

ADAPTING PLACE

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. A SELECTIVE LITERARY HISTORY OF PLACE IN MONTANA	1
2. WALLACE STEGNER AND THE IDEA OF PLACE	18
3. THE MACLEAN PLACE	31
4. REDFORD'S RESPONSE TO PLACE	39
5. TEACHING PLACE: GENESIS IN PLACE OF EXODUS	47
BIBLIOGRAPHY	58

ABSTRACT

Beginning writers in Montana, especially students enrolled in composition courses at Montana State University in Bozeman, Montana, can benefit from a curriculum that connects the act of writing to the place each person is from. Place occurs wherever people interact with landscape. Interaction is defined broadly, and can take the form of many activities, most importantly to this study, interaction takes on the form of writing. Place is embodied in the works of many of Montana's finest authors of literature, especially Wallace Stegner, Norman Maclean, Ivan Doig, Jim Harrison, Thomas McGuane and James Welch. These authors craft place both by creating characters who interact with the Montana landscape as well as re-acquaint themselves with their pasts in this landscape through the act of their writing. Building upon their examples, the first method of adapting place to the coursework for the beginning writer is to encourage students to craft place narratives of their own to answer two important questions – who are you and where are you from? The second method of adapting place to the classroom is to ask students to respond to other place narratives, much like a film responds to the best or favored elements of a written work when it adapts literature to the screen, just as Robert Redford accomplished in his 1992 adaptation of A River Runs Through It. The results of adapting place in these two ways eases beginning writers into college level critical thinking and writing, preparing them for more specialized writing. Indeed, students who have an opportunity to discover and question the memories associated with their place have a stronger sense of personal identity as well as a powerful foundation of sophisticated and practical reading, writing, and thinking skills.

CHAPTER 1

A SELECTIVE LITERARY HISTORY OF PLACE IN MONTANA

Place is formed where people interact with landscape. Mistakenly, the idea of place is often considered synonymous with a physical location. Location certainly has a role in the formation of place, yet the human element is more important than the characteristics of a physical landscape. I find myself using the word place to emphasize the idea of interaction, of naming a person's relationship with their natural surroundings. People interact with land by farming, ranching, teaching, hunting, flyfishing, building, or by any other practical purpose that imprints a human signature upon land. Place pays tribute to farmers, ranchers, explorers, teachers, preachers, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, or anyone who makes land into a home.

I would add writers to that category. Writers, especially in Montana where I am from and where I teach, craft narratives to understand themselves, to rediscover their past, and to come to terms with their memories. In this way, writers interact with location.

Writing is obviously active, and I believe its most sincere and genuine action is to search. Wallace Stegner wrote, "I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from" (23). He wrote this in his book *Wolf Willow*, which was an autobiographical memoir targeted at searching the historical and cultural background of his youth. When Stegner admits he does not know who he is, he names his desire to know how he perceives his surroundings in the present in 1950 as a college professor traveling back to his hometown versus the recollections of his youth in the early 1900s. The idea of perception is

important, and it shows that Stegner views life through a lens. Furthermore, he is unsure of the origins of that lens, and traces its history to its source: the prairie borderlands of Montana and Saskatchewan where he spent seven early years of his life. It was the only location he knew for any length of time because he lived in at least seven states or territories before he went to college, including Iowa, North Dakota, Washington, Utah, California, Nevada, Montana, and Saskatchewan.

To show how Stegner perceives life is to show how he perceived the town of Eastend, the focus of *Wolf Willow*. The book studies personal memories, regional history of Canadian pioneers and frontier military outposts, geography of the Cypress Hills, a fictional account about the blizzard of 1906, and anthropology of the area's Metís and Native Americans. In short, he performs a source study of what has formed his writing style and subjects as well as the past that has formed his character. He writes the book as a search for himself, and either by reminiscing or research, he accomplishes that mission.

After writing *Wolf Willow* Wallace Stegner knows who he is as surely as he knows where he is from. That is a powerful knowledge, something that makes his perception of the world much stronger. Indeed, he returns to a detailed study of place in his essay, *The Sense of Place*. In this essay he talks less about perception and more about knowledge. Giving credit to one of his former students, Wendell Berry, Stegner shows the process of how people gain knowledge from location. He writes:

Back to Wendell Berry, and his belief that if you don't know where you are you don't know who you are. He is not talking about the kind of location that can be determined by looking at a map or street sign. He is talking about the kind of knowing that involves the senses, the memory, the history of a family or a tribe. He is talking about the knowledge of place that comes from working it in all weathers, making a living from it, suffering from its catastrophes, loving its

mornings or evenings or hot noons, valuing it for the profound investment of labor and feeling that you, your parents and grandparents, your all-but-unknown ancestors have put into it. He is talking about the knowing that poets specialize in. (*The Sense of Place* 205)

Here, Stegner names knowledge formed by experience. I believe his words are the genesis of a distinction that place is not just location to be looked at through glass, whether it is a photograph behind a picture frame, a panoramic landscape in a car window, a view from a summer home's living room, or the lens of a film projector. Stegner values the action it takes to work or live or feel a landscape.

His last line — *the knowing that poets specialize in* — solidifies the writer's trade alongside the others. Stegner believed this, not only in words, but also in practice, and he sought to cultivate writers. Much in the same way he viewed landscape, Stegner believed the student had to be respected. The natural talent of the student was comparable to the natural beauty of the landscape, the worth coming from letting natural instincts grow. Stegner believed the West was an arid region that people tried to change to satisfy their wishful thinking instead of allowing the land to be arid and vast and unfriendly to human settlement. In the same way, his students were allowed to write to their strengths.

The knowing that poets specialize in is a highly individual sense of knowing, and, furthermore, an act of committing knowledge to writing. The writers who were Stegner Fellows at Stanford's Creative Writing Program found their individual voice, perhaps because Stegner was able to let them do it, or perhaps because he showed them how to do it. In either case, the result of his teaching was pure success. Larry McMurtry, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Robert Stone, Thomas McGuane, Scott Momaday, Ernest Gaines, Ken Kesey, and many others learned from Stegner. Many of these authors won awards

or achieved fame, earning Stegner the title “Dean of Western Writers” from *The New York Times*.

As a side effect, many of Stegner’s students continued his idea of place. Equally as important, other writers were directly influenced by Stegner’s idea of place or were indirectly influenced by the strength of the writers who studied under him. The legacy is especially evident in the catalogue of Montana literature. In recent years, certainly from the 1970s forward, place has been a central theme linking Montana writers together.

Some would argue that place was around for decades prior to the 1970s, but I would like to suggest that in that time period place made a transition to the definition I named earlier. In the late 1970s there were a number of authors who crafted place narratives to show how people interacted with location by reflecting on memory.

Ivan Doig wrote *This House of Sky* as an attempt to understand events *after* the death of his mother when he was very young. He grew up near White Sulphur Springs. He was raised by his father, Charlie, and his grandmother. Doig’s youth, or his narrative’s perception of his young life, continually perceives his father’s hardworking struggle to ranch and survive. He writes, “The ranch itself had plenty of ways to nick away at everyone’s nerves” (71). Doig links his understanding of his father with his father’s understanding of landscape. Both were struggles. He writes, “By the time I was a boy and Dad was trying in his own right to put together a life again, the doubt and defeat in the valley’s history had tamped down into a single word...All of them epitaphed with that barest of words, *place*” (22-3).

There is more to Doig's purpose. Landscape is important because it causes or instigates or mandates how we act. Daily chores on a ranch, for instance, are always planned in accordance with weather, temperature, seasons, animals, and so on. But the battle against those fluctuating elements is carried out by people. In stories about the West, and in this story by Doig, people are foregrounded against a backdrop of landscape.

In a speech he gave at Montana State University in 1984, Doig explored this characteristic. Doig writes:

Place, in terms of landscape, backdrops of mountain and of plain and of hard weather, *does* figure large in the work of a lot of us who are trying to write about the West. But I don't think it's at the neglect of the people, the human stories, the Westerners who carry on their lives against the big bold landscapes of those books. (Doig Lecture)

It is important to know that place begins and ends with people. If landscape claims a ranch by a cold blizzard that suffocates a herd of cattle, people did not prevent it. And if landscape yields a large crop of wheat, people harvested it. Certainly landscape has a hand in failure and success, but both, finally, are the result of human action or inaction. Doig wants to know his father and his father's endless struggle. He did not want to see his father ruined by the land. Doig crafts his narrative so that his father's struggle is brought to the foreground. Though it may be sad, self-understanding is always positive.

Continuing this theme, Norman Maclean explained how people adopt the rhythms of the surrounding landscape in his novella, *A River Runs Through It*. The book is about the four-count rhythm his father used to teach Norman and his brother, Paul, the art of flyfishing. Norman, the author, along the same lines as Doig, pursues understanding.

His search is for his brother, Paul, who broke away from his father's rhythm to invent his own rhythmic casting, the art of shadowcasting. However, Paul also broke away from his father's religious nature. Reverend Maclean mandated discipline and Paul could not conform. Instead, he followed the rhythm of the Big Blackfoot, the Maclean's family river. And in his way he paralleled the wild course of the river by gambling and drinking and womanizing.

Maclean repeats the metaphor, superimposing the two rhythms, man and river.

He writes:

The Big Blackfoot is a new glacial river that runs and drops fast. The river is a straight rapids until it strikes big rocks or big trees with big roots. This is the turn that is not exactly at right angles. Then it swirls and deepens among big rocks and circles back through them where big fish live under the foam. As it slows, the sand and small rocks it picked up in the fast rapids above begin to settle out and are deposited, and the water becomes shallow and quiet. After the deposit is completed, it starts running again. (62)

Then, Norman changes his subject, moving from river to man. In this section the metaphor explains Paul's beginning, or at least the beginning of the story about understanding Paul.

