

THEORIZING NATURE:
SEEKING MIDDLE GROUND

by

Dahlia Louise Voss

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Arts

in

English

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

January 2005

© COPYRIGHT

by

Dahlia Louise Voss

2004

All Rights Reserved

APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Dahlia Louise Voss

This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

Susan Kollin

Approved for the Department of English

Michael Beehler

Approved for the College of Graduate Studies

Bruce McLeod

STATEMENT OF PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree at Montana State University, I agree that the Library shall make it available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

If I have indicated my intention to copyright this thesis by including a copyright notice page, copying is allowable only for scholarly purposes, consistent with "fair use" as prescribed in the U.S. Copyright Law. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this thesis in whole or in parts may be granted only by the copyright holder.

Dahlia Louise Voss

Dahlia Louise Voss was born in 1972 in Washington, D.C. She is the daughter of Suzanne Dow, author of *The National Forest Campground Guide* and college instructor, and Dan Voss, Naval engineer and avid Formula V driver. Upon high school graduation from Lake Braddock Secondary School in Northern Virginia, she attended and received her Bachelor of Arts in English from James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. After several years of traveling, hiking, biking, skiing, and working in Montana, Oregon, and Vermont, Dahlia returned to school for a Master of Arts in English from Montana State University.

This project would not have been possible without the enduring support of my companion, John Rolfe, whose many hours of fishing and skiing with our son allowed me the time necessary for this project. John and Tyler, thanks for being my inspiration. Many thanks to Pam Flach, Emily Johnsen, Lora Brand, and Big Sky Infant and Toddler Care for their childcare support.

I am also grateful to the amazing insight and encouragement offered by my professors at Montana State University. I especially want to thank Susan Kollin for many thoughtful conversations and whose guidance will forever be remembered as the beginning of lifelong critical explorations. Other faculty of great influence and dedication toward encouraging my learning experience include: Michael Sexson, Robert Bennett, Greg Keeler, Michael Beehler, Sara Jayne Steen, Sharon Beehler, Linda Karell, Kimberly Meyers, and Kirk Branch. Thank you all for your time and knowledgeable guidance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION: THEORIZING THE SELF AND NATURE	1
(Re)presenting the Autobiographical 'I'	9
Rethinking Nature-Culture.....	15
2. REMYTHOLOGIZING EDEN	30
3. QUEERING NATURE IN PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF THE WILD.	48
4. DEEP ECOLOGY IN THE DEEP SOUTH	58
5. CONCLUSION: TOWARD SEEKING MIDDLE GROUND	95
BIBLIOGRAPHY	104

ABSTRACT

Acknowledging that our ideas about nature and culture are both inextricably linked and the result of social factors shaped by multiple forms of knowledge is at the center of this project. Through a postmodern analysis, informed by environmental cultural studies, I critique a relatively new genre, the environmental memoir, to theorize the ways interconnections between nature and culture are either resisted or revealed. Environmental memoir is a genre-hopping exploration of both personal narrative and environmental literature. Critiquing the literary constructions of nature, culture, environmental philosophy, and the autobiographical subject in David Oates' *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature* and Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* I question why we think about nature and culture in the ways that we do and what are the implications. This project exposes how problematic any postmodern critique of nature is.

We assume that our ideas about nature are straightforward. We claim that nature is anything not-man-made and it often becomes represented through a literalized version of 'nature' as a pure and pristine Eden. Ideas about nature, however, are always informed by culture and we often dismiss the need to theorize and question what factors contribute to our ideas about nature, who benefits from these ideas, and who does not. When we essentialize and naturalize nature we set up dualisms and binaries between nature and culture that reduce the real complexities we face in dealing with environmental philosophy, politics, and literature. These dualisms encourage rigid and extremist thinking that cloud our vision. Theorizing nature breaks down and complicates the binaries that separate nature from culture. Seeking the middle ground in the contested terrain of nature requires us to acknowledging that our narratives about nature, culture, and environmentalism are products of multiple sociohistorical factors. Resisting dualistic thinking offers us a new way to think about the interconnections between our lives, wildness, culture, and nature.

EPIGRAPHS

The autobiographical manifesto is a revolutionary gesture poised against amnesia and its compulsory repetitions. It is not quite anamnesis (or reminiscence) so much as a purposeful constitution of a future history, the projection of anamnesis into the future. Moreover, the manifesto offers a point of departure for the current generation...to resist a former generation imposing its multifarious technologies of identity. Through compelling myths and metaphors, these...manifestos map alternative futures for the "I"...They point to blurred boundaries, crossed borderlands of multiplicity, differences and divergences, political possibilities and pitfalls, strategies for intervention. They offer fascinating performances of the revolutionary subject...such performances hold out hope by insisting on the possibility of self-conscious and imaginative breaks in cultural repetitions of the universal subject. (182)

--Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body*

The difficulty of understanding nature is compounded still further by the fact that while it may be thoroughly implicated in culture, as Eco suggests, the reverse is also true: culture is thoroughly implicated in nature. Whenever we try to figure out nature, we are also trying to figure out ourselves...(22)

--Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*

Whenever literary environmentalism's fixation on and reification of nature impoverishes social consciousness, it functions ideologically, working at the most fundamental level to impede rather than facilitate "wholesome political change." (27)

--David Mazel, *American Literary Environmentalism*

Yet nature, like everything else we talk about is first and foremost an artifact of language. As recent developments in literary criticism have made abundantly clear, language is not dependable...As such, nature brought into political life, into language, can hardly remain 'natural.' Therefore, any attempt to invoke the name of nature—whether apologetic or confrontational in relation to authority—must now be either naïve or ironic. It can be anything but direct and literal. (5)

--Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka, *In the Nature of Things*

Even those who do not subscribe to the Judeo-Christian imagery can fall victim to its moral dualism, because that is how Eden tempts us. It is a place of absolute good and absolute evil, of actions that are unambiguously right and wrong. When we project its polarized, black and white myth onto the ambiguous world of gray on gray that we actually inhabit, the power of its imagery sparks our passions but darkens our vision. It buys clarity at the expense of understanding by tempting us to reenact its most ancient of stories rather than listen for whether there might be some other tale to tell. (39)

--William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THEORIZING THE SELF AND NATURE

Two socially constructed categories that have historically been resistant to theory are the Self and Nature. Ideas about the autobiographical 'Self' referring to the metaphysics of presence which point toward 'a Self' in the text or ideas about 'Nature' that refer to the epistemological Other that is not human are more often than not thought of as givens or as natural. Ideas about the Self often exist in relation to and within other categories such as gender, sexuality, race, class, and culture. Ideas about nature often exist in relation to and within categories such as wild, natural, pristine, wildness, or wilderness. All of these additional categories are themselves sociohistorical constructions so whenever we think, talk, and write about the Self or Nature we inevitably get caught up in the complex layering of constructions that are also often mistaken as natural givens. To clarify how these terms will be used I will write Self and Nature with a capital first letter to refer to the essentialized and naturalized versions of these terms. The essential definitions refer to 1.) the Self as a coherent, stable, determined identity that offers the absolute Truth in its self-representation. 2.) Nature refers to a limited and exclusive view of nature-as-wilderness or pristine as opposed to the much more inclusive term 'environment' which includes urban, suburban, other less-than-pristine places as well as designated wilderness, forests, or deserts. This limited view of Nature also refers to the idea of Nature 'out-there' apart from culture and civilization. If I use the lower case version of either the self or nature I am referring to a

more open-ended and more theorized notion of the both terms that resist essential categories.

In this project I will look closely at two texts that I refer to as environmental memoirs, David Oates' *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature* and Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*. These two texts bring forth the myriad ways our constructed ideas about the Self and Nature are reinforced and upheld through belief systems so deep within our culture that they are seemingly invisible, sometimes by the writers themselves. Oates and Ray both cross boundaries within traditional nature writing by weaving together personal narratives with politically infused environmental critiques. David Oates is an openly gay nature writer who defies traditional aspects of nature writing by bringing his sexuality into the text. As David Oates goes out into Nature to deal with a culture, family, and religion that does not accept his sexuality he simultaneously goes on a journey that begins to uncover how inextricably linked the categories of nature, culture, gender, and sexuality are within our lives. Oates critiques rigid religious and sociopolitical constructs of the Self as well as views toward Nature based on literal interpretations of myth and science evident in certain environmental philosophies such as, ecofundamentalism. As David Oates questions our culture's reliance on scientific and religious discourse and narratives about Nature he challenges these cultural belief systems by turning toward a literary aesthetic of our world, one richly imbued with metaphor and infinitely complex. David Oates ultimately encourages a rethinking of American Nature that appreciates the quandary we find ourselves in once we begin theorizing nature.

Whereas Oates' text works toward revealing the quandaries involved in a postmodern analysis of nature and culture, Janisse Ray's text often works in such a way that reinforces a privileged view of pristine Nature that strangely avoids a deep criticism of class issues. The interesting thing about Janisse Ray's ecological philosophy is that it apparently seems so contradictory to the early influences on her life. Ray grew up in a junkyard in rural and poverty stricken Georgia where her family home was situated amidst her father's wrecking yard business. It is worth considering how is it possible that a girl raised in a junkyard becomes such a passionate environmental activist who has an amazing appreciation for the aesthetics and beauty of Nature? How did she learn to have such an appreciation of Nature and why is it manifested through a philosophy of deep ecology? Janisse Ray's ideas about Nature are in line with mainstream environmental views that are so much a part of our cultural beliefs that they are often left unquestioned. Such ideas about Nature are seemingly untouchable; they are automatic givens that define what Nature is.

Deep ecology lies at the heart of Ray's environmental beliefs as she privileges a vision of Nature that is and should be pristine and ideally, virgin. Although Ray's goals toward preservation are clearly not unfounded as much of her native homeland has been wrought with environmental devastation and many species of the longleaf pine woodlands are endangered, her views surprisingly deal less with class critique or environmental justice issues that the South is faced with and more with preservationist politics that privilege a narrow view of Nature. In this sense, Ray's deep ecological views can be associated with a kind of ecology of affluence that wants to preserve Nature

or restore Nature to a pristine state, nobly for the sake of many species of flora and fauna, but unfortunately draws attention away from socioeconomic and class critiques that are only faintly touched upon. Ray could potentially theorize further by critiquing poverty and its connections to environmental degradation or even take a more self-reflexive step toward the interconnectedness of her environmentalist views and her own fundamental religious upbringing since both areas are often steeped in rigid and black-and-white thinking.

The autobiographical 'I' is approached differently in David Oates' *Paradise Wild* and Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* as the two writers vary in their levels of self-reflexive critique. Each text does however raise issues about the construction of identity as well as the interconnectedness between the self and nature. Much is at stake when dealing with identity politics and demands that we question the sociocultural constructions that inform identity. Basically, we must question those assumptions that we take for granted in relation to identity especially in relation to the autobiographical self. To begin unpacking the complex layers that create what seems to be a true or real representation of the Self we can ask questions such as, what are the absent or present forces that might inform ideas about gender, class, race, or sexuality? Who defines these categories and how are they set up hierarchically? Who is the dominant group of people that benefit from these constructions and who is discriminated against or oppressed? Who is authorized to speak and who is spoken for?

Similarly we must question our assumptions about nature and ask what forces have influenced our definitions of nature? Who gets to define nature and how has it been

historically defined? What does it mean that these definitions are never stable and are shaped by social and historical changes? Who benefits from these definitions? Who is displaced, disregarded, exploited, or denied access to nature? Whose nature is exploited and whose is legally worthy of being preserved and why? Why does our culture continually reinforce the idea that Nature is something that exists “out there” completely isolated from anything human? This may be one of the hardest things to come to terms with while theorizing Nature. While there is a physical and material world of “nature” that exists, it can never exist outside of the social and discursive realm. What this means is that our idea that Nature is “out there” is much more complicated once we realize that whatever it is that we see out there is already always figured somehow by previous cultural, religious, scientific, mythological, even political ideas about Nature. We can never fully access nature because it is already constructed for us by multiple forms of knowledge, all of which are also constructed by social and historical factors.

