the field of western studies. There is much to unpack in this short essay that can serve as a meaningful introduction during the first week of a semester that will be spent examining western American literature. The essay can be paired fruitfully with Walt Whitman’s “Facing West from California’s Shores” because of the poem’s allusions to empire, the concept of home, and the geographic region of the American West. Other keyword essays that might be used at the beginning of a semester or a unit are: “Nature” by Noel Castree from NYU’s *Keywords for Environmental Studies* and the related essay “Culture” by Dianne Rocheleau and Padini Nirmal. Essays on colonialism, empire, rurality, and borders are also potential choices. As an introduction to the concept of aridity in the West, students can read Wallace Stegner’s essay “Living Dry,” which argues that aridity is central not only to the climate of the West, but also to popular history and culture that most people associate with the West. In addition, Nancy Cook’s entry on the term “reclamation” in her chapter from the Bureau of Reclamation’s centennial symposium (along with a reading of the definition of “reclaim” in the Oxford English

Dictionary) are interesting primers for thinking about how complex American responses to aridity have been.

Keyword essays are an interesting genre for undergraduates because they are meant to serve as introductions to concepts and the context surrounding those concepts, exactly what many students need as they begin grappling with literary complexity. But keyword essays also serve as a kind of model for grappling with complexity in that they often focus on the many different ways a word can mean and the ways that usage and definitions have changed over time. For instance, Raymond Williams begins his entry on “individual” by noting that the term originally meant what is now almost its exact opposite: “indivisible” (161). Students who begin a course reading keyword essays are immediately faced with new ways of thinking about old words (or new ways of thinking about new words). The essays also tend to be exemplary models of writing using secondary sources. When teaching students how to write about literature, keyword essays provide examples for weaving together the work of multiple scholars. They do all this while often informing students rather than making explicit arguments. Hence, professors are less likely to see the arguments in a keyword essay be parroted back as a thesis in a research paper the way that literary criticism sometimes is.

This theoretical introduction can be supplemented by exploring personal connections to the West. On the opening day of the semester I often ask students to list all the things they think of when they think of “the West.” This list generally includes items such as cowboys, Indians, open space, gunfights, mountains, farms, ranches, and deserts. Once the students have added their items, I might add additional items such as urban centers (noting that the West has several of America’s largest metropolitan areas), the presence of Indian reservations (noting that almost all of America’s reservations are located in the West, even if the pre-contact location of specific

Native American groups was located in what is now the American East). I might also add items such as public lands, widespread aridity and large dams, Japanese internment during World War II, nuclear testing and weapons development, and the presence of a southern land-based border with Mexico, which is unique to the West as the American Southeast borders the ocean. From here, we can transition into personal connections to the West by discussing who lives in the region and whether they consider themselves “westerners” and what such a label might mean in the context of the lists we have just made. We also discuss how it feels for those who have grown up in the West to travel outside the region and for those who have grown up elsewhere to live in the region.

During this class session or sometime during the first week or two, a course on western American literature can begin the task of complicating definitions of the West by introducing the idea of metanarratives and how metanarratives are intertwined with the region’s identity. I have used images and quotations from well-known literary and political figures to show how the West has been defined culturally in American history as a pastoral paradise and garden, a frontier process for making Americans, a site of ongoing colonial struggle, and an indigenous homeland while also exploring the idea that the West’s aridity is often depicted as otherworldly compared to the humid East. This discussion can connect student’s personal constructions of the region (I ask students if they see their own personal version of the region represented in the quotes and images I have displayed) with the symbolic, political, and cultural relationships between the West and America as a nation. This kind of discussion can begin to do the kind of work that Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter describes when teaching postcolonial and multicultural literature in that it asks students to confront the idea that identity is “political as well as personal,” to which I might add a third identifier: cultural (145). As whole, this early semester work recognizes student

conceptions of the West while also defamiliarizing the region by revealing the parts of the West that we don't generally discuss (big cities and nuclear weapons) and introducing the way that culture contributes to regional identity.