As the heat mirages in front of me danced with and through each other, I could feel patterns from my own life joining with them. It was here, while waiting for my brother, that I started this story, although, of course, at the time I did not know that stories of life are often more like rivers than books. But I knew a story had begun, perhaps long ago near the sound of water. And I sensed that ahead I would meet something that would never erode so that there would be a sharp turn, deep circles, a deposit, and quietness. (63)

The quietness Norman speaks of is Paul's death. Paul died as the result of a gambling debt. Norman searches years of memories for understanding. That understanding is hidden in the river. He cannot understand Paul now because he cannot see him, but he

can still see the rhythm of the river. Perhaps his hope is that by understanding the rhythm of river he can extend the metaphor, and the understanding, to his brother. Sometimes it is only through the rhythms of landscape that we can understand human life.

Indeed, our fate is tied to nature's fate. Thomas McGuane, one of Stegner's students at Stanford, suggests that we are often in control of another's fate while not entirely in control of our own. For instance, in this essay first published in *Outside Magazine*, McGuane shows how we control the fate of wildlife. He writes:

As I took that step, I knew he was running. He wasn't in the browse at all, but angling into invisibility at the rock wall, racing straight into the elevation, bounding toward zero gravity, taking his longest arc into the bullet and the finality and terror of all you have made of the world, the finality you know you share even with your babies with their inherited and ambiguous dentition, the finality that any minute now you will meet as well. (*An Outside Chance* 242-43)

Closing in on a deer during hunting season shows the natural relationship between man and beast. That might be a cliché, but McGuane isn't using it as such. Earlier in the piece he clearly states that he hunts the deer for food. He does not hunt for sport. With appreciation for the life it will bring him, he does not mourn the death of what he hunts. Rather, McGuane values his backyard for an opportunity to hunt and gather. In later works by McGuane, like *Some Horses*, he spends time writing about cutting horses which he raises on his ranch in Boulder River Valley. For McGuane, making life from landscape is accomplished by stewardship of animals.

That's what each of these writers does. Somehow they make a personal connection to land. Doig names his father's struggle with ranchland, Maclean names his brother and the river, and McGuane names his connection in relation to domestic animals and wildlife. The search to understand a father, brother, or self marks places as

landmarks with history, in the least, a story of how one man perceives his surroundings. The stories make such a strong mark that they infiltrate the landscape, in essence, becoming the backdrop for people of later generations. It's similar to the quoted excerpt from Ivan Doig's *This House of Sky*. Doig mentions that the stories of every busted homestead plagued the valley with a curse that was seemingly impossible to overturn. Doig's father fell under that curse and failed like his ancestors. Sometimes I wonder if that's not why Doig left the valley. He returned to research and travel, but never to live. The lesson is that the past stories of the Smith River Valley probably contributed to how Doig viewed his father's place. Without that history, the struggle might seem to be an aberration, but in *This House of Sky* struggles are repeated.

In Jim Harrison's *Legends of the Fall*, Harrison also names similar connections. His novella follows the Ludlows' travels and activities in Montana and around the world. In his epilogue he pays tribute to the strength of story. Though fictional, the characters weave themselves into the landscape. And the fiction serves to be as authentic as fact. Indeed, Harrison's epilogue seems as though it is a historical footnote. He writes:

If you are up near Choteau and drive down Ramshorn Road by the ranch, now owned by Alfred's son by his second marriage, you won't get permission to enter. It's a modern efficient operation, but back there in the canyon there are graves that mean something to a few people left on earth: Samuel, Two, Susannah and a little apart Ludlow buried between his true friends, One Stab and Isabel; and a small distance away Decker and Pet. Always alone, apart, somehow solitary, Tristan is buried up in Alberta. (Harrison 275-6)

The graves of all these strictly fictional characters from *Legends of the Fall* matter just as much as the graves of all the real people in *This House of Sky*. That is true, at least in retrospect, or in memory. We can look back to the stories about the people who have

died, in life, in literature, and learn from them. I mentioned earlier that the act of writing is a trade. Writing actively makes a relationship with landscape because it forms how we look at land. That is to say, the stories of Maclean, Doig, Harrison, McGuane, and others make a fictional history so that these stories almost become history themselves. That is accentuated by the fact that these stories I have quoted blur the lines between autobiography and fiction. It is as though these writers mix memory with fact, creating a narrative that blends truth and fiction so that the reader cannot tell the differences between them.

Indeed, how we remember people in a landscape has to be considered. Often, memories are the only evidence of a relationship ever taking place. There is something practical about memories being transferred to stories because the stories then exist, on one level, as graves or landmarks of memory. Truly, these stories become history. I would say *A River Runs Through It* and *This House of Sky* are strong landmarks of people on the Big Blackfoot River and in the Smith River Valley. McGuane marks his place with animals. In his way, understanding one horse takes time, and when he sells a horse he sells that unique relationship, and his talents as a trainer live on in the skill of the horse. His stories are landmarks of that training. And Harrison comes with reverse intentions. He marks the relationship with land through myth. Harrison influences the reader's memory of and relationship with place by adding stories to it. In some ways his representation, by being the most fictionalized, does not pretend to be anything other than what it is. At least until the epilogue, which catches us guessing.

No matter how each author remembers land, his intentions are good. Or perhaps positive is a better word. There is something noble or respectable or conclusive about searching one's memories, especially if they're misunderstood at the beginning of the search. I think Doig and Maclean had memories that plagued their thoughts until they could write them down on paper. That act of writing allowed a coming to terms with what confused them. McGuane's writing seems to explain the instinctual minds of humans and animals. He proves that humans are stewards, not only of wildlife, but also of the wildness within humans. He would probably say humans *should* be better stewards of themselves. Harrison's more mythical approach shows either end of the human spectrum, especially the highs and lows of emotional and physical existence. We can probably never exceed his characters' failures or their successes, and so they speak for our existence by representation.

I don't know if one would call searching one's memories a tradition. William Kittredge refrained from doing so when he collected Montana literature in the anthology of *The Last Best Place*. I agree that place is not necessarily a tradition in itself. Place is the result of traditional behaviors, like learning a trade, or performing a trade. Kittredge says place acts more like a pattern. He writes:

This seeking after a good place in which to conduct a good life is the most evident pattern in Montana narratives...the possibility of a coherent life in a last best place. (Kittredge 765)

Coherent is a good word, and it represents how authors come to terms with disconnected or misunderstood or inconsistent memories. If place is where people interact with landscape, forming coherence of how interaction occurred based on memory is an act that

parallels the act of writing. Perhaps it is the same act. Writing could be considered remembering, at least in place narratives.

From here there are a number of changes that are occurring in the genre of place. Relatively new voices in western literature are naming place in ways that add to how Harrison, McGuane, Maclean and Doig name place. For each of them, place is about some kind of personal knowledge.

I would like to propose that the next authors, James Welch and Robert Redford, craft place in a way that highlights both an examination of personal knowledge while simultaneously examining place as it applies to someone else, perhaps another author or perhaps an entire people.

The first of these voices, James Welch, was featured quite prevalently in *The Last Best Place* and was on its editorial board. The reason for his position is that he stands as a voice of Native American literature who understands his cultural history in a way that challenges assumptions or stereotypes about Native Americans. Welch's work represents a shift. In Native American narratives, people nearly always speak of landscape as something they are tied to in comfortable and known ways that make them interdependent. In modern narratives, this may be a construction of representing the reservation. Welch's work is a break from that location.

For instance, in his novel *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, Welch tells the story of a Native American who leaves America to travel with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in Paris. There is a moment of decision when Charging Elk cannot decide whether or not to

accept the position in the show because his friend, Strikes Plenty, was not chosen to go.

Strikes Plenty knows Charging Elk must not pass up the opportunity. He writes:

Those times are gone, Charging Elk. We must follow our eyes and see what lies ahead. Today we go our separate paths and we are not happy about this. When you come back, things will be changed. But we will not be changed. We have been brothers together for many years, we have raised ourselves from children, and we are still young. Much lies ahead for us, but we will be strong brothers always. (37)

At that moment in the story there are several stereotypes in the balance. Charging Elk will leave his family, his land, and his culture. Unlike the moment of decision he faced when his family and Indian nation were pushed toward a reservation this decision is truly a choice. Welch has found a moment of history that needs to be emphasized. In the narratives of Native American literature, how many times do authors focus on the so-called plight of the Indian on the reservation? Perhaps that narrative has been overused to the point of a stereotype. The worth of such an image, whether true or false, has withered away. If we trace Welch's work from *Fools Crow* to *Winter in the Blood* to *Killing Custer* to *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* we see themes relating to Native Americans becoming more contemporary. *Fools Crow* handles a narrative of Blackfoot in traditional hunting lands. *Winter in the Blood* traces a man whose hunting lands have been exchanged for a restrictive reservation. *Killing Custer* reverses a historical perspective. We see Welch working away from that reservation stereotype, challenging societal views as well as his own.

It is true that Charging Elk did not live on the reservation with his family or nation. He held out with Strikes Plenty in a remote hiding place called the Stronghold. Yet they nearly starved in winters, often could not find game to eat during any season,

and barely survived. Their situation was as meager as their relatives on the reservation. To break away, Charging Elk chooses to travel with Buffalo Bill to Europe. He is at the mercy of his employers. He is paid enough to eat and try only the simple treats Paris offers. He exchanges his performances for existence at a level only slightly higher than reservation life. But he is in control of his freedom. He is not jailed or fenced by unseen boundaries. Unlike the reservation, he chooses the type of interaction he has with any location he chooses.