The above questions only uncover a few of the ways a postmodern critique of the Self and Nature is never uncomplicated. A location that might lend itself to a postmodern critique of the overlapping constructs of the Self and Nature lies in the relatively new genre of environmental memoir. I do not wish to solidify what environmental memoir is exactly; rather I am interested in the myriad ways these texts that may be categorized as such lend themselves to interdisciplinary critiques and critical analysis, expand notions of genre both in relation to nature-writing and autobiography, resist giving the full picture of the ‘self,’ and work toward critically conscious environmental ends.

A postmodern critique of environmental memoir encourages us to become aware of the many ways we resist the social and discursive factors behind our ideas of the Self or Nature and instead work at ‘naturalizing’ these constructs. We can utilize various theoretical paradigms to find the ways that the categories of self and nature are constructed, concealed, or revealed using theories that include but are not limited to poststructuralist theory, feminism, women’s autobiography studies, postcolonial and globalization studies, ecofeminism, ecocriticism, the environmental justice movement, and environmental cultural studies. Such critical developments should give us many of the tools we need to see destabilize the binaries that constantly work at framing and structuring nature and humans as separate entities existing as polar opposites, yet there is still more work to do. Because the way we *see* nature and humans is always already discursively figured one of the ways we either reinforce or work against hegemonic ideologies that created such polarizations is through textual production and criticism.

In the following pages I will look at the various ways textual production and criticism can work for or against cultural myths, science, mainstream environmentalism, deep ecology, and identity politics that include class, gender, and sexuality. What I hope comes out of this project is a sense of what new directions are possible for environmental rhetoric, thought, and policy as well as literary production and theory. The importance between the interconnections of our discursive world and physical world, which includes all nature—human and nonhuman nature— has serious implications for the way we go about getting along in this world. How we treat nature, both nonhuman and human, is

deeply implicated not only in each other, but also relies heavily on the ways we go about theorizing the constructs of Self and Nature.

This project is an undertaking that is by no means exhaustive or conclusive; rather it is based purely on interests that look toward progressive ways that two specific writers blur boundaries of literary genre; rethink political, social, and environmental thought and action; and theorize subjectivity and nature. I approach this task by looking closely at Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* and David Oates' *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature*, two texts that are resistant to easy generic, social, and political categorization. These texts work toward complicating generic boundaries through personal narrative, environmental literature, scientific writing, literary analysis, nature writing, philosophy, ecological politics, and cultural studies. Both Ray and Oates' texts perform different ideological work and are officially categorized differently by the Library of Congress; however, both texts can roughly be seen through a similar framework that I will be referring to as environmental memoir.¹ This classification should not box these texts in; rather it is a way to situate these texts that both deal with personal narratives as well as environmental concerns, thereby expanding on both ideas about the self/autobiography and nature/nature-writing. These are both rhizomatic texts where the narratives go wide and deep, spreading the reaches of textuality in many directions, often below the surface.

¹ Ray's text is classified through the Library of Congress under the following categories: 1. Childhood and Youth. 2. Baxley (Ga.) – Biography. 3. Longleaf pine. 4. Deforestation – Georgia. 5. Forest ecology – Georgia. 6. Consumption (Economics) – Social aspects. And Oates' text as: 1. Human ecology – Philosophy. 2. Human ecology –United States. 3. Environmentalism – United States. 4. Nature –Religious aspects.

The metaphor of a ‘rhizome’ system is attributed to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, DeLeuze and Guattari draw upon a politicized notion of a ‘rhizome’ system, where knowledge is horizontally connected and any point may connect with another. In *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, Arran E. Gare explains the purpose of Deleuze and Guattari’s use of a rhizome system works toward breaking down old disciplinary boundaries of thought, writing style, and organization by declaring “that the chapters can be read in any order” (Gare 70). Gare clarifies how a rhizome system differs politically from dominant ideas about knowledge:

Rather than an ‘arborescent’ system, the kind of system conforming to the model of a tree in which branches all stem from a central trunk, that is where all truths are ultimately derived from a single principle, there is a ‘rhizome’ system, comparable to the root system of bulbs and tubers, in which any point can be connected to any other point. Western thought and Western reality have been dominated by the tree. Biology, theology, ontology, philosophy and history are all organized as trees. (70)

The metaphor of the root system of grass is also used to represent a rhizome system and the metaphor incites a non-hierarchical and acentered system that challenges hierarchical and predetermined systems prevalent in Western thought (Gare 70-1).

Both Janisse Ray and David Oates intertwine multiple areas of study and thought within their texts: personal narrative, literature, myth, religion, history, ecology, philosophy, science, art, critical theory, environmental theory, and social critique. Each of these areas, represented through genre, theory, and various fields of study, may connect with any other area somewhere else in their texts. The issues move below the surface enriching the textual soil through intertextuality. Each text resists hierarchically coded, coherent, and unified systems where the autobiographical subject or the

environment take center stage. Ray and Oates complicate the center of generic and political conventions. These are relational texts where identity, class, gender, sexuality, family, religion, economics, science, myth, nature, and environment overlap acknowledging that environmentalism is not solely about Nature and the Self is not solely about the individual. Interconnections between human and nonhuman nature are if nothing else, what holds these texts together in provocative, stimulating, and thoughtful ways. These interconnections, full of complexities, paradoxes, and binaries sometimes reveal and sometimes conceal the problematic issues surrounding our ideas about nature and identity. I hope to unpack some of the ways Janisse Ray and David Oates complicate and further our ideas about the self and nature by symptomatically reading their texts. The following section will review some of the theoretical underpinnings of this project.

(Re)presenting the Autobiographical 'I'

Many theorists have been instrumental in theorizing the ideological constructs of the Self as (re)presented by the autobiographical 'I'. In the field of autobiographical studies the work of Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, and Leigh Gilmore have contributed to a revised look at the multiple subjectivities and identities involved with the construction of self and the (re)presentation of self through writing.² In *Women, Autobiography,*

Theory Smith and Watson acknowledge that although autobiography has been around for

² Smith's *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (1987); *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (1993); Smith and Watson's *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (1992); and *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (1998); and Gilmore's *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (1994) have informed the way we read, theorize, and write about autobiography. Feminist inquiries have taken into account the need to resist a subjective Self.

centuries, critical theories attendant to women's autobiography is a recent endeavor. Smith and Watson explain, "Women's autobiographical writing, seldom taken seriously as a focus of study before the seventies, was not deemed appropriately 'complex' for academic dissertations, criticism, or the literary canon" (4). As feminism grew stronger in the 1970s and cultural studies began taking shape in the 1980s "demand for texts that speak to diverse experiences and issues" began pressuring the canonical and generic constraints of academia. The validation of a revised critical look at non-traditional autobiography has proven vital to the way we now read the autobiographical 'I'.

For this reason it is important to understand a brief history of traditional and non-traditional technologies of autobiography. As Gilmore argues, "Traditional criticism of autobiography has constructed a genre that authorizes some 'identities' and not others and links 'autobiography' to the post-Enlightenment politics of individualism" (Gilmore xii). The traditional mode of autobiography asserts the individual as a stable, cohesive self represented through an organized, chronologically linear narrative where the autobiographical *I* is located at the center of the drama. This methodology is not limited to men's production of autobiography specifically, as some women of the past have also used this framework for self-representation. Genre has, however, historically excluded the female gender from many types of discourse, traditional autobiography as well as traditional forms of 'nature writing,' and it is no surprise that women's autobiography and criticism interrogates traditional authorship through resistance of genre limitations.

Quite often non-traditional women's autobiography is characterized by fragmentation, interruption, and discontinuity (Gilmore x). Janisse Ray's subject is often

represented through narratives involving family members or the environment she feels so closely bound to. Ray's narratives do not follow any kind of chronological order and the chapters sway back and forth between personal and ecological narratives. David Oates uses strategies of relational subjectivity by (re)presenting the autobiographical 'I' in relation to wilderness experiences where the 'wilderness' becomes the Other by which Oates' subject is defined. He then takes this further using self-reflexive critique and theorizes the very sociocultural systems that have influenced his experience with the wilderness Other. Oates weaves his narratives through generic boundaries, as critical analysis exists within personal and ecological narratives.

Caren Kaplan's essay "Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects" describes out-law genres as mixing "two conventionally 'unmixable' elements—autobiography criticism and autobiography as the thing itself" (208). Kaplan uses Jacques Derrida's "The Law of Genre" to describe the power genre has over writers and critics by structuring what may or may not be included in a specific area of discourse. Derrida claims, "As soon as the word 'genre' is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn" (qtd. in Kaplan 208). This limit, or "law of genre" is precisely what resistance literature in terms of autobiography is writing against. Leigh Gilmore explains, "In short, the law of genre creates outlaws" (21). I see resistance literature as a combination of Barbara Harlow's description of a body of writing marginalized in literary studies and Sara Suleri's idea that it contains an element of writing against the metaphor of the limit (Kaplan 208; Suleri 125). Ray and Oates' texts not only write against and expand generic limits, but

also interrogate ideological categories and constructs present in their lives, such as ideas about nature, culture, gender, sexuality, religion, and class-consciousness. In some ways both Ray and Oates' have lived "outside the law" in terms of their class or sexual marginality. As a gay writer, openly critical of rigid or fundamentalist religious and political constructs, Oates has much at stake in considering our current political environment toward gay rights, and he utilizes non-traditional forms of both autobiographical and environmental writing in order to carve out a niche for his narratives. He not only writes against a generic limit, but also sociocultural limits. In many ways the theoretical advancements since the 1970s in poststructuralist theory, feminism, and queer theory has helped to open such non-traditional pathways. These pathways, however, are far from being clear. There is still much work to be done against prejudice existing within our society.

In "Authorizing the Autobiographical" Shari Benstock claims that the model of autobiography featuring a stable, synthesized, and cohesive self was part of a long metaphysical and historical influence since Plato that "repeated itself with unsurprising frequency until the early twentieth century—until the advent of what we now term Modernism" (152). Benstock places Freud's discovery of the unconscious as influential "in the unsettling of the 'I'" but also points to many other factors such as "the political and social effects of World War I, the advent of industrial mechanization...the fall of colonial empires, and the changing status of women and minorities, all of which altered the cultural landscape against which literature was produced"(152). It is from these sociocultural changes that Benstock argues:

...female Modernism challenged the white, male, heterosexual ethic underlying the Modernist aesthetic...It is this...ethic that poststructuralist critics have exposed behind the façade of a supposedly apolitical artistic practice. Post-structuralism has taught us to read the politics of every element in narrative strategy: representation; tone; perspective; figures of speech; even the shift between first-, second-, and third-person pronouns. (152-3)

This poststructuralist influence teaches us that there is no apolitical narrative strategy, especially in relation to constructions of self-representation. Many crucial shifts in autobiographical theory developed from a poststructuralist position that “construes the self as an effect of language, a textual construction, the figuration of what we call identity” (Gilmore 18). This turn is especially important for cultural critique as we may now view the autobiographical subject as a (re)presented construction of self or identity that is figured by the writer and has the power to either uphold or critique ideological forces.

From the textual (re)presentations of self through a subject we discover that there is no real access to an essential self or essential truth that comes forth out of the narratives; rather the narratives do the ideological work of the text. Gilmore explains, “What emerges from the self-represented strategies...is not only a new way to understand the autobiographical agent but, in fact, a kind of autobiographical writing that breaks with monocultural imperatives of being...[and] leads us to examine not what autobiography is but what it *does*” (39 emphasis added). Gilmore continues the discussion of the way autobiography becomes political by explaining, “even in the narrowest and most ambivalent sense, writing an autobiography can be a political act because it asserts a right to speak rather than to be spoken for” (40). The acts of agency an autobiographical

subject takes on can work against essentializing constructs that shape cultural frameworks of identity.