Once students have a theoretical foundation to work from and have begun to consider the personal and political identities of the West, an instructor must consider how to sequence literary texts. One potential drawback of Graff's class that contrasts *Heart of Darkness* with *Things Fall Apart* is the sequence, which teaches Conrad's novel first, thereby potentially reifying the status of Africa as "other" by asking students to consider Achebe's novel in relation to *Heart of Darkness*. Of course, there are contextual arguments for teaching texts in specific sequences such as chronology or influence. However, instructors should also consider the conceptions and ideologies students will bring with them to the class and ask how sequencing can serve to complicate those conceptions. In the classrooms of the intermountain American West where I teach, the idea of the West as a pastoral paradise where the national character was constructed by cowboys and pioneers is strong. If the first major literary text my students read in a class on the region is a Western, I run the risk of confirming that the Western describes the "normal" west and that other depictions of the region are marginal by default. Instead, an instructor might consider beginning the class's literary reading with a text by an author such as Willa Cather, Mary Hallock Foote, or Marylinne Robinson, given that women are often absent entirely from the list of things the class associates with the West that we produce on day one.

Of the texts I have analyzed in this dissertation, an interesting short story to teach early in a semester on the literary west would be Foote's "Maverick," which includes elements of the Western that have been made grotesque and asks its readers to consider the role and agency of women in Anglo-American western community building. Foote's story also portrays the land as

foreign and much of the water within the story as trapped and unavailable to those who would people the land. The gothic elements of the story have the potential to defamiliarize what might be a familiar setting for local students. Having been published in *Century*, for which the back issues are available on-line through HathiTrust, “Maverick” also provides the opportunity to talk about how western writers were constructing the region for eastern audiences. In a larger unit, Foote’s story might be read with other Foote stories or novels, her memoir *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West*, or in advance of one of Cather’s novels such as *O Pioneers!* Or *My Ántonia* or Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes* or Robinson’s *Housekeeping*. Another option would be to read Foote’s work along with Stegner’s *Angle of Repose*, which fictionalizes Foote’s life in the West for its plot and borrows from her letters and other writings in ways that some critics consider to be plagiarism. Reading Foote’s work with Stegner’s novel would potentially allow for discussions about who has generally been allowed to write the story of the Anglo-American West given that—until the late twentieth century—Foote’s work had been largely forgotten until Stegner’s novel, which won the Pulitzer in 1972, helped to bring her work back into the spotlight while simultaneously failing to disclose her role as a kind of co-author. Stegner’s novel also reflects critically on the ways that the history of the West is constructed and his narrator is (at times) more critical of water development and land use in the West than much of Foote’s own work. Teaching Foote and Stegner together is ripe for Graff and Chick’s approach to “Teaching the Conflicts.”

These readings could populate an entire course on women in the West. But if used as a single unit in a larger course on Western literature, an instructor would be best served by limiting the literary texts in the first unit to a few stories and single novel and then supplementing the primary sources with secondary sources that encourage complexity and critical thought. Potential

secondary sources for such a unit include Miranda Joseph's work on community and gender (Joseph has written the keyword essay for "Community" in NYU's *Keywords for American Studies*) and Amy Kaplan's "Manifest Domesticity." For the Foote-Stegner texts there are several arguments from decades past taking up positions on either side of the conflict over authorship, but focusing too closely on a controversy that most scholars have left behind perhaps misses an opportunity. Instead, Jennifer Ladino's 2009 essay "A Home for Civilization," which takes up the question as to whether Stegner's novel goes far enough in challenging the metanarrative of the frontier and ultimately describes the novel as depicting a "conflicted west," is a useful text for reading Foote and Stegner in that it asks students to consider the role of literature in building national myths about the West beyond genre-westerns and it teaches that conflicts reside within texts themselves and not just in the pages of critical essays (225). Ladino's essay also opens with a transcript of an argument she has repeatedly had with her husband about Stegner's novel, which suggests that "teaching the conflicts" need not be limited to the classroom.

The units that follow can align with (and subvert) metanarratives of the West. James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* presents a view of Native American life in the West that defies traditional depictions of Native Americans in many ways and asks students to recognize the effects of colonialism on western life. The novel alternates between moments of humor, confusion, unsolved mystery, unrequited love, violence, tragedy, and hope. The text itself can be difficult to understand and hard for students to wade through due to the nonlinearity of the novel and missing information such as the narrator's name and the time he loses over the course of the story. Such difficulty is an opportunity because it opens the doors to ambiguity. Using the 10-on-1 method and other close reading heuristics can show students that difficult texts like *Winter in*

the Blood are not beyond their reach. In addition, there is a considerable amount of critical work looking at the novel, allowing an instructor to handpick accessible readings of the novel for students. A recent movie version of the novel also provides a potential discussion of adaptation as a kind of interpretation.