An accident while performing in front of a crowd in Paris breaks ribs and puts him in the hospital. He thinks his friend, Featherman, in the bed beside him, dies of the flu. Worried that he will also die in an unfamiliar setting he chooses to be on his own in unfamiliar Paris. He escapes the hospital. He lives on the streets. The parallel to many American Indians leaving reservations is striking. But remember that Welch's representation parallels new ground. Charging Elk, from the moment of his decision, directed all interaction he has had with his location. At any time he could leave the show and would not be pursued as he would have had he fled the reservation. The moment of decision allows for the individual to control his interaction. Charging Elk chooses an unclear path and proceeds forward. He disregards the past. He forgets memories. And though he frequently thinks back to his life in America, his course does not alter those memories, or choose to understand them. His moment of decision differs from the writers I named before because they were all tied to the past. They cannot break away from memories or the past. They return to understand brothers and fathers and animals and myths, and their characters, whether true or fictional, all have a desire to understand

the past. Charging Elk, despite his memories, does not need to understand his past. He may long for it, but he knows it, he understands it, he is at ease with it, and he is content. James Welch's Charging Elk moves forward, crafting a new relationship with a new place.

The final author is Robert Redford. By the nature of the medium of cinema he is crafting a different idea of place that is based on visual expression. There is a strong cinematic tradition in Hollywood to adapt Montana literature to the screen or to employ its authors as screenwriters to write movies with western themes. AB Guthrie's works were adapted to films by the same name: *The Way West* (1967) and *The Big Sky* (1952). Guthrie also wrote the screenplay for *Shane* (1953), a script that was Oscar nominated for Best Screenplay (5 other nominations, 1 win). Thomas McGuane had writing credits on *Rancho Deluxe* (1976) *The Sporting Club* (1971), *The Missouri Breaks* (1976), and *Tom Horn* (1980). *Legends of the Fall* (1994) was based on Jim Harrison's novella, and was nominated for three Oscars, including a win for Best Cinematography.

Robert Redford chose to adapt another of Montana's writers to film after he read *A River Runs Through It*, which was given to him by Thomas McGuane. If Redford had attempted to adapt Maclean's novella literally he would have failed. He did not. He chose to respond to certain elements of the novella and move forward. Film adaptations, when properly conceived, craft a new position in relation to the original work. An adaptation is a response, just as a friend responds or ask questions of a person he talks with based on what he is interested in. Likewise, the filmmaker must make natural choices of what he will respond to.

For Redford, the relationship between Norman and Paul and their father was natural. There is a particular selection of the novella that caught his eye. It comes on the last page. Norman is offering his sensitive conclusion. He remembers a conversation he had with his father after Paul's death. He writes:

Once, for instance, my father asked me a series of questions that suddenly made me wonder whether I understood even my father whom I felt closer to than any man I have ever known. "you like to tell stories, don't you?" he asked, and I answered, "Yes, I like to tell stories that are true." Then he asked, "After you have finished your true stories sometime, why don't you make up a story and the people to go with it? Only then will you understand what happened and why. It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us." Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them. (Maclean 103-4)

Redford is not interested in repeating what has been said and said well, but he is interested in what he respects and responds to. He is interested in crafting his place in relation to another's place. He wishes to choose elements he admires or finds universal or believes encouraging in order to keep the spirit of the original novella alive. He adapts those elements to his new message. He makes a contribution to a conversation. He makes a response. He narrates:

Long ago, when I was a young man, my father said to me, 'Norman, you like to tell stories,' and I said, 'yes, I do.' Then he said, 'Someday when you're ready you might tell our family story, only then will you understand what happened and why. In our family there was no clear distinction between flyfishing and religion. (*A River Runs...*)

This narration begins the film. In a sense, Maclean's last words in the novella compose the statement he leaves with the readers. Redford, then, merely answers that statement, casually saying, "you know, Norman, I like the idea of family in your book. I can relate to the need to tell a family story." That is the natural response of which I speak. Then,

after the film's thesis — as the opening line it serves as the thesis — everything supports that response. Redford, like Welch, is interested in remaking something, not merely adding to it. These authors are not interested in crafting place out strictly from their personal memory.

I started with a quote by Wallace Stegner from *Wolf Willow*. That book was a personal source study of Stegner's own writing. In a sense, that's what I've tried to do in this introduction. The source of Ivan Doig's writing, as well as Maclean's, McGuane's, and Harrison's are all based on memory. All are very personal memories that have attached them to one location or another. Interestingly, the memories are of how people other than themselves interacted with location to form place. Or perhaps didn't form place. At some point these writers were separated from that childhood place, just as Stegner was, only to return, compelled to understand the interaction. Charlie Doig struggled. Paul Maclean lived wildly. McGuane is compelled to return to nature repeatedly, and I don't think he'll lose his need for interaction. Harrison is also different than the others. He remembers land for its fictional characters, trying to plant an interaction that never actually happens. The collection of these authors presents a style of writing that is formed from an searching memories. Such place narratives are an accessible form of writing that beginning writers can respond to.

Furthermore, when you look at the sources of place in the works of James Welch and Robert Redford, one finds a second method of interaction that students can emulate. Redford interacts directly with another author whose novella becomes the source of his adaptation. Welch interacts with history, progressively moving stereotypes or longheld

assumptions toward an untold truth. Their work is not strictly retracing personal memories, but certainly those memories are present, fueling the aforementioned interaction. Instead, and this is a common theme between them, they craft place from someone else's original interaction that they never knew completely. Through research or conversation they uncover stories, facts, and anecdotes, recreating or refashioning elements of what they find. They subjectively choose selections to respond to. In short, they represent a style of interaction that favors personal interpretation of what happened while their work is simultaneously informed by personal memory.

CHAPTER 2

WALLACE STEGNER AND THE IDEA OF PLACE

Wallace Stegner believed the vast open arid wilderness of the West was *the geography of hope*. This phrase comes at the end of Stegner's famous *Wilderness Letter* written in 1960. In many ways that letter highlighted how we might look to the West for its spirit rather than its usefulness as a hospitable region to be settled. The West was a place to rejuvenate our sanity, he said, and with that renewed spirit comes hope.

Stegner's perspective of the West was born from firsthand knowledge. He lived throughout the region during his childhood while his father pursued money, his occupations transplanting the Stegner family to Iowa, North Dakota, Saskatchewan, Montana, Utah, Washington, Nevada, and California. Wallace Stegner settled down on his own to become a scholar of literature and writing, earning his PhD at the University of Iowa. He taught at the University of Utah, University of Wisconsin, and Harvard University until he moved to Stanford University where he founded the Stanford Creative Writing Program. Teaching at Stanford he made his home in Los Altos Hills, California, yet he often traveled throughout the country to deliver lectures and speeches, to his summer home in Greensboro, Vermont, and for leisurely visits to favorite locations in the wilderness of California, Utah, and New Mexico.

Wallace Stegner's personal knowledge of the western landscape was matched by the breadth of his writing. As a man of letters, he was adept and skilled in every form of writing. His books of essays, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West* (1992) and *The Sound of Mountain Water* (1969) collect ideas

about how westerners earn and respect and nurture the values associated with their land. His biographies *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (1954) and *The Uneasy Chair: A Biography of Bernard DeVoto* (1974) paint portraits of western intelligence. *One Nation* (1945) understood race well before politicians did. He was a personal historian for *Wolf Willow* (1962), chronicling his relation to the culture of Cypress Hills. His first great novel, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, presented a fictional look at the same region. Other novels were award winners. *Angle of Repose* (1971) won the Pulitzer Prize and *The Spectator Bird* (1976) won the National Book Award. Later works aimed at conservation and preservation of the western landscape, like his *Wilderness Letter* (1960).

The breadth of Stegner's work is miscast as simply western, as if his writing conveys only regional mastery. In his book *Wolf Willow* he wrote, "I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from" (23). He offered this statement early in the book as a thesis. From this we can know that this sentence, which, I believe, is his personal definition of *place*, is composed of people and location. Place, then, is formed where people interact with a physical location. Interaction is the go-between, and in Stegner's *Wolf Willow*, the interaction is completed as he travels to his home and as he writes the book. As a result he crafts place, by knowing his location, and by knowing himself. For Stegner, place is formed wherever a story of interaction is told.

The introspective journey of *Wolf Willow* best explains how Stegner approaches writing. Learning and writing were forced chores — skill was slowly acquired in a search for self-awareness, personal growth, and self-knowledge. Jackson Benson, his

biographer, wrote “In a way, his finest work of art was himself — he often declared that his motive for writing was to examine himself, his roots, his motives and goals” (Benson, *Geography of Hope* 3). With *Wolf Willow* Stegner began his exploration of place with his personal relationship with land in mind. He also was interested in knowing other people’s relationship with history, culture, geography, other races, and wildlife. Thus, place extends beyond personal relationships to include the interconnected relationships between a plurality of people and location in the broadest sense. Place becomes an idea Stegner used as his thesis for understanding people and location. We can trace this philosophy to the source of many of his books.

Yet his vast understanding starts with self-awareness, and it is essential to clarify, in detail, the purpose of his book *Wolf Willow* so that we know his identity and his voice. As the narrative of *Wolf Willow* embarks, Stegner traces the roadmap of the United States to find the borderlands between Montana and Saskatchewan. He drives a graded road along the Milk River connecting U.S. Highway 2 with Canada Highway 1. The road leads to the town of Eastend which his memory knows better as a feeling associated with the smell of wolf willow, the namesake of his journey. He made the trip years before. In the spring of 1914 he and his mother and brother completed the journey in a stagecoach to meet his father. He returns in an automobile to search for evidence of the origins of who he is.

The search ties his personal emotions to his personal methods. He invests himself emotionally into his journey home, and, furthermore, invests every bit of himself into his writing as well. He would say “I wrote my guts out trying to make it as moving on the

page as it was to me while I was living and reliving it” (Schoff, *Geography of Hope* 36).

It would seem that Stegner’s writing and his living were inseparable. The meaning of the former resulting directly from the meaning derived from the latter. Writing and living formed a reciprocal relationship.