Autobiography draws serious attention from some feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern writers and critics because it is a genre that lends itself to powerful critiques of race, class, gender, sexuality, or culture. It has proven itself to be a productive site for destabilizing the subject into an unstable, active, dynamic, complex, and complicated (re)presentation of identity.³ Although some of these theories have been underway in academia for over thirty years, we still find that the idea of the essential Self, the solitary author, the bearer of truth, is very much a part of the dominant American imagination and ideology. The solitary author, a descendant of the eras of Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution, the printing press, copyright laws, and even more recently the process movement in composition theory is a deeply engrained construct in American ideology. During these same time periods, our ideas about nature became starkly opposed to our ideas about culture. The stronger ideas about individualism became during modernism, the more separate the realms of the human, the man-made, and culture became from nature. There may be no other site where the idea of the solitary Self, reporter of Truth, correspondent for essentialized Nature, and the ideology of humans as separate from nature is more prevalent than within the rhetoric of Nature or the genre of nature writing—a descendant of Romanticism and Transcendentalism. The following section

³ For more information in this area read Caren Kaplan's *Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects*, 115-138 in Smith and Watson's *De/Colonizing the Subject* (1992) or in Smith and Watson's *Women, Autobiography, Theory* (1998).

will explain some of the theoretical paradigms that have either worked toward deconstructing notions of essentialized nature or those that have been less critical of interrogating ideas about Nature and promote nature/culture dichotomies.

Rethinking Nature-Culture

The term ecology has become a mainstay in our language; it is used interchangeably as both metaphor and as a field of scientific study. Dana Phillips explains in *The Truth of Ecology* that the term has been appropriated problematically due not only to misunderstandings of what ecology actually means, but also because it has come to mean two things, “ecology as ‘point of view’ and ecology as a science” (44). Ecology as a ‘point of view’ becomes an appropriation of just about any ‘thing’ (literary movements, genre theory, composition and rhetorical theory, personal relationships, social situations and actions) that can include discussion of relationships, interdependence, connectedness, holism, utopian climax theories, stabilizing qualities, and sometimes transformative qualities.⁴ Problems arise when ecology as ‘point of view’ becomes a value-ridden endeavor seeking to invest some relationships or connections as more valuable than others. This ideology is based on supposed ideas of ecology’s views of ‘nature’ for an idea of how the world should work—balance, harmony, holism—yet, on the other hand, the jury is still out as to whether or not ‘nature’ as explained by

⁴ Ecology used as a ‘point of view’ and as metaphor is attributed to areas that include ecocriticism, ecomposition, ecofeminism, and environmental history. Phillips explains that the science of ecology has come to represent “...basic natural processes and...certain moral verities: complexity is good, simplicity is bad; natural systems seek equilibrium and battle disruption; there is an ideal balance in nature that, once achieved, will maintain itself” (49).

ecology actually works in such a way and the field of Ecology itself is moving away from these metaphors.⁵

The fact of the matter is, that while we still do not know “what actually counts as ecology” the reality of its many popular uses are a result of social desires (Phillips 43). All of our ideas about nature are socially constituted whether we acknowledge it or not and beliefs that are absolutely invested in the pure connectedness of ecosystems, whether scientifically proven or not, are still the result of social construction. In fact, many ideas surrounding popular notions of ecology are more deterministic and metaphorical than we typically realize. What I mean is that if we truly want to embrace ideas regarding ecological communities we need to take into account many factors some of which have yet to be accounted for. As far back as 1935, ecologists were writing about this idea as Phillips discusses A.G. Tansley’s incorporation of hydrological, geochemical, and biological phenomena into the ecosystem debate and more recently, Eugene Odum “extends ecological modes of thinking into the provinces of sociology, social policy, and social engineering” (qtd. in Phillips 62). As I will point to in chapter four, Janisse Ray constructs her world around an ethos of ecology, based on both ideas of ecology as ‘point of view’ and ecology as science. That is, she structures her social reality of the world through her own constructed ecological lens. She explains how her father, Franklin Ray:

...surrounded himself with particulars useful to mechanical ingenuity, fragments and fractions of this and that, of everything, because any one piece might be necessary to link seventeen others together, to restore a broken machine. He

⁵ For a thorough discussion on ‘Ecology as Point of View and as Science’ see Dana Phillips’ *The Truth of Ecology* (2003) chapter two, “Ecology Then and Now,” pages 42-82.

would have agreed with ecologist Aldo Leopold, that if you are going to tinker with the earth, at least keep all the pieces. (139)

Ray invests her father's overstocked and overcrowded junkyard next to the family's house with an analogy of ecosystem ecology—each part of the system creates, sustains, and maintains the whole. Implied here is the notion that the 'parts' are essential to the whole; therefore, tinkering with any of the parts is an inherently dangerous activity. My point here is to not only focus on what Dana Phillips might say is a biased and politically motivated use of the ecosystem concept based on ideas of ideological ideals of interdependency and holism; rather I merely want to point out that our interpretation of the world, of nature, of environment, through science or any knowledge is always already socially and textually mediated through language. To acknowledge this is to peel off another layer of the infinite palimpsests on which our ideas about nature are writ large.

Many of the historical influences on our ideas about the self, identity, and authorship simultaneously affected ideas about nature. In actuality, there is no real way to separate human history from the history of nature, as they are always informed by the larger sociocultural systems of any given time and as Raymond Williams explains, "Any full history of the uses of **nature** would be a history of a large part of human thought" (*Keywords* 221). I will not attempt to review the entire history of the constructions of nature, nor will I be able to cover the numerous intellectuals who have changed the theoretical frameworks of our thinking about nature. I would, however, like to point toward some critical historical periods because of their influence on the ways we think about nature still today. More specifically I would like to address how we came to be

where we are today in terms of thinking about nature as a sacred, pristine, not-man-made, intrinsically valuable ‘thing.’ In other words, the quintessential Other.

Many theorists have taken up thorough explications of the historical, artistic, literary, scientific, and political developments of nature-as-construct; however, here I would like to focus on only a few important theoretical paradigms that have greatly influenced my own reading strategies.⁶ It is no surprise, that dominant American ideologies regarding nature are often pitted against one another in black-and-white arguments over the sacredness of nature based on sociocultural, historical, religious and mythical constructs and the sacredness of our rights to uncompromisingly use nature based on sociopolitical and economic constructs. Constructions of nature often work toward creating nature in opposition and apart from humans and a paradigm of nature that is either sacred or profane. These constructs will take up the greater part of analysis in the following case studies in the ways they are upheld and concealed or resisted and revealed.

Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, major changes occurred via the Enlightenment, Scientific Revolution, and the Romantic Movement that cemented ideologies regarding the separation of humans and nature. These changes were, in fact, a long time in development. Since Greek times, for example, “ideas of dominion over the

⁶ Some of the instrumental areas of study contributing to our understanding of the sociohistorical constructs of nature have included, but are not limited to cultural studies, cultural historians, ecofeminism, and postcolonial theorists. A sampling includes Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City* (1973); Roderick Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1973); William Cronon’s *Uncommon Nature: Toward Reinventing Nature* (1995); Carolyn Merchant’s *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (1995); Bennett and Chaloupka’s *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics, and the Environment* (1993); David Mazel’s *American Literary Environmentalism* (2000); and Adamson, Evans, and Stein’s *The Environmental Justice Reader* (2002).

earth existed in Greek Philosophy and Christian religion” as is the case with one explanation of the Genesis myth’s assigning man dominion over the earth and its creatures (Merchant 78). It was not until the scientific revolution, however, that ‘man’ acquired the technologies and the cultural sway to further the exploitation of natural resources (Merchant 79). Modernist ideologies affected our ideas about ‘man;’ printing technology created the solitary author and owner of knowledge; ‘culture’ changes from the tending of ‘natural’ growth (of crops or animals) to mean the process of human development as something man-made and civilized; and ‘nature’ became something defined as ‘not-man-made.’⁷ All of these changes play a role in our ideologies today. The major changes regarding nature include ideas that are both reinforcing, yet conflicting. The scientific revolution brought about ideas of nature-as-material world that includes everything not-man-made whereby a binary opposite concretely defined culture as-man-made and therefore excludes man from nature. Oates points out that with the case of dualities and either-ors, “both elements are needed to define the system” (129). As ‘man’ becomes defined in relation to nature, as it’s opposite, other constructions of self and nature develop. Raymond Williams explains that coming out of the Enlightenment’s “identification of Nature with Reason...The emphasis on law gave a philosophical basis for conceiving an ideal society” (223). Nature becomes both the foil and the informant toward an ideal society. In this sense, Nature represents an ideal; there is now a great deal of ‘value’ placed on nature:

⁷ For more detail on these ideas see Woodmanzi and Jaszi’s *The Construction of Authorship* (1994), Williams’ *Keywords* (1983), and Merchant’s *Earthcare*.

The emphasis on an inherent original power—a new version of the much older idea—gave a basis for actual regeneration, or, where regeneration seemed impossible or was too long delayed, and alternative source for belief in the goodness of life and of humanity, as counterweight or as solace against a harsh ‘world’. (Williams 223)

Nature is defined through the human/nature dichotomy establishing nature in opposition to civilization. Nature, in this paradigm, is solace against a harsh world. Here I see some of the early, although not the earliest, influences on what we now call deep ecology—investing nature with intrinsic value, goodness, innocence, and sacredness. Some deep ecologists view humans as a disease to the environment.⁸ There are several problems with deep ecology that will be addressed in the following chapters, such as the extreme binary set up between humans and nature and an exclusive view of nature-as-pristine which negates the environmental issues that plague less-than-pristine areas and the inhabitants who live there. Additionally, deep ecology creates the homogenization of all humans, dangerously ignoring their diversity so that all humans regardless of class, race, and gender are seen as exactly the same.

One of the earlier influences on creating the dichotomy between humans and nature began with the Genesis story as Adam and Eve were *cast out* of the garden and the many theories resulting from research in this area is so widely known I need not rehearse it here.⁹ In fact, I will discuss the problematics of the Eden myth further in regard to

⁸ Deep ecology, a contested philosophy in its own right, at its most extreme, contends that humans do not belong in ‘pristine’ nature/wilderness because they upset, destroy, and ruin it simply by being there. Another view of deep ecology sees humans as part of the natural world, yet they see all our environmental problems stemming from our modern separation from that ‘natural’ world (Oates 62).

⁹For an ecofeminist analysis regarding the Genesis myth’s ideological impact throughout history on the grand narratives of the Fall and Recovery see Merchant’s “Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a

David Oates' *Paradise Wild*. Yet, it is difficult to miss the overbearing effects the Genesis story has played in our constructions of nature from recovery narratives to the various historical constructions of 'wilderness.' As Candace Slater points out, "'Edenic narratives,' ...are presentations of a natural or seemingly natural landscape in terms that consciously—or, more often, unconsciously—evoke the biblical account of Eden" (115) in order to reinforce preservationist goals. The fact of the matter is, however, that even Eden has been assigned different forms. As David Oates explains, "Wilderness, for our Puritan parents, was no Eden: it was an unregenerate Canaan, an evil place full of evil people" (29). And yet as history would have its way and Europeans changed the Americas, ideas about nature also transformed. By the time of the Romantic Revolution nature takes on the role of the sublime—God's territory. For some reason ideas about nature have historically changed, but dominant American ideas about nature more often than not exist in a nature/culture binary. Whether wilderness is evil or godly it still exists as Other, essentially not human and so forgetfully separate from our own making of it. That is why it is such a slippery construct; we forget to question our own assumptions about nature, our own discursive making of nature, because it so easily slips in to the category of Other, nature 'out-there.' In this paradigm, nature 'out-there' is separated and stands apart from the social and cultural realm and can only exist in certain places: preserves, designated wilderness areas, National Parks and Forests, essentially far away

Recovery Narrative" in Cronon pages 132-159. Other theorists worth seeing regarding nature and the Eden myth include Cronon (1995), R.W.B Lewis (1955), Oates (2003), and Roderick Nash (1973).

and void of people, beyond the frontier, Out West, in Alaska. Nature ‘out-there’ is problematic and delineates borders between the social realm and the natural.