Winter in the Blood can be paired with other shorter, more accessible literary texts to invite students into the world of Native American literature and ask them to consider how stereotypes about Native Americans have been constructed. Sherman Alexie's poem "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel" is one such text. Welch's novel defies much of Alexie's satirical advice. But in some ways, *Winter in the Blood* as a novel does meet Alexie's ironic criteria: the novel is predicated on what the audience doesn't know ("Indians always have secrets" Alexie writes) and Welch's narrator is haunted by his dead father and brother ("In the Great American Indian novel . . . / all of the Indians will be ghosts") (lines 39-40). These complexities can be further explored by reading Thomas King's essay "You're Not the Indian I had in Mind" from the book *The Truth about Stories*, which, like Alexie's poem, analyzes the ways Indians are represented in popular culture. King examines nineteenth century novels by white authors such as James Fenimore Cooper that inform Alexie's poem (and stand in contrast to Welch's novel) and explains how these novels contributed to the idea that Indians were vanishing while creating a stereotype of how Anglo Americans expected Native Americans to behave. Like Alexie's poem, King's essay is very funny, which endears it to students and serves to complicate preconceptions about noble, stoic, and doomed Native Americans.

Additional secondary sources related to Native American texts in the West that can help undergraduates grapple with the complexity of Welch's novel (or a novel like Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* or McNickle's *The Surrounded* or Silko's *Ceremony*) include essays on the

concept of indigeneity and alienation. In terms of western aridity, Donald Pisani's chapter on the Bureau of Indian Affairs from *Water and American Government* is a readable narrative describing the fraught history of Native American water rights and Anglo-American attempts to usurp those rights, many of which have been successful. Silko's essay "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination" is also an accessible yet eye-opening read for many Anglo American students. It can be paired usefully with Silko's short story "The Man to Send Rain Clouds."

Moving the Western—the category of text many students will associate most readily with the West—to the end of the course increases the chances that whatever Western the instructor selects will be read with many new ideas swirling around in the heads of the students. While Wister's *The Virginian* is one option, Jack Schaeffer's *Shane* is my preferred choice because it is shorter and can be used to examine the relationship between the Western novel and the Western as a film genre. Reading Schaeffer's novel and then assigning George Stevens' film adaptation provides the opportunity to discuss adaptation. One opportunity for close reading when thinking about these two texts is the way that end of the narrative of Shane and his time with the Starretts. After the climactic gunfight, Schaeffer's novel continues, providing a chapter in which the Starrett family recommit themselves to settlement. Stevens' film ends famously with Shane riding into the night, away from Joey who calls out to him in the darkness. Schaeffer, it could be said, privileges roots while Stevens privileges routes. Students might be introduced to these ideas and asked to write about the implications of these endings.

Using *Shane* also serves as a way to discuss the popularity of Western film, which has shaped the way many people *see* the American West. Building on this concept, one day might be spent looking at scenes from westerns set in especially arid landscapes such as Monument Valley and contrasting these scenes with the ways that aridity has been depicted in other texts read

during the course. Such a discussion could draw on the personal experiences of students with aridity in West. How does the western air *feel* compared with other places and how does the prospect of riding into the desert with little more than a horse and canteen strike students who have lived in the West their whole lives or students who are recent residents? This discussion might also include a 10-on-1 activity to show students that such analytical thinking is not limited to literature, that aridity and arid landscapes can be analyzed like a poem or a short story.

Secondary sources that can be fruitfully paired with Westerns include Kelton's introduction to *The Time it Never Rained*, which provides a working definition of rugged individualism and then celebrates and defends it. Kelton's essay can be contrasted with Stegner's essay "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur," which argues that romantic notions of individualism in the literature of the West have done more harm than good. These essays can then be applied to *Shane*, which (as I have argued previously in this dissertation) presents the reader with a complex relationship between individualism and community in which the rugged individualist goes to battle in the name of western expansion and communal settlement. *Shane* also offers the chance to revisit the themes of domesticity and colonialism and read them in a text that romanticizes both compared to primary sources that might have been read earlier in the course. Students can examine the relationship between Marian Starrett and Shane along with each character's relationship with Joe Starrett. Similarly, the few passages related to Native Americans in the novel (almost always depicted as enemies or referred to insultingly) might be paired with a reading of the absence of Native Americans among the characters of the novel.