I mentioned earlier that Stegner remarks “I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from” (*Wolf Willow* 23). More than any line in his complete bibliography, this one counts. His son, Page, introduces *Wolf Willow* by claiming his father’s remark is rhetorically modest. He believes it should read something more like “I may not know exactly *why* I am who I already know I am, but once I revisit where I’m from, I’ll know better” (Page Stegner, *Introduction to Wolf Willow* xx). I agree with Page, the line is modest, that is true. But as I look for a mentor for my writing I see him here. Stegner plainly admits his journey by posing a question of identity. He admits to a universal indulgence — personal curiosity to know one’s self. Driving northward, he knows who he is. But he knows he will learn and remember and improve that identity by revisiting his memories. And, as a writer, he indulges our curiosity, perhaps indicating that we can follow a similar path to self-awareness. After all, by gathering information and exploring his thoughts before the act of writing *Wolf Willow*, he knew what he found before he actually wrote the book.

How we form knowledge about ourselves is a difficult matter. In the paragraph following his statement, Stegner narrows what he knows about himself by virtue of memory. He writes:

I can say to myself that a good part of my private and social character, the kinds of scenery and weather and people and humor I respond to, the prejudices I wear

like dishonorable scars, the affections that sometimes waken me from middle-aged sleep with a rush of undiminished love, the virtues I respect and the weaknesses I condemn, the code I try to live by, the special ways I fail at it and the kinds of shame I feel when I do, the models and heroes I follow, the colors and shapes that evoke my deepest pleasure, the way I adjudicate between personal desire and personal responsibility, have been in good part scored into me by that little womb-village and the lovely, lonely, exposed prairie of the homestead. However anachronistic I may be, I am a product of the American earth, and in nothing quite so much as in the contrast between what I knew through the pores and what I was officially taught. (*Wolf Willow* 23)

I would say Stegner is offering an initial, tentative explanation of what he knows about himself. He moved to Great Falls in 1920, leaving the only extended stay of his childhood behind. Curiosity and instinct drive him back northward to find the stories that made him. He knows where he is from, but his journey is an attempt to answer some of the questions about who he is. You might say that he has set all that he knows himself, and the rest of the book will discuss what he comes to learn by traveling to Eastend.

The following chapters of *Wolf Willow* are historical, cultural, and social commentaries on the region along the border between Saskatchewan and Montana. On another level, Stegner presents a survey of observations explaining the background to his personal education. Each chapter is a package of history, fiction, and autobiography. *The Dump Ground*, where Stegner searched for trash and treasure, is a metaphor for recycling the town's history. *The Divide* is a geographic history of the Cypress Hills, the backdrop to Stegner's prairie. *Horse and Gun* is an anthropological study of the region's Native-Americans and an assessment of where his child's image of them began. *Genesis* is a short story of a green cowboy on a cattle drive during the horrendous winter of 1906. Some nineteen chapters find the corners of Eastend as both Stegner and history see them.

To understand Wallace Stegner's idea of place is to revisit our past, physically through research and observation, and emotionally by reliving memories through the act of writing. I made the earlier comment that place is where people interact with landscape. Physically revisiting the landscape sometimes supports fresh observations made by our senses. We can experience clouds stringing over the Cypress Hills, the pungent smell of wolf willow along a cutbank, gunshots from a young man's .22 rifle, and so on. Our emotional connection can be heightened by close physical proximity. In *The Dump Ground*, Stegner's view of the town dump reacquainted him with the emotional loss of his colt, which he nursed from a crippling injury only to find its skinned carcass with the rest of the town's trash. The strength of loss, sadness, and anger undoubtedly increase as he stands next to the dump. Ultimately, revisiting our place physically and emotionally is comparable to the original experiencing of the place. As a child our memory is, perhaps, not quite up to the challenge of filtering every little experiences of our senses. Yet, as a child we are certainly shaped by what we experience, no matter how difficult it is to synthesize. Mature observations allow us to fact-check our memory for truth.

We must capitalize on those observations to write about old memories with a fresh voice. The act of writing, particularly as we choose what specific experiences we will write about and the language we will use, will revisit the original experience. This act is most important for its tendency to help us figure out what we are writing about. If Wallace Stegner knew where he was from, but did not know who he was, his best

solution was to travel to what he did know in hope of what he could find out about what he did not know.

Years later, Stegner returns to the idea of place in an essay, *The Sense of Place*. Stegner defines place with the comfort and ease of a teacher who has used place to find himself, somewhat unlike the youthful definition of place in *Wolf Willow*. He is now helping others to find themselves. I would like to quote a familiar line. Stegner is again modest, this time crediting one of his students from Stanford, “If you don’t know where you are, says Wendell Berry, you don’t know *who* you are” (*The Sense of Place* 199). From here, Stegner builds place by talking about knowing, about how people interact with location, specifically how they experience it through their senses. Knowing a location by senses is an intimate knowledge. He writes:

Back to Wendell Berry, and his belief that if you don’t know where you are you don’t know who you are. He is not talking about the kind of location that can be determined by looking at a map or street sign. He is talking about the kind of knowing that involves the senses, the memory, the history of a family or a tribe. He is talking about the knowledge of place that comes from working it in all weathers, making a living from it, suffering from its catastrophes, loving its mornings or evenings or hot noons, valuing it for the profound investment of labor and feeling that you, your parents and grandparents, your all-but-unknown ancestors have put into it. He is talking about the knowing that poets specialize in. (*The Sense of Place* 205)

The Sense of Place takes the tendency to *observe* and *write* place from *Wolf Willow* and makes it active. Knowing place is now based upon actions Stegner names like working, living, suffering, loving, valuing, and feeling. Stegner is a writer, after all, and his idea of actively knowing a place revolves around people knowing then communicating place, especially in some form of structured storytelling. My favorite line from all of Stegner’s writing — the knowing poets specialize in — combines the style of making emotional

and physical observations used in Stegner's *Wolf Willow*, but is reinforced with an active knowledge from the idea of place created in *The Sense of Place*.

The *knowing poets specialize in* takes the feeling from observation and act of writing, turning it to a more developed action and more poetic words. More than *Wolf Willow*, it tells us to write well. Natural to that process is activity — the writing of poetry, or of fiction, or of any narrative that tells the story of where you are from and who you are. The commonality between them is storytelling. By telling stories about your place, you are also participating in the act of figuring yourself out. The writer is searching through writing. “No place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments. Fictions serve as well as facts” (*The Sense of Place* 202). Each time the writer drafts another narrative sourced in place he knows himself further, but also knows his place further.

Let me give you an example from Stegner's writing that explains writing about place. First, the need to write about something is established. Stegner believes place comes from a highly impressionable period of youth. That is, experiences that shape growing up do not cease to function after youth, but continue to be the formative lens by which all experiences are measured. In the first few chapters of *Wolf Willow* he explains that youthful lens is closely tied to environment. He writes:

Unless everything in a man's memory of childhood is misleading, there is a time somewhere between the ages of five and twelve which corresponds to the phase ethologists have isolated in the development of birds, when an impression lasting only a few seconds may be imprinted on the young bird for life...Expose a just-hatched duckling to an alarm clock, or a wooden decoy on rollers, or a man, or any other object that moves and makes a noise, and it will react for life as if that object were its mother. Expose a child to a particular environment at his

susceptible time and he will perceive in the shapes of that environment until he dies. (*Wolf Willow* 21)

Stegner's environment is clearly Eastend, Saskatchewan, and the trip he makes for *Wolf Willow* as a middle-aged man is a successful attempt to understand the environment that shaped his perceptions. Stegner is careful to introduce this idea in the early chapters of *Wolf Willow* because it sets the course of the book as an investigation of how he views life through the Eastend lens. It is an investigation of a past that created place, and place configures how he looks at that past.

The susceptible time that formed Stegner's place can certainly be traced to many origins, but I would like to focus on one moment to examine how deeply and extensively Stegner's idea of the *susceptible time* applied to his life and work. I would like to explore how Stegner creates the story of the colt in *Wolf Willow*, the essay *Finding the Place: A Migrant Childhood*, and his novel, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*.

We'll start with *Wolf Willow*. The story of the colt makes its appearance as a memory associated with the town dump. The dump ground, as it was called by the citizens of Eastend, contained all the trash the town threw out. The Stegner boys, and the rest of their gang, would filter through junk for treasures. They found things like shiny metal belt buckles and a wall mount of mountain goat whose beard was full of moths. Eventually these treasures would find their way home as possessions until they were found by their parents and sent to the dump. In their consistent searches, Stegner found something that caused great sadness. He writes:

The colt whose picked skeleton lay out there was mine. He had been incurably crippled when dogs chased our mare Daisy the morning after she foaled. I had worked for months to make him well, had fed him by hand, curried him, talked

my father into having iron braces made for his front legs. And I had not known that he would have to be destroyed. One weekend I turned him over to the foreman of one of the ranches, presumably so that he could be better cared for. A few days later I found his skinned body, with the braces still on his crippled front legs, lying on the dump. I think I might eventually have accepted the colt's death, and forgiven his killer, if it had not been for that dirty little two-dollar meanness that skinned him. (*Wolf Willow* 35)

On a level concerning history, what is thrown out is later valued. By visiting the dumping ground in person during his *Wolf Willow* research, Stegner reacquaints himself with the powerful memory of the colt. The power of the memory is the emotion it caused when he was young. The need to continue to write about it comes from the need to understand that memory, to come to terms with the emotion. Each version he writes finds a different purpose to explain its meaning. In the chapter *The Dump Ground*, Stegner uses the story as proof of youthful emotion lasting until adulthood.

The next use of this story comes in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* which actually precedes *Wolf Willow*. I wanted to propose the emotional moment before I presented Stegner's account of it. Of course Stegner's fictional Mason family does not precisely share his perspective. Indeed, they carry his perfected perspective, finetuned with time. In this excerpt, the parallel character to Wallace Stegner is Bruce Mason. The scene takes place midway through the book as the Mason family leaves Whitemud, the fictional name for Eastend. He writes:

The boys chanted at everything they saw... "Goodbye, Old Whitemud River, Goodbye, Old Dumpground, Goodbye."