The fact that nature is so resistant to theory may have something to do with what the historian William Cronon attributes to the concept of “*nature as moral imperative*” where “The great attraction of nature for those who wish to ground their moral vision in external reality is precisely its capacity to take disputed values and make them seem innate, essential, eternal, nonnegotiable” (36). Such a stance is in line with Raymond Williams’ account of European Enlightenment investing nature with authority, ‘original power.’ Nature as moral imperative makes an environmental debate similar to debating any political stance *from* morals rather than *about* morals—to be an opponent of such a debate is signing up for a losing battle and Cronon emphasizes, “Nature in such arguments becomes a kind of trump card against which there can be no defense” (36). That innate, nonnegotiable, original, authority granted to Nature not only informs ideas about nature with a great deal of intrinsic value, Cronon argues that where Western traditions once cited God as authority Nature has now “become a secular deity in this post-romantic age” (36). To theorize and question assumptions regarding Nature as moral imperative is to question the very roots of what nature *is*.

Nature *is* whatever a culture, or the accumulation of cultures, decides it is. A way to theorize nature, then, might be to figure out what nature is to different people and their cultures and why. If nature is as much a story about human thought as it is about nature then we cannot study either in isolation. In *Nature’s State: Imagining Alaska as the Last Frontier* Susan Kollin promotes the importance of theorizing nature in ways that

environmental cultural studies suggests by recognizing “the human element of nature, the social histories that shape ideas about the environment, and the ways constructions of nature often contribute to larger social formations” (177). In this sense, nature is no longer a universal Nature, but rather becomes a site that exposes stories about nature, as well as our stories about us. As Cronon reminds us, “we must never forget that these stories are *ours*, not nature’s. The natural world does not organize itself into parables. Only people do that, because this is our peculiarly human method for making the world make sense” (50). A parable, such as the making of nature into a literal Eden is the type of story that humans create or place upon nature. The problem with such stories or parables, however, is that they simultaneously privilege some natures over others and some humans over others. As such, America’s mainstream environmental organizations have privileged ‘pristine’ nature/wilderness to the extent that they cannot see the problems that exist with other environments. This goes right back to nature as a trump card because for mainstream environmentalists, pristine nature trumps all. In the following chapter I will discuss how David Oates critiques the pitfalls of thinking about nature as secular deity in relation to hardcore ecofundamentalists who clearly reduce environmental politics to a situation of good versus evil. And we know what trumps in that situation. If we cannot expand our notions of nature beyond pristine/ruined to encompass a greater sense of environment, or Oates’ sense of nature as encompassing the spectrum of nature from “‘untouched’ to ‘mildly peopled’ to densely cultured” (118) we do our own human nature a great injustice.

The environmental justice movement has been one of the strongest forces to question mainstream environmental politics and work toward opening up our ideas of what encompasses environmental issues.¹⁰ Environmental justice exposes the ways environmental degradation, hazards, and pollution unequally affects people of color, as well as people who are poor. Other areas of concern as noted by Dorceta E. Taylor in “Women of Color, Environmental Justice, and Ecofeminism” involve “hazardous waste disposal; exposure to toxins; occupational health and safety; lead poisoning; cancers, and other health issues; housing; pollution; and environmental contamination” (39).

Historically and globally there exists links between the systematic degradation of regions where poor people live, yet grassroots environmental justice work has proven a more powerful link between environmental degradation and toxicity with issues of race.

Devon Pena, however, explains in *The Environmental Justice Reader*:

What I see happening within the environmental justice movement as a result of the leadership of the network, SNEEJ and other grassroots organizations, is that environmental justice wants to get beyond the critique of environmental racism, it wants to get beyond the critique of how globalism is destroying the planet and destroying the cultures to sustainable alternatives...to create production processes that aren't based on the destruction of the environment or the worker. (23)¹¹

These ongoing critiques are more than just a much needed rethinking of environmentalism, but also work toward a rethinking of social, political, and economic ideologies. To work toward the production processes Pena discusses he claims we need to go to the local level and listen and learn from sustainable practices that have been in

¹⁰ For more on this movement see, *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy* by Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein (2002).

¹¹ SNEEJ is the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice.

place for much longer than our current capitalistic production mania. Some of these issues regarding sustainability of environment, or lack thereof, in relation to poor communities will surface in chapter four with my discussion of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*.

Another way that the environmental justice movement rethinks environmentalism is by critiquing ecofeminism. Ecofeminism has been a major player in questioning the assumptions of ideas about nature through questions of gender and culture. Ecofeminism has made important critical contributions, such as the stance of cultural ecofeminism expressing “that women and nature have been mutually associated and devalued in western culture” (Merchant 10). Greta Gaard expresses a view of ecofeminism that claims, “the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanction the oppression of nature” (Gaard qtd. in Kollin 102). Although Gaard acknowledges issues of race and class, environmental justice scholars such as Taylor take ecofeminists to task because they:

...have done little to bring issues of central concern to women of color (and men of color) to the forefront of environmental dialogue...ecofeminism does not adequately consider the experiences of women of color; neither does it fully understand or accept the differences between white women and women of color. (58-62)

To this end, it would prove useful then for mainstream environmentalists, ecofeminists, and environmental justice activists to begin communicating among each other. Similarly, we could bring poststructuralists, postcolonial theorists, cultural historians, cultural

geographers, scientists, political scientists, rhetoricians, art, literary, and film scholars/historians/critics to the same table for discussion.

There is much to be gained from inter-and-cross-disciplinary knowledge, inquiry, and critique. We may never be experts in all of these fields, but it is worthwhile researching and studying what it is that others have to say about environment and culture. Ecofeminists who traditionally “match the racial and socioeconomic profiles of traditional environmentalists that are white and middle class” should not necessarily speak for the experiences of people of color; rather they should be listening, researching, and learning what it is that people of color have to say (Taylor 62). Likewise, mainstream environmentalists may not understand issues of ecofeminism and could stand to learn from them as well. Ecofeminism, ecocriticism, cultural studies, and poststructuralism can begin discussing the intricate ways culture, nature, gender, and textuality are inextricably linked; rather than privileging one area of study over the other.¹² All of these theories, movements, groups, and philosophies have something to offer, they all have their own pitfalls, and they all stand to learn from one another. My point is all environmental groups and scholars who hold some interest in environmental, cultural, social, economic, political, and justice issues could stand to learn a thing or two from one another. Hopefully that process will work toward more self-critical awareness and more critical consciousness toward ideas about nature and culture.

¹² For an excellent discussion regarding what ecocriticism and postmodernism lack in relation to one another, see Phillips’ *The Truth of Ecology*, “Expostulations and Replies,” pages 3-41.

This meeting of minds so to speak presents no easy task and could be incredibly idealistic to suggest. In “The Trouble With Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” William Cronon reveals, “To gain such remarkable influence, the concept of wilderness had to become loaded with some of the deepest core values of the culture that created it: it had to become sacred” (73). People who envision nature as holding core values and sacred ideals are not necessarily the same open-minded people accepting of alternative ideologies. It could be equally said of some hardcore poststructuralists, such as Michel Foucault, who as Oates describes literally turned his back to nature, and biology for that matter.¹³ We must remember, however, that the culture that created the concept of American ‘Wilderness’ was not a universal culture. That nature is a construct does not simply imply that that is *all* it is. Dana Phillips refers to Bruno Latour’s discussion that “‘the intellectual culture in which we live does not know how to categorize’ the ‘strange situations’ produced by the interaction, combination, and recombination of nature and culture because they are simultaneously material, social, and linguistic, and our theories are poorly adapted to them. Our theories take no cognizance of what Latour likes to call ‘nature-culture’” (34). The strange situations of nature-culture have tales to tell that may help us improve our critical consciousness toward

¹³ Oates argues, “Foucault is a good (even notorious) example of the oversold ‘construct’ idea...Foucault’s biographer tells how the great man drove through the Italian Alps with a colleague, Jacqueline Verdeaux: ‘Whenever she showed him some magnificent landscape...he made a great show of walking off toward the road, saying, ‘My back is turned to it.’” (139). Although Oates points out how this is purposeful over-reaction it also implies to what Foucault’s friends and partner concur that he “...turned his back on biology again, intentionally engaging in unprotected sex as part of an assertion of radical freedom” (140). Granted these are accounts from biographers, friends, and a lover, however, it chillingly reminds us that no matter what our constructs are they are not all powerful. Nature and biology will always be more complicated than we can rhetorically construct.

environmentalism. Dana Phillips' advice is "to philosophize with a hammer" so that we may gain "a greater sense of irreverence toward our own received ideas and a willingness to improvise" (30). Phillips is really talking about our own use of critical theories and explains:

Theories may or may not be like tools. To the extent that they are, their efficacy when we use them to perform the interpretive tasks for which they are designed may be less interesting than their usefulness when we need something handy to jimmy open a stuck concept or break up the hardpan of fixed opinion. I take it that this is why Nietzsche urged us to philosophize with a hammer. (xii)

Phillips' advice is worthwhile for any student of critical theory and if rethinking nature-culture requires a metaphorical hammer, I'll keep my tool belt on.

You may be wondering what lessons are to be gained here from carrying around a metaphorical hammer and prying open our minds by questioning assumptions, listening to others, to other tales, and realizing that our constructs are sometimes useful and sometimes not. It may be that in texts such as *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature* and *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* that there are lessons for us about how to get along with nature in the future. Sometimes these lessons are helpful and sometimes they are not. Oates rethinks nature, gender, and culture in productive and useful ways and Ray often gets caught up in an overly sentimentalized version of what has been lost. My point is that I no longer want our environmental, social, and cultural politics and lessons to be based on anxieties over what we supposedly had 'in the good old days.' This does not mean we should not question our rapid, incessant, and mostly uncritical cycles of production and consumption and its inherent waste from both past and present. The facts regarding nuclear testing and poor waste storage and resulting poisonings of both human

and nonhuman nature is not just about anxiety over lost nature, they are real atrocities. We cannot live healthfully, however, in thinking our way through life in patterns of binaries of sacred and profane nature. We can stand to learn from philosophizing our constructs with a hammer and to begin trying to figure out how to get along *with* nature. The results of such philosophizing will hopefully bear some results in our lifetime and if we are truly fortunate our children and their children will see a more conscientious understanding of nature-culture.

CHAPTER TWO

REMYTHOLOGIZING EDEN

Rethinking nature requires a kind of openness to take into account how cultures have constructed nature in the past, how we currently think about nature, and how we might go about thinking about it in the future. This kind of openness is crucial to William Cronon's suggestion that polarized thinking is counterproductive in a world that is rather ambiguous. Cronon urges us to get past the extremes of moral dualism and instead listen for other tales that may be accessible to us in interpreting our world as he explains:

Even those who do not subscribe to the Judeo-Christian imagery can fall victim to its moral dualism, because that is how Eden tempts us. It is a place of absolute good and absolute evil, of actions that are unambiguously right and wrong. When we project its polarized, black-and-white myth onto the ambiguous world of gray on gray that we actually inhabit, the power of its imagery sparks our passions but darkens our vision. It buys clarity at the expense of understanding by tempting us to reenact its most ancient of stories rather than listen for whether there might be some other tale to tell. (39)

The dichotomies we create to discuss nature such as pure or ruined do not hold for us useful ways of thinking about ourselves or nature; even though those dichotomies more often than not still have a hold on us. In *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature*, David Oates expresses his concerns in this area by encouraging us to engage “with the real complexity of the world” in the sense that real decisions must be made, trade-offs and bargains need to take place if we are to go about getting along in this world in the best way we can for both human and nonhuman nature (101). To engage in with the real

complexity of the world requires an awareness, an ability to pay attention, and certainly the willingness to listen for other tales. David Oates' *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature* is one of those other tales. It is a remythologizing of the Eden myth and offers us new ways of being, acting, and thinking in the world. This remythologizing is no easy task, for there is already a mythic structure in place and it is one of Western thought's core myths that surfaces "anytime people speak of nature. It is so widespread in modern environmental thinking that it deserves to be labeled as a separate cluster of ideas in its own right: *nature as Eden*" (Cronon 36). The idea of *nature as Eden* is evident when we invest in nature the idea that it is a pure, pristine paradise. The problem with this narrow view of nature is that it sets up an idea that nature is always primed for disaster or already ruined.