Concluding discussions or in-class writing in such a course might ask students to revisit the discussions from first day of class. How have their conceptions of the West changed? What ideas that seemed simple have been complicated and how would such ideas be described now?

How do the metanarratives of the West coexist? How do these metanarratives change the way you think of the western landscape or the pervasive presence of cowboy symbols in western spaces? These potential prompts can re-focus the students on the course outcome of becoming comfortable with complexity and teasing it out of cultural and literary signifiers. A final paper can also reinforce this goal by encouraging students to focus on keywords they have learned over the course of the semester in their analysis of literary texts. New concepts and ways of thinking should be present in their writing at the end of the semester and some class time should be spent returning to secondary sources and examining how writers have used concepts as lenses to help them view the West in different ways. Such modeling can help students who feel overwhelmed by the task of final research paper that asks them to contribute to the very “conflicts” they have been reading and talking about all semester.

A Home Without Rain

I end my discussion of teaching western American literature in the West and my examination of the constructions of water and aridity in twentieth century western American fiction by examining two texts that bookend the twentieth century: The folksong “A Home on the Range” (written in 1872 and popularized in the early twentieth century) and Luis Alberto Urrea’s short story “Welcome to the Water Museum” (published in 2015). A class on western American literature might use these texts to open or close the course. Both texts provide unique and interesting ways of seeing the intricate web of literary structures, historical contexts, metanarrative, and cultural influence that have served to construct the West in the American imagination and beyond over the past 150 years.

“A Home on the Range” is perhaps the most well-known folksong that attempts to define the American West by merging metanarrative, landscape, and climate. The West of “A Home on

the Range” is a peaceful, Edenic garden in which animals “roam” and “play” without fear and humanity utters not “a discouraging word.” It is a place in which aridity is described simply (“the sky is not cloudy all day”) while the lesser known second verse of the original poem from which the ballad stems describes a West where water is vibrant and easily captured (“light streams with buoyancy flow”) (Cooper 271). This seems a straightforward folksong that appealed to populist notions of the West in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And yet the song’s history, composition, and reception are filled with ironies and complexities. For instance, the well-known buffalo who “roam” in “A Home on the Range” were in the process of being systematically slaughtered by buffalo hunters in 1872, when the lyrics were composed as a poem by Dr. Brewster Higley on the Kansas plains where buffalo were ceasing to roam. Ironically, one place the song became popular was Dodge City, which in the 1870s and 1880s was one of the shipping centers of the West, the very place from which buffalo hides were shipped east while the hunters of those same buffalo perhaps sang or listened to “A Home on the Range” in the 1870s. In the 1880s, buffalo hunters and buffalo were replaced by cowboys and cattle who also sang the song, opining for an animal whose very absence made their industry possible. Higley himself, who had been a medical doctor before trying to homestead the Kansas plains, wrote the lyrics between marriages and while battling alcoholism (Mechem 22). But Higley left Kansas for Arkansas in the 1880s because, according to his family history, the Kansas climate—where the sky was purportedly not cloudy all day—was “too severe for his health” (quoted in Mecham 21).

So “A Home on the Range,” the so-called “anthem of the American West,” is a text wrapped in complexity (Cooper 268). It was influenced by the garden metanarrative and the culture of western expansion. In its popularity, the song helped to construct culture and responses to land and climate for much of the twentieth century. This complexity may even explain the

song's appeal. The speaker isn't describing the West that he sees, but rather the West he wants to see; "Oh, *give* me a home" the song begins, suggesting that such a home—such a place—does not yet exist. It is a plea that—considering the demise of the buffalo and the "severe climate" that forced Higley away from Kansas—attempts to create a romantic, fantastical version of the region that is divorced from its complex environment and history. Similarly, in the version of the song collected by John Lomax in his 1928 book of "Cowboy Songs and Frontier Ballads," the song recreates the narrative of the vanishing Indian: "The red man was pressed from this part of the West, / He's likely no more to return" (39). The complexity of colonial conquest and the presence of Native Americans surviving that conquest is replaced by a story of indigenous absence, never-ending sunshine, and "breezes so balmy and light" (39). "Home on the Range" attempts to replace complexity with simplicity, but it is unable to escape its own history and the history and climate of the region it attempts to simplify.