"Hold your noses," Bo said. He eased the car into the windward fork around the dump. "Somebody sure dumped something rotten."

He stared ahead, bending forward a little, and Elsa heard him swear under his breath. The car jumped ahead over the bumpy trail.

“What?” Elsa said. She looked at his set face, the dark look of anger in it. Then she saw too, with a hard, flinching pain, and closed her lips tight over her teeth. Hurry, she said. Oh, hurry, get by before he sees it!

But the boys were not missing anything. They were half standing, excited by the burst of speed and the reckless bouncing. She knew he saw it before she heard him cry out; she could feel his seeing it like a bright electric shock, the way she had once felt the pain of a woman in the traveling dentist’s chair when the dentist dug a living nerve out of the woman’s tooth and there was a livid tableau, the woman sitting with face lifted, half rising from the chair, the dentist scrambling stupidly on hands and knees looking for the wire of pain he had dropped. Then she heard Bruce’s cry.

“Oh!” he said. “It’s Socks! Ma, it’s Socks! Stop, Pa, there’s Socks!”

His father drove grimly ahead, not turning or speaking, and Elsa shook her head. Bruce screamed, and neither of them turned or spoke. And when he dug down into the luggage, burrowing in and hiding his head, shaking with long smothered sobs, there was no word in the car except Chet’s “Gee whiz, he still had his hobbles on!”

So they left town, and as they wound up the dugway to the bench none of them had the heart to look back on the town they were leaving, on the flat river bottom green with spring, its village snuggled in the loops of river. Their minds were all on the bloated, skinned body of the colt, the sorrel hair left below the knees, the iron braces still on the broken front legs.

Wherever you go, Elsa was thinking, whenever you move and go away, you leave a death behind. (332)

Finally, the story of the colt is told in the essay, *Finding the Place: A Migrant Childhood*, published in 1989. Here, the story, as it appears in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, is explained as a practical writing tool.

In *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* there is a chapter, made out of an earlier short story called “The Colt,” which reports the Mason family’s departure from Eastend, and the desolation of young Bruce Mason, who is of course based on myself, when they drive past the dump ground on the way out of town and he sees the skinned body of his cripple colt, the iron braces still on the front legs, thrown on the dump. He had thought the colt was going to be cared for at a ranch downriver, and what he saw on the dump made him pull a blanket over his head and bawl. The story is an approximation only. That is not quite the way we left. I pulled a blanket over my head and bawled, all right, when I saw my crippled colt dead on the dump. But that had happened the year before. When I wrote the story I needed a justification for the boy’s distress; but in reality, his distress was all at the realization that he was leaving behind his friends, the river’s wild rose bars and cutbank bends, the secret hideouts in the brush, Chimney Coulee’s berry

patches, the sound of water running under the sagging snowbanks in May, the Chinook winds with their fierce blizzardly sound and their breath as warm as a cow's. In the very thrill of leaving, it struck him—me—all of a sudden *what* he and I were leaving...I loved the place I was losing, the place that years of our lives had worn smooth. (*Finding the Place* 11-12)

I feel there is a need to quote the entire length of these excerpts in order to show how Stegner dealt with this memory in several forms and with varied perspectives. I think each version was a revision. Chronologically, he started with fiction, moved to personal commentary about what might not have been perfectly clear in his original representation, and ended with his final look, stating as exactly as he could, a self-examination of his intentions for how and why he used the story.

With each draft Stegner became increasingly self-aware. Just as he traveled back to Eastend to consider the sources of his self-identity, he returns to his previous draft to consider its truth. And when he revises the story, or explains it, he shows the reader that he is learning about himself once again. Indeed, he is always learning. In the interlude between two drafts he has had time to think about his previous attempt to write what he knows about himself.

The interaction, here, is writing. I said that place is formed where people interact with place. In the story of the colt, place is formed wherever Stegner interacts with the memory of seeing that dump ground when he passed the carcass. The original interaction was the sadness he felt as a young boy. Somewhere in his mind that sadness sticks with him, compelling him to interact with the memory by writing. The act of writing becomes interaction between him now and location then. Place is always being revised in our

minds and on paper. That is why, I believe, Stegner wrote with care and investment. The act of writing achieves self-awareness just as the act of thinking revises memories.

CHAPTER 3

THE MACLEAN PLACE

Place narratives are, as an act of writing, attempts at self-discovery. A writer writes place narratives to understand unresolved memories, affording an opportunity for coming to terms with those memories. Cleansed by the act of writing, the writer continues to search. With each draft, the narrative closes in on a perceived memory. With each draft, the writer knows himself a little more completely.

When Ivan Doig came to Montana State University to speak about place he was known for the place he crafted in *This House of Sky* in 1978. What we learned from Doig's act of writing is that his autobiographical novel explored his childhood feelings of his mother's death.

By the time I was a boy and Dad was trying in his own right to put together a life again, the doubt and defeat in the valley's history had tamped down into a single word. Anyone of Dad's generation always talked of a piece of land where some worn-out family eventually had lost to weather or market prices not as a farm or a ranch or even a homestead, but as a place. All those empty little clearings which ghosted that sage countryside — just the McLoughlin place there by that butte, the Vinton place over this ridge, the Kuhnes place, the Catlin place, the Winters place, the McReynolds place, all the tens of dozens of sites where families lit in the valley or its rimming foothills, couldn't hold on, and drifted off. All of them epitaphed with that barest of words, *place*. (*This House of Sky* 22-23)

All those places stood individually as recognized places, and Doig slips his own place beside them. Doig's place is an equal because he now understands the memory of his youth, and knows his tragedy parallels the obstacles that every pioneer family encountered in that valley. The Doig place is nestled next to the McLoughlin place, the Winton place, the Kuhnes place and the others he remembers.

Doig uses the word epitaph to mark these family homesteads. Unfortunately, it is a word that reflects broken beginnings. Despite the tone of living, when we consider his novel, no matter how sad its message, we can remember his search in positive terms. Embodied in his narrative is a resolution to the tragedy — the finished novel is the resolution.

That insightful conclusion shows Doig understands where he is from and who he is. Indeed, if you take the last line of that long quote from Stegner I used earlier — *the knowing poets specialize in* — I think we can assume Doig knows his voice. Finding place or finding self are synonymous with finding voice. And we can then consider the Doig place as one established, self-aware authorial voice among the literary valley of authors in Montana, including the Stegner place, the Norman Maclean place, the Tom McGuane place, the Jim Harrison place, and so on.

Those places of Montana literature are collected by editor William Kittredge in the anthology, *The Last Best Place*. Kittredge was the director of the creative writing program at the University of Montana where he taught authors and knew others, all of them adding their place to the tradition. In his essay introducing the section of contemporary fiction, Kittredge writes:

This seeking after a good place in which to conduct a good life is the most evident pattern in Montana narratives...All of these stories seem to be focused mainly on naming, one way or another, what they value in the Montana they were born to or found. What we find in these stories, over and over again, is talk of home, lost or sought after, or in some conditional way discovered or rediscovered — the possibility of a coherent life in a last best place. (Kittredge 765)

Kittredge shows that place writes life, or perhaps, writes living. And narratives rediscover past living. Creating a place understands past, present, and future

relationships with voice, self-discovery, and memories — each of which define how we tell the story of interacting with landscape. Place is reciprocal with storytelling; only when a story about place is told can a place be made.

The Last Best Place includes the last best pages of Norman Maclean's novella, *A River Runs Through It*, where he takes us through the last day he and Paul and their father, Reverend Maclean, flyfished together on the Big Blackfoot River. Maclean's words in those pages explain the life of his brother, Paul, as much as they can, or perhaps it is better said that those pages explain the *way* Paul lived.

Lets go back to the beginning — to Maclean's foundation of Paul's life. On the second page of the novella, Norman tells us about the way his father taught his boys to cast. "As he buttoned his glove in preparation to giving us a lesson, he would say, 'It is an art that is performed on a four-count rhythm between ten and two o'clock'" (2). Norman says his father always introduced flyfishing lessons with this message of rhythm, and I think Norman wanted to start his novella with the same hint. He uses his father's statement to tell us he wanted to tell a lesson about his brother, Paul.

Truth be known, *A River Runs Through It* is a personal study of Paul's death, and Norman Maclean writes to metaphorically superimpose two images — the river and Paul — into one rhythm. He writes about the river, the Big Blackfoot, because it is still alive to understand, and, if he comes to know the river, perhaps he will know Paul.

In death, it had its pattern, and we can only hope for as much. Its overall pattern was the favorite serpentine curve of the artist sketched in the valley from my hill to the last hill I could see on the other side. But internally it was made of sharp angles. It ran seemingly straight for a while, turned abruptly, then ran smoothly again, then met another obstacle, again was turned sharply and again ran smoothly. Straight lines that couldn't be exactly straight and angles that couldn't

have been exactly right angles became the artist's most beautiful curve and swept from here across the valley to where it could no longer be seen. (Maclean 43)

The metaphor is thick with obvious comparisons to Paul, similarities between the curves of the Blackfoot and the cast of Paul's line, sharp angles and sharp temper, and two movements that follow natural instinct.

Like the river, Paul's interaction with Montana was metered at a rhythm wilder than Norman's. Paul lived like a like a big fish in big water, uncontrolled by others, and defined by how others tried to control him, or in Norman's memory, how others tried to help him. Paul follows natural instinct. He forgoes the Presbyterian four-count rhythm taught by a metronome to invent his shadowcast, where the line travels close enough and long enough along the water to form a rainbow. He doesn't eat God's oats at the dinner table, defying his father's command that it must be done before grace is said. He becomes a reporter instead of learning a noble profession. As a young boy he tries to place bets on horses at the county fair, and by the time he was an adult he was in heavy debt at the stud poker games.