In *Paradise Wild*, David Oates explains in a chapter titled "Paradise Lost" that investing nature with such pure perfection automatically creates polarization:

I'm convinced that our public debate (and private struggle) over the environment are locked into an unresolvable cycle of use versus preservation because they are founded on the cultural myth of Paradise Lost, reinforced by an unexamined nostalgia. A remembered perfection; an inevitable decay—this thought pattern has already broken the world into two opposites: nature/wilderness/Eden and human/civilized/fallen...In seeing nature through this distorting lens, we remain stuck in a story with no possible happy ending, short of the end of the world. (41)

Every time we encounter nature through the dominant American imagination's idea that nature is nature/wilderness/Eden and therefore becomes *nature as Eden* we in turn create the pattern of Paradise Lost. Nature in this pattern leaves little room for other interpretations; we find ourselves in a stalemate of polarized thinking and politics that lead to the dead-end cycle of use versus preservation and pure versus ruined.

The last thirty to forty years have made strides in promulgating anti-essentialist notions of the self and identity, however, it seems that ideas about ‘nature,’ ‘environment,’ and ‘wilderness’ have continued to gain essentializing powers over the American imagination despite poststructuralist theories. Nature in American imaginations and environmentalism is still firmly resistant to theory. In other words, the Otherness of Nature, what is and is not Nature, are all strongly held ideologies in America today. It is not an uncommon American ideology to view nature as a stable place that if only left alone would survive indefinitely as a paradise existing in a climatic state. Relying on a view of nature as a ‘refuge,’ whether in terms of “a view of forests as refuges from change” or a forest as a refuge from civilization, the idea of refuge signifies a resistance to change (Oates 82). Nature or forests represented as refuges come to signify a special kind of resilience and stability “*if untouched*” (Oates 82). Why is this? And why do we strive for such dualistic thinking that constructs nature as stable and pure and civilization as change is impure. Oates writes:

This view supports the notion that the human role is, ‘simply leave them be...people should not intervene in nature.’ Obviously, ‘nature’ here means nature-as-wilderness. There’s that dualism again. Nature is in the preserve; whatever’s outside it is impure, fallen, human, syphilized. (83)

‘Syphilized’ is a direct connotation toward civilization as disease; it is toxic to nature. But is this view really helpful in trying to figure out how we are to go about developing a sustainable relationship with nature? Do we really not belong in nature and are we not ourselves nature? Can we afford not to use natural resources and therefore shouldn’t we begin trying to figure out how to make some very hard decisions? Are our ideas about

Nature so resistant to theory because it is virtually sacrilegious to question the intrinsic value of Nature? What is it exactly that captivates us so and creates such dichotomous ways of thinking about nature in opposition to everything ‘human’? Or is that part of the game and the paradox, to play out and pretend that civilization is the antithesis of nature?

Some of the historical forces of early ecology still incite us to think about nature as a place, which if left alone will continue in a perfect and stable climatic state. Nature as situated vis-à-vis its stability. Yet we must ask who gets to define this particular essence of stability? Who benefits from some areas achieving unspoiled status, worth preserving and mapping off as a refuge? Certainly there is ‘value’ in these places; however, we must remember that it is a human value, not an intrinsic value of nature itself. Likewise, our theories about nature-as-stable is a human story about nature.

The ideas of ecological climax serve in many ways as bedrock to popular and mainstream American imaginations and environmentalism, although the concept itself is based on an old, and as yet unproven belief that relied more on analogy than scientific consistency. As Dana Phillips explains in *The Truth of Ecology*, “the concept of the climax state had ‘to give way’ because of its inconsistency as a scientific concept and because of its great impracticality” (56). Frederic Clements, the early plant ecologist, is responsible for the ‘climax’ idea that remains “part of the popular conception of ecology today (regrettably so)” (54). In David Oates’ *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature* we see a bit less hostility toward Clements; however, consensus lies in the verdict. Oates explains of the early-twentieth century ecologist, “Clements was deeply interested in change—championing the ideas of ecological ‘succession’ of plant communities—he

was also, paradoxically, committed to the ideas that succession would culminate in final and in a sense permanent stage: the ‘climax community’” (149). Can you imagine the implications of translating these ideas into establishing a ‘human climax’ community? Does this correlate with the Enlightenment ideal of utopias? Who gets to decide when the community has reached its ideal? Who is part of the perfect ‘ecosystem’? In many ways we are constantly doing this work on the part of nature. We make lists of endangered species at the cost of others, we decide which forests are more perfect and therefore worth saving at the cost of others, we decide which areas and which people nearby are going to serve as neighbors to hazardous waste areas. Decisions are made all the time on ‘behalf’ of nature that is both nonhuman and human. Oates claims that the tricky part of making such decisions is learning how to engage with the “complexity of the world,” doing the hard work and getting dirty and messy while working toward figuring out how we are going to go about what Wendell Berry describes as “getting along with nature” (101,106).

The idea of getting along with nature may sound simplistic, even rather easy, yet it is more complex than ascribing to valuing nature for nature’s sake and we need to ask why we invest nature with stability in the first place. What is really happening when we place upon nature the idea of stability when in fact we know nature is quite unstable? This paradox is a kind of veil by which we may identify with something that is in opposition to our ideas about civilization and change. Our categorization of what nature is and how it is the antithesis of civilization allows us to define our world while simultaneously reducing the complexities involved. This capitulation to a static view of

nature is now quite mainstream and is partly a result of the environmental movement that reached a large part of the public and soared to new heights in the 1970s. The premises for this movement are a product of Clementsian climax theories. Oates uncovers some of the essentializing notions of the environmental movement of which “Clements’ idealistic concept of climax has become the touchstone of value. It illustrates how nature works, what nature *is*. This nature is aesthetically beautiful, spiritually resonant, physically stable” (150). The post-enlightenment notion of nature as bearing the law of reason and thereby establishing grounds against which human culture can be judged is interesting in relation to concepts of stability. Oates explains how words such as “balance, cooperation, holism” are used to describe nature. These words are chosen “because those values were seen to be drawn from nature, they had authority” (150-1). Using ecological science for authority has often been part of the environmentalist agenda and Oates defines the term “Ecologism” as “the environmentalist worldview [that] uses science for its proofs, but the underlying drive is to portray a kind of natural perfection. That perfection is, when you peel it, a static, unchanging nature, an Edenic steady-state bubble” (151). Nature’s authority established vis-à-vis its ‘intrinsic value’ and ‘stability’ is not only the bedrock of mainstream environmentalism and deep ecology but is also the bedrock of traditional nature writing and an aspect upheld within much ecocritical literary analysis.

David Oates’ *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature* actively works toward deconstructing notions of an ideal of stability, not only in regard to nonhuman and human nature, but also in regard to genre. Oates not only changes ‘textual’ genres, but

also the text itself works toward changing the sociorhetorical genre we participate in when we think, talk, and act in relation to our ideas about nature and environmentalism. Oates' text is firmly focused on rethinking polar oppositions and false binaries. Within this effort is also a rethinking of the myths of a stable and fixed essential Self and Nature. This text transgresses traditional notions of nature-writing and autobiographical writing. Oates intertwines and layers ideas that encourage various possibilities for re-thinking nature, gender, sexuality, culture, environmentalism, and genre. Oates enters, crosses, and blurs various genre forms, which work toward notions of change, and in turn creates patterns. These patterns occur in forms of repetition where some chapters embody a more theoretical and academic style, some are laden with personal narratives, some are a blend of both, and some are called "palimpsests," referencing layers of textuality and regeneration, and take on a fascinating, reflective, and creative style of narrative.

Although we are never outside of genre, there are ways to push at its boundaries, transgress, and transform the structures into something that works for and helps renegotiate a subject's position. In this regard I am referring to an unstable notion of boundary, one that is in flux and not static. Yet Oates' must still work from existing genres, have a critical awareness of their various conventions, and then move in directions that suit his narratives. Traditional nature-writing does not allow his subject to perform the ideological critiques of the intersections between constructions of nature and gender; therefore, the genre of nature-writing is (re)presented in various ways and ultimately lends itself more, but not exclusively to the genre of environmental literature. Oates renegotiates his various genre positions in relation to his subject positions—

academic, gay ex-Baptist, mountaineer, nature-culture lover, literary critic, and so on. As Martin Heidegger eloquently suggests in *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, “A boundary is not that at which something stops but...the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing” (qtd. in Bawarshi 78). This presencing of a theorized nature-writing genre takes on various forms as mentioned above and it is no longer deterministic. His subject can transgress various genres forms, all the while moving within genre. Anis Bawarshi explains in *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*, “As such, transgression, which itself depends on the conventions it seeks to resist, remains a function of genre” (93). Oates’ revised genre still operates within environmental literature because he writes about an expanded notion of environment. Oates writes about various ideas of nature, not one nature, and considers the possibilities ranging from downtown Portland to popular walking trails to backcountry ‘wilderness’ areas.

This text shakes up traditional notions of nature-writing, as well as autobiographical writing. The autobiographical subject is present in fragments, bits and pieces of self in relation to ideas about nature. Oates’ subject is not revealed in a chronologically, linear, birth through present fashion; rather, the narratives are poignant and purposeful, revealing the many ways ideas about nature are so highly constructed. A chapter titled, “A Mutability Canto” begins with a personal narrative detailing Oates’ account of a tree falling very near him while he sits eating his lunch at the end of a long alpine lake. “I felt like I had chanced upon something private. Of course logs in every state of decomposition lay everywhere. But the woods give us the impression of stasis, don’t they? ...That’s an illusion very hard to shake”(148). From this personal experience

of the paradoxes existing in a seemingly static environment full of constant, yet slow or sudden changes, the text goes on to theorize the environmental movement's adoption and adaptation of ecological science from climax and ecosystem community theories to what he describes as something similar to Dana Phillips' notion of ecology-as-point-of-view as representative of environmentalism's ideological framework.

Oates theorizes how "Modern ecology sees an ecosystem much more loosely; the word 'ecosystem' itself is regarded as little more than a heuristic device, a convenient way to visualize a much more random reality" (151). What this sounds like to me is another example of lamenting the good old days. Even as ecology-as-science moves forward, challenges past assumptions, and creates new ones environmentalism holds on to their deck of cards from a previous hand. Environmentalism's desire to see Nature at physically stable concurs with their ideology to keep their political underpinnings stable as well, resisting current theoretical advances. As already discussed, environmentalism's political views are often imbued with moral and social meaning. Anna Bramwell explains, "The normative sense of the word [ecology] has come to mean the belief that severe or drastic change within [a natural] system...is seen as wrong" (qtd. in Oates 152-3). By normative Bramwell points toward the popular usage of ecology, not the scientific use. Science is quite often interested in studying change; however, Oates describes environmentalism as "simply opposed to change, and committed (like politically distant rightists) to an imaginary picture of past perfection that never was" (153). Environmentalism's deference to science is interesting to me because as people who care

about environment, it would seem logical to begin theorizing the nature-culture connections in a productive way that includes humans in the analysis.