In 2015—after 143 years of "Home on the Range" being sung around campfires in tribute to the West, and after the body of texts I have examined in this dissertation was published—Luis Alberto Urrea published a short story called "Welcome to the Water Museum." Like "A Home on the Range," Urrea's story merges metanarrative, landscape, and climate. But it does so to reveal an immensely complicated region, a place where the familiar refrains of "Home on the Range" and the metanarratives that are used to construct Western identity are rendered unfamiliar and even grotesque. Urrea's story is set in an unspecified near future, after climate change has wreaked havoc on the American East and West and reconfigured the ways the regions think about themselves and each other. The West is in the seventeenth year of a drought so severe that the young protagonist—a middle schooler named Billy—has never seen rain or even rainclouds. The story sets up a generational divide as Billy's parents cling to the

metanarratives of western past. His father—a lover of Western films—has placed his hope in government programs that are trying to engineer the presence of rain itself and which bring in water by military helicopter from “the water states” of the East in exchange for electricity generated by wind and solar energy in the dry West (229). The two regions are separated by a border that has been instituted between the humid and dry regions to keep climate refugees from going East. This border satirizes and renders grotesque Turner’s frontier line and the current U.S. southern border that keeps climate refugees from coming north. Like many Americans, Billy’s mom grows a precarious vegetable garden and feels a great nostalgia for the western past when water was plentiful, she was young, and both conditions seemed endless.

Billy and his classmates, however, react to water differently. On a class field trip to the “Western Plains Water Museum,” the sci-fi loving Billy and his friends are disconcerted by what they encounter. The museum is mostly *representations* of water—computer generated and digital simulations of fountains, waterfalls, and thunderstorms. In the story’s future, water has nearly ceased to be material and has become primarily text; the national nostalgia has become a nostalgia for the age of humidity, when the Bureau of Reclamation seemed poised to engineer aridity out of existence. These representations of climate are foreign to Billy and his friends who have lived their entire lives without easy access to water and view such plenty with suspicion and terror. Sitting in the museum’s small theatre, the children are exposed to a simulation of a thunderstorm that Urrea calls “the horror of the rain”:

Dark. Crickets. Then stars started to appear above them. And—what the hell was that? It looked like a scary movie. The docent’s voice in the darkness: “The clouds obscure the moon.” And they did—these projected huge beasts rose up and blotted out the stars and the moon, settled like a threat upon them. (232, 233)

When the rain comes it is made of sound and light, but the children recognize it: “Rain that sang to their bones . . . Rain they had never felt yet knew as intimately as they knew their own skins. It was dreadful” (234). Raised in an era of scarcity and a landscape of extreme aridity, Billy and his friends react to realistic representations of the greenery and rain of a humid region in much the same way that Anglo American migrants reacted to the arid West in the nineteenth century, the same way that Bull and the Little Elk people react to the concrete dam in McNickle’s *Wind From an Enemy Sky*: it is unrecognizable and terrible, something to be feared, something that doesn’t seem to belong.

Urrea’s story finds Billy and his friends adapting to aridity by letting go—or never taking hold—of the metanarratives of the garden and the frontier. As precarious as their present and future are, they somehow feel at home in the dry domain, cut off from cultural logics that describe humidity and a surplus of water as “normal” they instead view aridity and scarcity as their baseline existence. While it is far from clear that the story’s family will continue to get by on the little money Billy’s father makes from working on a government crew that repairs the foundations of houses that have detached from “the desiccated earth pulling into itself,” it does seem that that Billy’s generation will not be saddled with the expectations of plenty and the valorization of individual self-interest inherent in the metanarratives of colonialism, the garden, and the rugged individualist paradise. Instead, Billy sees a homeland—a land that is sick and perhaps soon to be unfit for human habitation—but a land that Billy feels comfortable in when compared to his parent’s nostalgia of water surplus. This less-than-perfect existence captures the complexity of living in the American West in the age of climate change. It is a time when metanarratives must be questioned and interrogated, when new ways of being must be imagined

into existence by recognizing the constructions of the past and conjuring an existence beyond them.

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