Norman's rhythm was more like his father's. Norman chose to follow the disciplined methods of the Scottish Presbyterian, completing his education at Dartmouth College, working for the Forest Service during summers, and settling down to marry Jessie Burns. In the last pages Norman shows how his father notices the difference.

"While my father was watching my brother, he reached over to pat me, but he missed, so he had to turn his eyes and look for my knee and try again. He must have thought that I felt neglected and that he should tell me he was proud of me but for other reasons"

(Maclean 100).

The conflict of the story is between these two rhythms. A lot of people who love *A River Runs Through It* rightfully believe the book is about Norman's effort to help Paul, a disciplined rhythm helping a wilder one. William Kittredge, as part of his opening essay in *The Last Best Place*, explained the spirit of the novella that capture the reader's emotions. He writes:

A River Runs Through It is a story about delineating the ways in which we can and cannot help one another, in the unlikely event we might know what help would be. It's glory lies in Maclean's willing reverence, always implied in the precision of his language as he goes at his business of naming the sacred aspects of his own life. And there's more. Perhaps the story's most profound glory lies in Maclean's ability to convince us that all of our lives contain elements that are sacred on any scale of things. (761-762)

I like the thoughts after Kittredge's phrase *and there's more*. He proposes Norman isn't just writing about helping Paul, but is writing about the sacred elements of his personal memory.

In the tradition of place, Norman Maclean's novella shows that he is returning to his past on a search to understand himself and his brother through the act of writing. Maclean retired from teaching at the University of Chicago in 1973 at 70 years old. Untied, Norman returned to seemingly unresolved emotions and reactions to his brother's death in 1937. Norman is seeking knowledge with the same intentions with which Wallace Stegner sought to understand himself when he posed the unsure statement, "I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from" (*Wolf Willow* 23). Norman Maclean always knew where he was from, but like Stegner, did not know who he was, at least not in relation to Paul's death.

There are markers in *A River Runs Through It* where Maclean's emotions show through his writing. That last day on the river, Norman thought about Paul as they fished the Big Blackfoot on opposite banks, their casts mirroring the same hole. He writes:

While I was standing in quiet, shady water, I half noticed that no stone flies were hatching, and I should have thought longer about what I saw but instead I found myself thinking about character. It seems somehow natural to start thinking about character when you get ahead of somebody, especially about the character of the one who is behind. I was thinking of how, when things get tough, my brother looked to himself to get himself out of trouble. He never looked for any flies from me. I had a whole round of thoughts on this subject before I returned to reality and yellow stone flies. I started thinking that, though he was my brother, he was sometimes knot-headed. I pursued this line of thought back to the Greeks who believed that not wanting any help might even get you killed. Then I suddenly remembered that my brother was almost always a winner and often because he didn't borrow flies. So I decided that the response we make to character on any given day depends largely on the response fish are making to character on the same day. (90)

It is difficult to determine how much of this selection is the truth experienced in the moment of fishing the Big Blackfoot that day as opposed to how much of it might be a fictional representation of a lasting memory. Maclean revisits such memories, and how he remembers people seems to win out over how life really happened. This includes how he remembers himself. Perhaps Norman truthfully remembers himself in the act of thinking, and what is fictional is the subject of his thoughts. Helping Paul may or may not have been on his mind then, but it certainly is on his mind 36 years after Paul's death.

I believe that when Norman Maclean looks back over his life he focuses on this last day of fishing with his brother as the moment that shapes him. In Stegner's words, "Expose a child to a particular environment at his susceptible time and he will perceive in the shapes of that environment until he dies" (*Wolf Willow* 21). Revisiting that day interprets many years of thought. When Norman finally agrees to share a yellow stone

fly with Paul, Norman writes “All there is to thinking is seeing something noticeable which makes you see something you weren’t noticing which makes you see something that isn’t even visible” (Maclean 92). I don’t know what something noticeable is, nor do I know how it transitions to something you weren’t noticing to something invisible, but I know Norman longs for Paul. I might guess, too, that Norman saw that Paul obviously needed help with his gambling debts, but that Norman only knows that now, in retrospect. And now his thoughts plague him, making him think about every possible solution and resolution that were not visible to him when he fished with his brother. He attempts to know what *isn’t even visible* by writing.

The process that Paul suggests, and that Norman partakes in, is the way place is understood and communicated. Place is a dual-process, as much acting as it is thinking, so knowing what Norman does in this book is important to further knowing what place is in literature. The last page is his admission. Norman talks about conversations he and his father had about details, like how nearly all the bones in Paul’s right hand were broken at his death. Then they no longer spoke about death — they spoke only about understanding.

Once, for instance, my father asked me a series of questions that suddenly made me wonder whether I understood even my father whom I felt closer to than any man I have ever known. “you like to tell stories, don’t you?” he asked, and I answered, “Yes, I like to tell stories that are true.” Then he asked, “After you have finished your true stories sometime, why don’t you make up a story and the people to go with it? Only then will you understand what happened and why. It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us.” Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them. (Maclean 103-4)

Coming as the last words of the story, the conversation gives depth to the opposites of Paul and Norman's separate rhythms. Reverend Maclean's advice opens comparisons between fiction and truth, past and present, confusion and understanding. Norman's reflective writing has crafted the differences between each divide, yet by hidden and secretive suggestions we finally glimpse results of his methods. His explanation suggests things we already know, but haven't tied together until the moment he truly understands, "I am haunted by waters." We know he started *A River Runs Through It* to understand, and perhaps his writing answered some thoughts, but his thinking continues.

CHAPTER 4

REDFORD'S RESPONSE TO PLACE

Robert Redford's *A River Runs Through It* (1992) is an adaptation of Norman Maclean's novella. Filmed on location on the Gallatin and Madison rivers around Bozeman and on Mill Creek, a spring creek flowing through the eastern side of Paradise Valley into the Yellowstone River, the picture is devoted to Montana landscape. Yet Redford did not film the actual setting of Maclean's novella such as the Big Blackfoot River, the Elkhorn River, or Seeley Lake. Redford, I believe, chose these locations for other reasons, and what is important to note is that he was not against changing the original. Indeed, the landscape of Redford's *A River Runs Through It* proposes how successful adaptations of literature to film builds upon elements of the original. Film cannot be a true adaptation, but must aspire to be a response to the elements its author values most.

Without question, the most unfortunate sin of cinema is to claim a film is a true adaptation of its literary source. An adaptation always changes the elements of a novel, and, furthermore, these elements are under control of a different author than the novel because the medium is now visual. Whereas a novel has its single author, the film is always a collaboration between creative architects who tinker endlessly with the novel's ideas and meanings at every level of production. As they change literary elements to visual representation these various authors work simultaneously, often in conflict or in disagreement or in isolation. Understanding the chaotic collaborative process of any one film will ultimately yield the elements of the novel that inspired the response.

Furthermore, out of this process most films reach the screen with one authorial voice that resonates more clearly than its competitors. However, this voice does not control all elements of a film as an author controls the elements of his novel. The authorial voice of a film is simply the clearest voice among the many, becoming the representation of the novel.

I like the idea of a film being a response to a novel, rather than an adaptation. It is the same process that Wallace Stegner or Norman Maclean use as they write with place in mind. They use it to understand their life from a viewpoint of wisdom and hindsight. This is the sense of place Stegner proposed. In action, each author is using the strategy of place. Maclean, for example, looks back at his brother to focus on the help he could have given. Redford's film is a response to Maclean, using the relationship between Norman and Paul as the foundation for his film. Yet, Redford is an artist, and his film is not just a simplistic response, but is layered with his own touches. Understanding his vision and its ramifications makes his voice very clear.

Redford was given a copy of *A River Runs Through It* by Thomas McGuane, an author of western literature who lives in Montana. (McGuane was also a student of Wallace Stegner at Stanford's Creative Writing Program.) As Redford read through Maclean's writing, he was drawn to family relationships. In an interview conducted by *Shadow Casting: The Making of A River Runs Through It*, Robert Redford noted his connection to the novella.

For me the key was in maintaining the chief element in the book which is Norman's voice. Norman described...the story as a story about a deeply loving family, but a family that was troubled, and finally could not understand each other. I would probably go a step further and say that this film...reaches into that

dark area of not being able to help someone you love until it's too late. That's what interested me most. (*Shadow Casting*)

We can take this statement as Redford's thesis. His film will be built from a foundation of the brothers.

Redford crafts his film to add to this relationship. In the opening scene the camera zooms in on a river flowing over red and gray and blue and purple round rocks so that only the rocks and the water and the water's sound are seen and heard. Then, Redford narrates a few lines before opening credits. Redford narrates:

Long ago, when I was a young man, my father said to me, 'Norman, you like to tell stories,' and I said, 'yes, I do.' Then he said, 'Someday when you're ready you might tell our family story, only then will you understand what happened and why. In our family there was no clear distinction between flyfishing and religion. (*A River Runs...*)

I quoted the source of this narration from Norman Maclean's novella earlier in the paper to show how Maclean names the purpose of his book. In Maclean's words it goes like this: "After you have finished your true stories sometime, why don't you make up a story and the people to go with it? Only then will you understand what happened and why" (103-4). Maclean's lines conclude his novella, and are used as the resolution to understanding his brother, Paul. Perhaps he cannot understand everything that has happened, but his memories are strong. The strength of his memories enable some understanding, perhaps just enough to ask all the questions. Yet the answers are out of reach. And when Maclean ends his novel with "I am haunted by waters" he admits that Paul is linked to the Big Blackfoot just as his personal memories are linked to a regret of not helping his brother.

Redford has tinkered with the line to make it mean something more relevant to his response. He values the family relationship, and must name it more specifically so that viewers of the film can make the distinction. Redford will move toward his response, dropping other elements to focus on this most important theme. This line — *you might tell our family story* — is his topic sentence, outlining the direction of his film.