As “A Mutability Canto” continues, Oates’ subject destabilizes some of the generic conventions of nature writing further by not pretending to narrate details about nature without implicating himself into the scene. As he explains, this is the case with most nature writing, “The customary way to tell such nature-writing stories is to keep the point of view but eliminate the truly personal” (154). Oates’ subject is forthright about beliefs, feelings, and the constructions of nature that have informed him, yet he is always at the ready to theorize these notions and the problems that follow. Complicity. That is what is going on here. Oates’ revealing narratives peel away at layers of not only the subject’s levels of false consciousness in relation to nature, but speaks toward the larger American imagination toward ideas about nature.

How Oates theorizes the idea of the absent or detached nature writer working through his own complicity in dealing with the nature-as-refuge construct is important toward rethinking nature and nature writing. He questions the reader:

Why was I sitting on that rock, blessing my solitude, in the faraway mountains...Would it change anything to admit that I was there in the wake of terrors and losses in my personal life? That far from being a hearty Thoreauvian—disembodied, chaste, and cheerfully spiritual—I was a wreckage of grief, fleeing my insoluble humanity? How would that change the picture? It would reveal that I too sought refuge in nature, solace in the ‘eternal’ mountains. And that I found it. (155)

To admit one’s own desire to seek in nature what Raymond Williams describes as “solace against a harsh world” is a brave move in a postmodern critique of nature. Oates places his subject at the intersection between experiencing the delusional experience of nature-

as-refuge, being fulfilled by its inherent illusions of calm, stasis, acceptance, and goodness, and all the while Oates, as nature writer, is simultaneously problematizing and theorizing this very experience. The narrative subject believes in this pure, regenerating, accepting Nature that will not cast him out because he is gay. All the while his fundamentalist religion is simultaneously telling him he is a “bad person whom God officially hated,” Oates’ subject is dealing with many constructs, all layered on top of the other, and he prefers to play out nature-as-refuge because of its supposed safety net as an escape from culture (155).

What lessons, you might ask, come out of this episode? Some of the clues that lead Oates to remythologize the Eden myth come out of what I call an eventual paradigm shift resulting from the ‘fallen tree experience on a seeking-refuge-in-nature day.’ Oates does not automatically experience this paradigm shift, and there is no way for me to tell when it actually occurred. It probably began slowly that day, but possibly took time, years, or it even happened—became a conscious realization— while he wrote his text.

Oates writes:

The death of that big tree reminded me not to get snookered by the surfaces. Here was no safe harbor...Here was an Eden that had no ending and that I could never be cast out of, though I would leave and return again and again...In time I learned to re-enter it from many other places, small and humble ones. My breath. My body. That tree in the yard. I learned to think of the pains I felt as the pains of anything living. Part of the game. I tell this story because pain is where the topic of time and change must at last take us...Replacing our fantasy Edens, our imaginary getaways of motionless nature, requires confronting pain, loss, and death. (155-6)

The idea that nature is not a safe harbor, not a perfect Eden resistant to change, does require some painful paradigm shifts. Oates warns us that such a shift will be painful and

it is no wonder why when we think about Cronon's explanation that some of our deepest values are placed upon nature and to rethink what nature is will not be an easy, or initially comforting, experience.

If we recall all of the changes brought about by literary studies and literary theory changing the way people read we can also see that such a change can be a painful experience, a little death, because reading will never be the same again. Bringing theory to consciousness so that people are aware of what theories and constructs they are operating within changes the way they 'see' the world, language, texts, everything. Freire, likewise, urges for critical consciousness on a very political level to work toward change.¹⁴ And changing people's views about Nature can also have life-altering effects. Rethinking our constructs of nature can be a positive change because nature-as-Eden, nature set up as a constant binary, is not useful and in fact, creates dead-end politicking and activism. Oates' realization, however, that he can re-enter 'Eden' again and again, through his breath, body, mind, the backyard is a rethinking of nature as wild, wildness. What he re-enters is not the lost paradise of Eden; it is Paradise Wild.

This is where reimagining American nature and re-mythologizing Paradise Lost comes into play. The first line of Oates' introduction asks, "What would it be like to stop mourning for nature?" (1). This is a valid question that some 'nature-lovers' may not have asked before and instead continue to absorb all the bad news, all the 'nature problems' and dwell and grieve over ruined and lost nature. And why the hell not,

¹⁴ Paulo Friere's "The 'Banking' Concept of Education" from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (1963) and featured in David H. Richter's *Falling Into Theory* (2000).

because as Oates reminds us, “Eden is where you get kicked out of” so we have already always been grieving its loss and our castigation (1). Oates bases much, but not all of his critique of our own uncritical notions of nature and our dichotomous thinking about nature on the Eden myth. I need not rehearse the myth here, so let it suffice to say that our ideas about Nature, specifically nature/culture dualisms, are greatly influenced by this myth.¹⁵ But this myth is not the only influence on our beliefs that we are separate from nature and continually chase after a dream of ‘saving nature’ which Oates claims is impossible and in fact, creates the “nature problem” (2). Some of our dichotomous beliefs are blamed on, for example, Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution and Descartes and Bacon. Oates reminds us that we can also point fingers at “self-consciousness, consumerism, industrial capitalism, Christianity. Take your pick” (2). The real problem Oates argues is that ultimately “our separation from nature...is a self-deception” (2).

This self-deception relates to David Mazel’s explanation in *American Literary Environmentalism* that environment is “a discursive construction, something whose ‘reality’ derives from the ways we write, speak, and think about it” (xii). These ‘realities’ are in fact constructions, self-deceptions that are named as nature, environment, wild, or wilderness. Each term weighs in heavily packed with its own value-ridden objectives depending on the sociorhetorical situation in which and by whom it is used. Mazel argues, “the environment is *itself* a myth, a ‘grand fable,’ a complex fiction, a widely

¹⁵ There are many texts that address the influence of the Eden myth on the American ideas about nature, a few examples follow: Cronon (1995), Merchant (1995), R.W.B Lewis’ *The American Adam* (1955), and Roderick Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1973).

shared, occasionally contested, and literally ubiquitous narrative” (xii). The very fact that environment is always a construct and ubiquitous makes it an unusually good target for resisting theory. We so easily normalize and naturalize our ideas about environments because they are always ‘there.’

This idea is similar to what Oates refers to in regard to myths. Myths always play a part in creating patterns of behavior and beliefs. Myth, too, is literally a ubiquitous narrative, or set of narratives. Some poststructuralist scholars see all knowledge as myth. Considering that myth, theory, and knowledge are all ways of making sense of the world the idea is useful. Oates believes that we cannot operate outside of myth for as he explains, “Myths must be there: I suspect we can’t think far without them, nor could there be such a thing as a ‘culture’ without some deep storyline to give it shape” (51). These deep storylines exist on levels most of us are not consciously aware of, or at least not aware of all the time. Oates conveys a similar message, “a myth like *Paradise Lost* is not even *what* we believe. Most of us don’t believe it in any doctrinal sense. Rather, it’s the *structure* of our believing, the shape of our mental terrain” (50). These structures or patterns literally shape the way we think on a very deep, unconscious level. If you told a friend that he was operating under the *Paradise Lost* Eden Myth that person would probably deny it, look at you puzzled, and walk away. We see this myth operating around us on a daily level, especially in the media: newspapers, advertising, magazine articles, on the news.

We need not look far, however, to see how the structures of *Paradise Lost*, the rhetoric of lost Eden, are clearly imbedded in our local Bozeman, Big Sky, and

Livingston, Montana newspapers and Real Estate sections. Advertisements for Big Sky's 'Last Best Ski-in, Ski-out' communities, for example, play on the anxieties of Paradise Lost. And lest we not forget Montana's "Last Best Place" motto to remind us of our impending future because being last never lasts for long, especially when the motto more often than not paradoxically refers to real estate aimed at 'selling' paradise.

My favorite 'review' from last summer on a local guest lodge came by way of *The Wall Street Journal's* travel section writer Laura Landro who calls upon the famous Joni Mitchell song for a reference to Paradise Lost:

Of course, as the song goes, paradise is quickly getting paved over by parking lots...there is enough fancy resort-home development going on that the early morning bulldozer sounds tend to overwhelm the birdsong. And even natural beauty has its downside: During our four-day stay in Montana the horseflies were out in force... (W1)

Here, the problem is not a lack of 'wildlife;' it's just the wrong, annoying, buzzing, and biting kind. I guess in a perfect 'paradise' there are no bugs. Landro's idea of the wild is just another part of our everyday life here in Big Sky, Montana. And, the sounds of building machinery from the excavation of new roads, the paving of established roads, and the building of new homes for those extremely wealthy few who can afford the 'last best place' twenty acre tracts near by is not the 'noise' one wants to hear in their four-day paid vacation in 'paradise.' As Landro departs the Lodge for the airport, she gets her big break, yet it yields the emotions of grieving for the inevitable losses to come. As she explains, "there ambling towards us was an enormous moose...Hopefully, they won't build too many houses in his habitat" (W7). The myth of paradise comes to a final halt. Landro takes her snapshots all the while pondering on how the moose's 'frontier' is being

trespassed by new roads, new homes, not to mention the tourist industry. She knows that indeed, it is likely that homes will be built in this 'habitat' that also supports a long list of other mammals, predators, ungulates, raptors, insects, even the hummingbirds Landro has been admiring from her vacation deck. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, *Paradise Lost* insidiously fills in the gaps of our thinking about nature. When we are constantly stuck in the black-and-white world of the Eden myth, there are apparently no other ways to 'construct' nature other than pristine/ruined and sacred/profane. As Oates contests, "Over and over we recapitulate our master narrative, the myth of virginal nature all around us, always in the process of getting lost" (52).

The problem with the recapitulation of *Paradise Lost* as Oates sees it, and you've probably noticed this too whether from students, friends, or the media, is that "It locks us into a passive despair" (49). We already know the culprits of our 'sins,' although many environmentalists, politicians, and scientists will argue which is the worst: overpopulation, urban sprawl, capitalism, industry, chemical production, nuclear weapons production, and so on—as you know the list goes on. Certainly we have problems, many exist along the lines of atrocities and grand injustices; however, we mostly feel incapable of doing anything about it. Why is this? There are many reasons, such as apathy or denial. It is fair to say that most of these reasons fall under the same area of passive despair within the Eden myth paradigm. Oates explains his reason for such apathy, "Nothing less than saving or losing the world is at stake. If you don't feel up to the task, you're not alone. How could you be, unless you're a God or a Hero? That's one of the downsides to this myth" (48). This passive despair keeps us from

getting to an understanding of what is really going on around us. What are the real losses, what can be restored, what can we learn from our mistakes? Unfortunately our understanding of nature-culture is so infused with the structures of *Paradise Lost* that “until we reconsider this old myth,” the patterns will keep telling us that we are fighting a losing battle (Oates 48).

If we must always have myth, if it always already there, then we should be able to remythologize the myths that are no longer useful. This may also seem like a daunting task, as we may not yet have the ‘language’ we need to rethink nature-culture. As Oates confesses, “I could read, like Muir, glacier tracks in high valleys; I could read, like Thoreau, glimmerings of insight in my soul...But a half-destroyed, half-reconstructed island, act of God and artifice of greed, I could not have read” (117). What he is describing is Ross Island. It has been a sand-and-gravel operation for seventy-five years. It is basically an island with its center dug out, scooped, dredged. Why this island is of significance it is a real example of re-thinking nature-culture. A place heavily affected by industry that still has the potential to be called ‘nature.’ In three years, Ross Island will be legally turned over to the city of Portland, Oregon as a recreational site. The gravel company will do its legally required remediation, pull out and the public will have it. This island sits in the Willamette River. Surrounding are the cityscapes of Portland, its many bridges, and the homes of the West Hills.