Redford adds a number of sequences from outside the novella. These occur early in the film. That is, I think he changes early elements of the film to skew the meaning of the film heavily toward the brothers and away from introspection by Norman the author. Norman goes to the school of Reverend Maclean, and while Norman learns reading and writing of literature, especially that “the art of writing lay in thrift,” Paul waits in the hallway to go flyfishing. When the lesson is done the boys race to the river where they spend the afternoon flyfishing. There’s another scene where the boys head to town to taunt women in the brothels, sneak a ride on a wagon, and watch and partake in fistfights.

The most developed story addition, and perhaps the one that really stands for what Redford is trying to do, is when Paul dares his brother and a group of friends to steal a neighbor’s wooden rowboat to ride the river’s rapids . Paul says, “I know how we can go down in history. They’d bury you with full honors, tell’em, Norm.” And Norm responds, “Well, we would be the Kings of Missoula” (*A River Runs...*). Everyone agrees to shoot the chutes, but when the party views the gruesome rocks that guard the river, everyone turns chicken save the Macleans. Paul concludes, “Then I guess it’s just the Macleans.” The Macleans live through the stunt to form a brotherhood of bravery and pride, only to face their scowling father and mother in the hallway of the family home.

One might say that Redford is taking too much liberty in adding these scenes because they come from outside the novel. That claim is too literal. Redford took his relationship with the author and the material very seriously. Despite Hollywood's reputation for forgetting the author's intentions, Redford went so far as to grant Maclean's first approval of a first draft of the film so that the initial development of the film would be satisfactory to Maclean and Redford alike. Redford stated:

What made it happen was trust...I told him I wasn't sure I could make it work [as a movie]. It's a very literary work, difficult to translate to another medium. Nonetheless, I had a tremendous passion to make it, so I proposed the following: that we meet three times, letting a few weeks pass between each meeting. During our encounters we would exchange ideas and ask each other questions freely. If at any point during the process he didn't care to continue, he should say so and we'd go our separate ways, with no hard feelings. But if after the third meeting he was willing to grant me an option, we would go forward. Moreover, I told him I'd show him the screenplay as it developed and allow him to pull the plug. What I asked in return was, having approved the finished script, he would give me the freedom to make the film and shut up. (*Shadow Casting*)

Indeed, when the film was finished, the movie trailer distributed to theaters and television promoted the relationship between the brothers as the film's over-riding message.

It is often those we live with and love, the ones we care about the most, who elude us most. Even now when I look back on the Montana of my youth I long to understand what happened there and why. My brother, Paul, and I grew up in a time when the land was still untouched. It was a world of wonder and possibility. But it was a tough world, too. (Movie Trailer)

As we move through the trailer, the montage that accompanies the narration focuses intently on the boys, beginning with scenes of Norm and Paul running along a ridgeline as young boys. Other short excerpts include the young boys flyfishing in afternoon light, Norman and Paul shooting the chutes in the rowboat as young men, and Norman, Paul,

and Reverend Maclean on the last day they spent fishing together. Also, dialogue from the movie hints at a few lines from the film. Jessie, Norman's girlfriend and wife, states "Why is it the people who need the most help won't take it." And then, Norman, saying to Paul, "I want you to know, I can help" (Movie Trailer).

Narrating over the last few images, a second narrator gives the Hollywood synopsis: "From boys to men, in life and in love, all memories become one, and a river runs through it. From Academy Award-winning director, Robert Redford, comes the classic story of an American Family" (Movie Trailer). The film's economic success rests with family drama and Redford's personal reputation.

Indeed, when Robert Redford chose to narrate the film he attaches his persona to the meaning of the film. He is not simply an actor or director, but brings with him a resume dedicated to environmental activism and arts preservation. He is the founder of the Sundance Institute, an organization that certainly includes the popular Sundance Film Festival, yet also promotes arts through programs like its Native American Initiative. Redford also speaks out on many environmental issues. Recently he criticized President George W. Bush for his energy policies in an editorial titled "Bush vs. the American Landscape." When Redford responds to Maclean, he crafts his film with all these credentials powerfully lingering behind him — credentials that prove Redford seriously interacts with landscape. In a recent interview, Redford names the purpose of Sundance. "We are about good storytelling. If our culture or society loses its mythology or its need to be told stories, we're goners. It is why the Native American program lends itself to the very nature of our mission. Their cultures survived because of the handing down of skills

and information, of storytelling. Sundance at its core about storytelling” (Reynolds 116). Redford’s persona, based the way he interacts with place, especially his lasting commitment to how he tells a story, withstands critical analysis.

His image also draws mainstream audiences. As a box office draw, he captures attention. And this is a parallel to the rugged good looks of Montana. We know how cinema can proliferate popularity of the image of a landscape. *A River Runs Through It* was made by Robert Redford in 1991 in and around Bozeman. A decade after the most beautiful river scenes of Redford’s film were shot in Park County, the number of septic permits, the most reliable statistic to monitor the number of inhabited homes, has doubled, from 1476 in 1989 to 3025 in 1999 (parkcountyenvironmentalcouncil.org). Monthly real estate guides use as their tagline the words, a river runs through it, boasting the property has a creek setting or river frontage. A simple, but beautiful film, remade the landscape of Paradise Valley into a populated valley where residential properties are now its most valuable natural resource.

These results also highlight the importance of responsible storytelling, and remind me of my original point — place is how we interact with landscape. Redford’s storytelling is one way to interact while Maclean’s way is another. They write and film to show, to understand, and to respect land. But we must be responsible in the way we interact. Redford says, “Living close to nature, you develop a way to be with things you can’t control. The frontier we knew doesn’t exist anymore. What does exist is really a vestige of what remains, but in what remains it is important—incredibly important—not only to us but to future generations and must be respected, protected and understood”

(Reynolds 114). Understanding place, the interaction between people and landscape, is a way to understand how we can better shepherd progress of our land. The Western, whether film or literature, can always be an act to show understanding.

CHAPTER 5

TEACHING PLACE: GENESIS IN PLACE OF EXODUS

The appendices of canonical works at the end of Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* does not include regional texts. He argues the Canon should remain pure; such peripheral texts confuse the purpose of the Western Canon, which, in his words, is this — “The Canon, once we view it as the relation of an individual reader and writer to what has been preserved out of what has been written, and forget the canon as a list of books for required study, will be seen as identical with the literary Art of Memory, not with the religious sense of canon” (17). Even though Bloom does not include regional texts in his literary Art of Memory, I believe using place narratives from Montana literature, a so-called selection of regional literature, can provide content and style that are more accessible for beginning writers.

Bloom's message that we should view the Canon “as the relation of an individual reader and writer to what has been preserved out of what has been written” is simultaneously simple and profound because it places the power of the Canon, or any text, into how the individual understands it. Bloom's perspective does not modify the study of Canon literature into cultural studies or political agenda. Moreover, the level of understanding that an individual achieves after reading a novel or essay corresponds directly with a level of usefulness. That is to say, a student who reads material that is close to him will certainly be able to critically assess and respond to it in writing.

Also, Bloom does not offer his lists of books to fuel a mandatory life-long reading plan. Instead, Bloom turns to his “lists, hoping that literate survivors will find some

authors and books among them that they have not encountered and will garner the rewards that only canonical literature affords” (528). Again, Bloom argues for enjoyable learning over institutional learning.

I buy these arguments, and as a result, I believe the Western Canon should not be discarded or disbanded or weakened. By keeping the Canon pure — like idealizing appendices and lists of literature based on aesthetic genius — we preserve our most perfect writing so that the individual can read, study, emulate, and improve upon the Canon. Such a Canon values the individual.

However, by reducing the Canon to the individual, as I believe Bloom would like to accomplish, the Canon seems to expand into a periphery of readings of subjectivity. I will grant Bloom the importance of his appendixes of Canonical literature, but, in addition to the value of the universal aesthetics of the Western Canon, there are highly subjective regional canons which would help students begin to judge

Beginning with Bloom’s wonderful statement of what the Canon is to the individual — “All that the Western Canon can bring one is the proper use of one’s own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one’s confrontation with one’s own mortality” (30) — we can see that the individual is solitarily confronting his own existence. That existence begins where the individual is from. The drama of understanding that place through literature of that place is how one’s own mortality is known. The result is identity.

Though he speaks often of aesthetics, specifically the importance of judging aesthetics, Bloom doesn’t really go so far as to name specific ways for how readers

actually execute the act of judging universally strong, canonical aesthetics. Rather, he has hope in the fact that capable readers exist, readers who know what these quality aesthetics are. Bloom briefly mentions that “We need to teach more selectively, searching for the few who have the capacity to become highly individual readers and writers” (17). I think it is important to start naming how the individual can be Bloom’s idea of highly individual. What are the origins of the student who has the capacity to be highly individual? I would argue that to get to that understanding the individual needs to know where they came from, know where their cognitive processes developed, and, most importantly, know what events and lessons shaped their thinking. Understanding the source of one’s thinking will certainly be a manifestation of confronting one’s own identity.

In the West, and certainly in Montana, we are often defined by issues that connect us with the land. For students, working through such unsettled issues as cyanide heap-leach mining, hydroelectric dam deregulation, wolf reintroduction, CRP farm subsidies, and appropriation of water rights, to name only a few, are beginnings of understanding identity. The push to resolve these problems is the modern representation of the struggle to pioneer the West. Resulting discussion divides and unifies citizenry, both individuals and groups. Where you choose to stand in relation to these problems, and, more importantly, where you stand in relation to your neighbor, determines your identity.

I regularly see the need to clearly establish opinion while teaching College Writing to beginning writers at Montana State University in Bozeman. With few exceptions, most of the freshmen who take my course are Montanans from rural

communities east of the continental divide. These students are genuinely Western, caring deeply for issues that impact the ranches, farms, and small towns they are from; it's just natural to their upbringing. The end I need to achieve as their teacher is to help each student choose one issue, explore its history, and explain their position.

Even with my students' native understanding, learning to craft a sophisticated, formal essay to express their position is not easy. They don't know how to start with a problem, then progress through discussion, to answer, to identity. They know their answer, even their reasoning, but they often struggle to find precise words; they think they lack the proper tools to do so. I don't tell them that the strategy to compose their opinion emerges naturally from within themselves through the power of place — I let Wallace Stegner do that.

Any study of Wallace Stegner will eventually pass through place. Though he was born in Iowa, he spent his youth moving throughout the West. Looking back over his life and career, it is evident Stegner considered Eastend, Saskatchewan, his childhood home. The testimonial of his youth is presented in *Wolf Willow*, his book of powerful essays, fiction, history, and cultural study.

If you take a drive up to Eastend through the northern Montana grasslands and wheatfields you'll cross the highline into Canada to find the house George Stegner built for his family. It's now officially named the Stegner House, though it doesn't honor the builder, but the writer. It's less important to notice the details of the building than to understand the metaphor that exists in the spirit of the homestead. The Stegner House is now used to provide accommodations for writers to live easily and affordably; they live

there, in his place, to learn to write. Place, then, is a highly usable tool that awakens writing.

As I said earlier, learning to write is not easy; it's a search for words to explain. *Wolf Willow* began as such a journey, probably for Stegner to understand his youth. Early in the book, in the late pages of the first chapter, "The Question Mark in the Circle," Stegner finds the words he looked for when he took his trip to Saskatchewan in 1953.

It is with me all at once, what I came hoping to re-establish, an ancient, unbearable recognition, and it comes partly from the children and the footbridge and the river's quiet curve, but much more from the smell. For here, pungent and pervasive, is the smell that has always meant my childhood...And yet all around me is that odor that I have not smelled since I was eleven, but have never forgotten—have dreamed, more than once. Then I pull myself up the bank by a gray-leafed bush, and I have it. The tantalizing and ambiguous and wholly native smell is no more than the shrub we called wolf willow, now blooming with small yellow flowers. (18)

Here, Stegner is not only writing a physical description of *what* he finds, but there's also an underlying message of *how* he finds wolf willow. Both real and symbolic, wolf willow represents place and words he knew from the mind of his youth, but had forgotten them there, and had needed his memory rekindled. Searching Eastend yielded those words.

I believe that each of my students, like Stegner, has the words, they just need a map to find them. Stegner sketches the path to self-discovery in *Wolf Willow*, and in his later essay, *The Sense of Place*.

First, Stegner believes place imprints itself on each individual. In the second chapter of *Wolf Willow*, "History is a Pontoon Bridge," he explains, "Expose a child to a

particular environment at his susceptible time and he will perceive in the shapes of that environment until he dies. The perceptive habits that are like imprintings or like conditional responses carry their habitual and remembered emotions” (21) Place ordains how the individual sees.

Then, in *The Sense of Place*, Stegner shows how place can help us talk about what we see.

Back to Wendell Berry, and his belief that if you don't know where you are you don't know who you are. He is not talking about the kind of location that can be determined by looking at a map or a street sign. He is talking about the kind of knowing that involves the senses, the memory, the history of a family or a tribe. He is talking about the knowledge of place that comes from working in it in all weathers, making a living from it, suffering from its catastrophes, loving its mornings or evenings or hot noons, valuing it for the profound investment of labor and feeling that you, your parent and grandparents, your all-but-unknown ancestors have put into it. He is talking about the knowing that poets specialize in. (205)

If we know our place well enough, we should approach the detailed, invested knowledge Stegner explains here. That resulting knowledge — “the knowing poets specialize in” — is the source of artistry that poets use to create the personal language of their poetry. The words are independently theirs, crafted from knowledge natural and familiar to their place. They find the words and write them, leaving themselves on the page.

In the above excerpt, Wallace Stegner talks about the ability of one of his students at Stanford, Wendell Berry, to use place to write. I would like to talk about how one of my students, JT Gilman, uses place to find personal language to make his point. During the upcoming summer season, JT will fight forest fires in the Big Hole Valley in Southwestern Montana, just as he did last year. It's in his blood — he's a fourth

generation forest firefighter. He grew up in Deer Lodge, Montana, he works in Montana, and tells me in every paper that he'll never leave.

For his first paper in College Writing, JT wrote about how fighting forest fires is meaningful education, how interaction with his crew taught him values of communication, and, most importantly, how he believes forestry agencies can best protect and save our wildlands from fires. The best words he used to defend these points were those he used to talk with his crew in the field, or to discuss firefighting with his father and grandfather, or the terms he learned by firsthand experience fighting fires in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. For JT, working on a fire crew in Wisdom, Montana, shaped his personal language. This is the knowledge Stegner was talking about, and he would be proud of JT's ability to select words natural to his place.

Stegner perfected natural words to describe natural places, using this power to affect change along the way. His mastered skill was not just that he could explain the value of the place he came from, as he did in *Wolf Willow*, but he could travel to any natural landscape and quickly find the words to match. Place inspired his concern, and, in return, conservation became a long-lasting triumph of his writing.

All of my students have equal knowledge of the place they consider to be their home. This is where the regional canon of Montana literature begins to work its influence. As with JT, the first paper assignment for the beginning writer is to create an answer for the natural questions of where are you from and who you are. After studying how Wallace Stegner writes about place in *Wolf Willow*, they no longer hesitate or stammer through opinions about wildlands preservation, or irrigation development, or

forest fire prevention. They search for their own wolf willow, and begin to discover words to support their claims, and, consequently, empower their own identity.

Looking over Harold Bloom's view of building up the individual versus the practical view of how JT executes his assignment is a nice meeting of two worlds – the academic and the personal. What I like about Bloom's vision is simple. He cares for how the individual reads and interprets canonical literature. By knowing how to aesthetically judge the best writing, the individual can also judge, criticize, and evaluate what he or she likes outside the canon. JT's vision, though it is simple and instinctual, isn't that far off from Bloom's, and, even though it might be dismissed by academic circles, it is extremely logical. JT just writes about what is important to him.

When teaching beginning writing to beginning writers I like to start with the JT way of thinking. I try to encourage students to write a highly individual narrative that achieves an explanation of who they are and where they are from. Certainly this follows the school of thought that Wallace Stegner proposes in his various works on the subject of place that I've discussed at length in previous portions. When my class reads through *Wolf Willow* they excitedly and easily respond to how Stegner articulates his past, mimicking the way he writes descriptions of the scenery, activities, and people as well as the more personal explanations of emotional, spiritual, or familial connections.

In addition to Stegner's *Wolf Willow* and *The Sense of Place*, I like to introduce a work of fiction that embodies the process of writing as interaction with place so that students have evidence of how personal narratives about place start to blur the line between autobiography and fiction. Sometimes the fiction we create from what we

understand to be true helps us to remember our pasts, or, at the least, reconsider them.

Thus, it is my goal that beginning writers start their critical thinking with an assessment of what they know best when they begin their studies at MSU – themselves.

Furthermore, works that I have mentioned in this paper, especially *A River Runs Through It* and *This House of Sky*, represent a personal narrative that blends fiction and truth while simultaneously providing a blueprint for the Stegnerian search of oneself through writing, indeed, by the very act of writing.

While the search of one's personal past composes the first segment of the course, the second segment of the course is composed of encouraging each student to start assessing each other's work. Critical reading and thinking skills begin to develop by questioning the community of writers in the classroom through peer workshops as well as challenging other novels, essays, and films. The underlying importance of this type of environment is the possibility for students to respond to what they absorb. At this point the student is pushed from what they know well — themselves — to the uncomfortable position of considering what others know.

The transition between personal narratives to responses is built upon the cinematic adaptation of *A River Runs Through It* by Robert Redford. As I have discussed earlier, the way Redford makes the film is to focus on key elements of the book he particularly connected to. Certainly his opening narration sets a thesis that this film will be about family relationships, especially as it plays out between Norman and Paul. The resulting film does not merely add or subtract from the novella, but Redford selects a series of themes from underneath that guiding force to focus upon.

Students are asked to make this same determination about the novels, essays, and films they encounter. With the adaptation of *A River Runs Through It* as a model they quickly pick up how one responds to a novella. The first assignment, then, is to respond to one theme in Maclean's book. I also introduce film reviews, essays, interviews, documentaries, and other sources of writing about both versions of *A River Runs Through It* in order to widen the community of voices. Later assignments are vague in terms of subject matter, leaving the student to create his paper based solely on his interests. With so many voices and so much information students easily find other questions to answer or original opinions to develop, often without any teacher interference. The natural and practical responses such an environment invokes is genuine and rewarding from my perspective while the students seem to enjoy and capitalize on the freedom to write about any position they wish.

In nearly every respect this composition strategy represents a beginning. Further on down the road, once students have acquainted themselves with literature from their region, they will search for works categorized into appendices of such volumes as Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*. That is not to say Bloom's list of works is the standard. Nor is any such list everlastingly valuable. I simply believe starting with something that students are connected to helps them transition to works they are not accustomed to reading in subsequent courses. Lists are valuable. As I make my list of books about place (just as *The Last Best Place* did in 1988), the works of Montana literature that I have discussed stand as powerful markers. That is to say, this list of literature I have assembled is especially important for readers and writers from this region. In some ways,

one could argue, they are more important for beginning writers like students taking composition at Montana State University. Such literature is comfortable. Speaking on a practical level, *A River Runs Through It* was much more successful as a novel to be discussed and dissected than Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. I firmly believe the success of the former novella is due to the similar place Norman Maclean shares with my students. Simply, they connect to the landmarks and memories Maclean searches in his quest for a better sense of self-understanding.

Indeed, place affords self-understanding, and students who begin their studies with a firm sense of where they are from will, likewise, discover and create a firm sense of who they are. Most importantly, such self-awareness will encourage students to move toward answering another important question – who will you become? Place is the genesis of the answer.

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