Oates takes his kayak to the Island and reports, “Heron will stir around if you stay for long. You might see some damaged salmon drudging by, or hear birdsong through the alders and black cottonwoods...There may be river otters, nutria, beaver.

Right in the middle of Portland” (116). This is not your typical wilderness, but why can it not be a Paradise Wild? Why can't the island's sandy banks still make for a nice boater's destination? Oates wonders what can be done with such a place? He explains, “Once I was a wilderness guy; such a question would not have engaged my imagination. So near to folks. So sullied” (117). So sullied. We humans, or at least first world Americans, can sound so snotty. This is a place that can be restored to a certain extent. The center will still be dug out, but it is not uninhabitable. No losing battle here, no lost Paradise or Eden-grief. Oates admits, “Something can be done here. Salmon can find clean gravel or refuge in passing. Herons can build up their numbers. Eagles and osprey can nest. It could be a good place to visit” (117). So much possibility as long as we can work ourselves out of the pure/ruined dichotomy of Paradise Lost. Ross Island will become a Paradise Wild—a place full of complexity. Our relation to any place should be complex not simple and we should read it carefully. Oates claims, “Portland's present is here, a palimpsest of past acts; as with any person or place, acts of nature and acts of culture mingle indiscriminately” (118). It is a nature that starts where we stand, not some far-off, 'out-there' unattainable Nature. Ross Island is reimagined nature, and I think, a useful example of the possibilities for remythologizing Eden.

CHAPTER THREE

TOWARD QUEERING NATURE IN PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF THE WILD

In *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature*, David Oates knows well the complexities involved in experiences of nature as he admits:

I've played out my own little version of the American Eden story...So there are personal stories in this book of how I went to the woods, and why. How God and Eden, gender and nature got all mixed up together; how, as a gay boy, I found myself exiled from my fundamentalist family and faith, and took to the hills for *refuge*. How, even as I got a Ph.D. in literature, and shaped a side-identity as some kind of nature-outsider, borrowed perhaps from Muir and Thoreau. A construct, that identity—practically a cliché; yet something spoke, high in the Sierras. Something real happened, something from far beyond my imagining and outside my construct. What was it? (4)

What was “it” becomes as equally a part of *Paradise Wild* as the rhizomatic effect of Oates’ remythologizing of the Eden myth. This “it” of nature, of wildness, although inevitably something different for each of us, is still a force that goes beyond our constructs and helps us remember the importance of not taking knowledge, myth, or social constructs so *literally*. Oates not only incites a rethinking of the Eden myth, but also encourages us to cross over borders of black-and-white thinking that so often influence our ideas about nature and gender and he insightfully reminds us, “Just because the constructs we impose are powerful, doesn’t mean they are all-powerful” (139). Nature is mediated through our constructs Oates contends, “but it is still IT. We must ...recognize our constructs, and ride them lightly” (133). This philosophy commands us to pay attention and be open to all the multiple ways wildness is within and surrounds us. David Oates offers some interesting ways to rethink nature and gender and in doing so

reveals just how complex the issues are that we are dealing with. Oates' philosophy of "practicing the presence of the wild" is a complex task that requires a reimagining of not only American nature and culture, but also gender and Oates suggests we consider the idea of nature-as-queer.

To begin reimagining American nature, Oates remythologizes the Eden myth as discussed in the previous chapter to show how our culture's literalized reading of this myth forces us into dichotomous patterns of thought that result in Paradise-lost grieving and longing, faulty environmental politics, and nature/culture binaries. Oates suggests a countermyth named Paradise-Wild: the awareness of the ever-present, changing, less-than perfect, complex, layered realm of the wild, of wildness that exists everywhere—in our bodies, in our minds, and in the wide spectrum of nature from "untouched" to 'mildly peopled' to 'densely cultured'" (118). This countermyth encourages us to read nature and our experiences with nature differently to theorize what constructs we place on wilderness and gender in order to cross borders of binary thought, such as pristine or ruined wilderness, and enter into the liminal spaces that confuse such boundaries. Paradise-wild is not limited to ideas about just nature and gender; it is a way of rethinking ideas about nature, both human and nonhuman, in general. It is a call to practice the presence of the wild in hope that we will be able to shed our mournful discourses of nature, as well as such discourse about ourselves. This countermyth is a vital example of one of the ways we may begin to reimagine the myriad ways our ideas about nature, gender, and culture are intricately layered, complex, and far from existing within either-or categorization.

In *Paradise Wild* inquiries about American ideas of nature are thoroughly implicated within Oates' personal narratives involving his part Cherokee grandfather, or the early American botanist William Bartram, his Quaker kinsmen, his own fundamental Baptist upbringing, his role as a wilderness guide, and coming to terms with being gay in light of these various influences on his identity. Oates reveals, "In this story—my story—gender and nature are twisted together in all sorts of interesting ways" (128). Gender in Oates' story is discussed as masculine gender constructs being played out against and reinforced by nature or in this case, wilderness. Being aware of how gender is played out within our nature experiences may allow us to see the ways our constructions of both nature and gender help to either reinforce or question one another.

A chapter from *Paradise Wild* that highlights some of these layered complexities is "Good Indian, Bad Indian or, The Opposite of Queer is Still Queer." He explains how "'Gender' has been linked to 'wilderness' in my private journey, and this has allowed me to reflect on the ways we have constructed nature in these two realms. Both wilderness and gender are taken as *givens, as reality*, instead of being seen as the *overlapping constructs* they are" (138). During Oates' youth he used wilderness as a place to define and express his maleness. He concludes, "If in our culture (as in my family) value is defined by maleness, then facing the wilderness is an essential act, an archetype of the masculine" and therefore he pursued wilderness challenges with a macho-obsessive, out-do everyone else determination. It was as if he could exorcize gayness by climbing the bloody-hell out of every peak.

The thing of it is, his virginity came with him on every altitude obsessed venture, just as we bring all our cultural baggage with us on our wilderness jaunts: our high-tech gear, our topo maps, and even a mind filled with preexisting images of ‘nature’ from art and literature. Oates’ intense efforts at creating masculinity may have fooled others, but as the chapter subtitle reminds us, the opposite of queer is still queer. We see how queerness can deceive gender paradigms through culturally constructed performative acts of masculinity. The borders that keep the macho and the fey separate are crossed and overlap are no longer so easily defined in opposition to one another. The possibility of breaking with cultural repetition becomes available when our ideas about categories such as nature or gender are reimagined. In Oates’ youth, however, the examples he was given by family, culture, religion, and myths as to what it meant to be a man or how to define ‘nature’ were drawn out like lines on a map. To fulfill his father’s desire that he be a good man meant that he needed to be masculine, and to be a good Indian, meant he must embody stoicism and strength. There was no room for overlapping constructs—not for what pristine wilderness meant or pure masculinity.

The point is, as Oates tries to mask his homosexuality by exerting and performing historically constructed acts of masculinity, what he views as the “apotheosis of queerness,” he finds that there is no escape to or from culture, gender, or nature (135). Looking back he now realizes that for all of us who have ever tried to ‘escape’ from civilizations many forms by seeking *refuge* in nature, “We were enmeshed in discourses; inward and outward, official and tacit, they created the elaborate world of ‘nature’ we experienced. There’s no unmediated Eden for us, either of nature or of sex” (132). In

American Literary Environmentalism, David Mazel explains this idea as postnatality and asserts, “Postnatality is not about our sense that there is no longer any escape from culture into nature—such a feeling, after all, is hardly new. The term more sensibly should refer to our just-dawning sense that such an escape *never was* available” (34). During Oates’ wilderness guiding years, however, no one told him such an insight. He kept on playing out the role of the ‘rugged individual’ in the wilderness—meaning ‘rugged man’—in order to take his “queerness to its opposite pole” yet he comes to realize that no matter how macho he constructed his outward identity to be he “never stopped being queer” (129). The “refuge” in nature he had been looking for did not exist, but a different kind of refuge squeezed its way between the cracks of polarity.

What happened to Oates in dealing with all of these conflicting constructions of nature and gender was a realization that he was equipped with the wrong myths. He was informed by literalized versions of myths and social constructs what was and was not true wilderness, what was and was not manly, and what was and was not a good Indian. These are what Oates describes as either-or valuations and he explains about himself, “no matter how stoic I was, no matter how many victories I could achieve, no matter how many wilderness miles I counted, I could never feel fully a man” (135). The irony of it is that there are always other myths, other ways of telling the tale. Later in life Oates finally found stories from the past that opened up the interpretation of what it means to be a good Indian. He found another way of telling the tale through Native American cultural beliefs in berdache—“a European word for cross-gender sex- roles” (136). Many Native American cultures included and accepted queerness. It was not vilified, but instead an

honorable part of their society. Such modern terms of sexuality were excluded from Oates' fundamentalist Baptist and Cherokee upbringing. But like most things found to be different in other cultures, this behavior was quickly extricated by European conquerors. Berdache became a shameful, unspeakable, and sinful practice—a taboo in need of Christian salvation and ultimately became a buried tradition. So as Oates recovered this myth of the past he wished to tell his father after all, he “was a good Indian” (137).

When Oates finally realized that being a good Indian meant he could embrace his queerness, it was a completely alternative view than the one he had grown up with. Although nature did not serve as the refuge Oates initially thought it was, in terms of being a mask for queerness via its masculinizing powers, it had an opposite effect. Nature ultimately contributed toward an acceptance of queerness—a realization and appreciation of alternative values and a move away from absolutes as Oates explains:

I think of wilderness as a realm of alternative values...Nature answers (or at least questions) civilization: if you spend a few days or weeks in the woods, the mall-and-TV world seems less absolute. We recall there's something else alive, something else bigger than the human...nature still has the potential to surprise, challenge, and overcome our preconceptions. It remains an alt. realm, where a reality outside the culture-system is glimpsed (or at least glimpsable). (143)

In this regard, an awareness of the instability of social constructs and a reminder that we live in “the ambiguous world of gray on gray” (39) as William Cronon insists opens up our reading and interpretation of our world and ourselves. When Oates discusses the possibility of nature as capable of questioning civilization (not as the antithesis of civilization, but as a reminder of how our categories are more ambiguous than we think) and challenging our preconceptions he is moving toward a philosophy of practicing the

presence of the wild, a resistance to easy categorization. Oates claims, “Though we project our socially constructed meanings onto nature, and play them out as if they were ‘real,’ and confuse our projections with nature itself, Nature Itself is always capable of bursting our bubble, breaking through...and insisting that Real Reality is bigger and stranger than we’ve ever imagined” (145). Although we may never have access to real reality or real nature we can be aware that our current views have the potential for revision.

Oates refound a Native American myth that challenges our neat American constructs of gender and his remythologizing of the Eden myth explores new ways to view American nature. He ultimately theorizes:

So nature could be queer as me, queer as Thoreau. That’s no worse a formulation than nature-as-feminine or nature-as-masculine. The essential gesture, I’d like to suggest, is away from either-or, toward a flexible spectrum—nature’s ‘multiple but finite truths.’ Many possibilities, within the envelope of nature and body. Queer nature: full of tricks: hard to categorize: consistently outrageous. Pan. Nature. Sex.
So many names for the wild. (141)

Oates sees the construct of Nature-as-queer as informed by a transcendence of gender represented in “many of the old mythologies” where nature “escapes safe channeling” because those myths recognize nature as *both* a masculine *and* feminine force (138).

Such a construct is interesting to think about in regard to Oates’ experiences as a wilderness guide. This job can be played out within both the construct of wilderness as a female space that becomes tamed by mountaineering and climbing knowledge, maps, and technological gear. And at the same time a wilderness guide may be operating within the construct of nature-as-masculine space that works at creating or reinforcing masculinity

through tests of strength, stamina, and bravery. What would nature-as-queer look like I wonder because it would not be the exact combination of both nature-as-feminine or masculine working for example, in a state of flux. It would possibly be something less definable and not so easy to categorize resisting ideas about polar opposites that cloud our judgment in both political as well as social thinking. It may invoke an idea of nature that acknowledges the changeability of nature—both humans and nonhuman nature—in such a way that avoids mournful or anxious discourse. Recognizing the way that we use nature and it uses us, and how in the end as Oates reminds us, nature will eventually take us into death. Facing the unavoidable interrelatedness between nature, society, culture, and discourse in such a way that we are urged to question what it is we take for granted in these categories. Nature-as-queer would probably delight in the appreciation of complexity. In *The Truth of Ecology* Dana Phillips explains that the acknowledgment from ecologists “that nature is extraordinarily complicated” and difficult to figure out necessitates a more critical view of our ideas of nature, of environmentalism, and maybe we could apply this to our ideas of gender, as well (22).

To reimagine nature-as-queer is a reminder that a stable, perfectly balanced, and completely understood world does not exist. It is also a fine example of thinking in ways that resist either-or categorization and works more toward a middle ground philosophy. The importance of crossing over the boundaries of our own social constructs is a way to work toward the awareness that we don't control everything and Oates explains:

...when gay people go around bursting gender categories and goofing up the neat either-or schema, we're sort of speaking for nature—doing the Lord's work, you might say. Isn't that a hoot? Insisting that real people and real sexuality are

strange, multiform, exciting, unprogrammed, and capable of infinite surprise. Just like nature. Just unlike the staid, safe, stultifying confines of rigid gender categories. (146)

If we practice the presence of the wild we will ultimately see how wild our own bodies are and how we are a part of nature, just as we are a part of culture—realizing all the while the we have constructed both and yet, we will never fully understand either. And Oates realizes that the “It” he has been feeling all along from his experiences in nature are brought with him when he leaves the wilderness boundaries. That “It” of nature comes with him both while he is on a climb or in a Portland bar and in either place nature still has the potential to bring surprise and challenge what we consider “real” nature or “real” culture. As Oates works out ideas of nature-as-queer he says, “Those who go *outside* in any sense are likely to discover the queerness of the world. It don’t stay put. It keeps surprising. It won’t fall into our neat constructs...reality is absolutely beyond us and we’d better learn to ride our constructs lightly, provisionally” (146). And the ideas each of has about the world around us will continue to change, and not stay put. Our views about nature are both always in flux and always subject to many forces, even as they apparently stand still because the socio-ideological forces that change our views of nature either occur over long periods of time or during significant sociohistorical periods that encompass many changes.

Yet, even though our experiences of nature are never unmediated in some discursive way, practicing the presence of the wild helps us to remember that we are just as likely as Oates says to get “bumped by it. *It*. Not just by our constructs of It” because “What we have been adapting to, these last million years, is not just our idea of nature”

(139). Theorizing nature, especially in a poststructuralist sense, is always invariably complex, difficult, and the more we theorize the more nature slips through our categories. We at once create the nature(s) we 'know' and yet there is never a way to actually access the nature that exists outside of those constructions. So, as we try to break down the nature-out-there constructions, we only get so far. That is, we get as far as realizing that there really isn't a nature-out-there that stands apart from our construction of the said nature, yet there is still, and always will be that nature that we can never know outside of our constructions. David Oates' *Paradise Wild* is a text that brings forth the complexities that we are faced with when dealing with our ideas about nature, culture, and gender and puts us to task to further reimagine American nature through the practice of the presence of the wild.

CHAPTER FOUR

DEEP ECOLOGY IN THE DEEP SOUTH

If we are truly going to put forth an effort toward rethinking nature then we have much work to do. Gary Snyder calls this the ‘real work’, which as David Oates explains is “knowing when to keep the tree and when to make it into something else” (76). This real work “takes passion, energy, humility, and perhaps humor. Willingness to try, to get soiled; to compromise, learn, improve” (76). This real work is hard to do if we remain stuck in a world that so easily accepts the ideology of Paradise Lost and post-Edenic guilt. This real work is difficult enough without Eden-grief and longing that forces us into black-and-white thinking, us versus them mentalities, and pure/ruined dichotomies because it forces us to make hard decisions, ones that acknowledge our own complicity with nature and culture. David Oates reminds us that we cannot stand a part from either nature or culture; we are simultaneously implicated in both and we must all use nature in some way to survive. This does not mean that we all—individuals, communities, corporations, governments— use it in the same way, but in this complex world, there is no way for anyone—men or women—to be exempt from this cycle, at least on some minute scale. Oates contends:

Saying *No* to the use of nature is flatly silly. We’ll be using it, eating and harvesting and processing, as long as we live. Saying *No* to nature’s use of us is equally silly. That’s going on simultaneously, and in the end of course it wins out. Instead of saying *No* to the use of nature, I want to learn to say *How?* How shall we eat, harvest, use? Where? In what quantities? How much of ourselves, our harvest, our substance, shall we allow to slip back before we can use it? How relaxed, or how efficient, ought we to be? (159)

These are crucial questions. They involve the real work and the hard won decisions. Such decisions cannot be made if we are clouded and weighed down in a framework of guilt, blame, pessimism, apathy, or denial.

There are many environmental philosophies: mainstream, ecofeminism, cultural and social ecofeminism, social ecology, deep ecology, environmental cultural studies, ecofundamentalism, and so on. These ideologies become both the means and justification for beliefs, actions, and politics. Getting the real work done is also complicated by what the real work is to different groups; William Cronon discusses this in regard to nature as contested terrain (51). Exposing essentialist ideologies that underlie many of these philosophies is one way to work toward questioning their assumptions and inherent pitfalls. For example, if Paradise Lost mentalities drive environmental politics, those actions may be grounded in essentialist notions about nature, both human and nonhuman, and may work toward perpetuating cycles of Eden-grief and longing. A result of such work actually brings little fruition because as Cronon reminds us:

Nature will *always* be contested terrain...This is *not* to say that all visions of nature are equally good, or that we can never persuade others that one of them is better, truer, fairer, more beautiful than another. It is simply to state that such persuasion will never occur if all we do is assert the naturalness of our own views. Tempting as it may be to play nature as a trump card in this way, it quickly becomes a self-defeating strategy: adversaries simply refuse to recognize each other's trump and then go off to play by themselves...[This] is surely not a very promising path for trying to understand our differences. Without such understanding, the prospect for solving environmental problems, to say nothing of working toward a juster world for all the peoples and creature of the earth, would seem very grim indeed. (52)

I think it is safe to say that Janisse Ray is interested in working toward a more just world and a social and political system that is better at environmental problem solving. She is involved in the 'real work' of trying to figure out how we are going to get along with nature. Her text offers some ideas that take into account how to make compromises and decisions toward use and preservation such as, "single-tree selection or uneven-aged management" (25). She also critiques monoculture forests for their part in reducing viable habitat for local species of flora and fauna. Ray's support of alternative forest management is important in that it offers alternatives to clear-cutting and monoculture tree farming.

These alternatives are what Oates is interested in as well. Oates looks for the alternatives to the no cut/go cut dichotomy because that is where the middle ground exists. The no cut/go cut dichotomy works toward either creating a symbolic, museum like forest that cannot be cut because it stands as a literal Eden or the opposite end of this spectrum emphasizes clear-cutting of forests with little or no regard for the real aftermath of problems such as watershed quality or soil stability. The timber industry, however, knows that its livelihood relies on forestry practices that ensure a viable forest for the future and clear cuts are not as popular as they once were. Forest managers also know that selective cutting, thinning of stands, reduces fire danger and encourages tree diversity, which works toward creating a healthier forest. Yet, our dominant American imagination easily falls back on patterns of dualistic thinking. David Oates describes a dispute going on just North of Portland that represents some of these dualistic downfalls.

Oates explains, “protesters are stopping a National Forest timber sale that apparently is a model of good forestry (they’re stopping it anyway)” (96). This timber sale would adhere to forest management that includes “no clear-cuts; no taking of old growth; using helicopters to airlift the cut wherever possible; and closing and restoring about five miles of older logging roads” (97). These guidelines for timber harvesting are an example of good alternative methods, but the timber sale was ultimately shut down. Environmental groups even protested reports from some of the region’s leading forestry, fish and wildlife, and biology scientists whose results brought about their endorsement of this sale. Oates explains that these scientists “know more about Northwest forests and salmon—and care more about them—than almost anyone else on the planet” yet when it comes down to it the forest area under dispute, Eagle Creek, stood more as a symbol than it did an actual viable place to harvest timber (98). Eagle Creek became a symbol of Eden—immortalized, literalized, mythologized--ultimately a place where nothing short of zero cutting was acceptable for the protesters. As part of the National Forest system, Eagle Creek is an easy target for the projected image of immortal forest. The National Forest is ‘everyone’s’ land, paid for with American tax-dollars. How these tax dollars are spent will be an ongoing dispute. Harv Forsgren, a local forester, says the timber will still be cut—just not here—more likely it will happen “where environmental protections may not be so rigorous” (qtd. in Oates 97). Timber will still be cut. There is no way to avoid using nature whether for timber or for management purposes. Oates sees the proposed timber harvest for Eagle Creek as move toward “the possibility of forest management somewhere *between* the extremes of industrial clear-cutting and don’t-touch

wilderness. That's the territory I'm most interested in" (97). Although, the in-between management possibilities will not come to fruition in Eagle Creek, Oates is accurate that it does at least suggest possibilities beyond the no cut/go cut dichotomy.

Janisse Ray is also interested in some in-between territory, but mostly she isn't. She does acknowledge an alternative to the clear-cutting and don't touch dichotomy. There is a type of forestry management Ray discusses in "The Kindest Cut" that is practiced by an ecological forester by the name of Leon Neel. He has managed a wealthy industrialist's pine woods plantations in northern Florida and southern Georgia for over forty-five years. Ray explains:

Leon applies ecology in such a way as to preserve a forest intact while extracting economic benefits. Known as single-tree selection or uneven-aged management, Leon's silviculture selects by hand individual trees to be harvested and leaves multigenerational or multispecies growth in a handsome, functioning grove. It is an innovative alternative to clear-cutting, proving endangered species can exist in a working landscape. (251)

Ray points to important factors here of how the forest can offer humans economic benefits while still retaining aesthetic value and provides nonhuman species the benefits of a multigenerational variety of trees.

A landowner must often have a way to pay for the land at stake. So as Neel admits, "he realizes most landowners can't afford to immortalize a forest for the sake of the forest and its creature" (253). Ultimately, economic benefits are what many landowners seek. Timber can often offer that type of benefit. Neel explains, "We get paid by what we cut...But I have refused to cut trees time and time again" (qtd. in Ray 254). Neel, however, confesses, "If I wanted to be rich, I could be rich" (qtd. in Ray

254). While Neel admits that both he and the landowner could make a valuable sale from their timber, instead he offers a good alternative to clear-cutting and its fast profit turnover. His methods mark the possibility for a trade-off with and a compromise to traditional timber harvesting. Neel sets an example of how to make the hard decisions regarding land and profit. His forestry practices preserve wildlife habitat and his selective cutting only harvests trees “every seven to ten years. On any one cut he takes no more than 20 percent of the volume. Instead of returning a large sum of money to a landowner at one time, Leon’s forestland yields smaller amounts over a long period” (254). Neel and the landowner may not get rich overnight with such forestry practices, yet the land still yields some return while maintaining a high level of environmental quality. Neel knows that many landowners cannot afford to immortalize a forest by leaving the land completely alone, however, he also knows the stakes of not respecting land that is used. The idea of immortalizing a forest is a curious one. I question the possibility of such a task and yet people’s imaginations try to immortalize forests all the time as seen, for example, with the Eagle Creek debate.

Besides alternative forestry management practices, there are also alternative preservation methods that still yield some economic return without resulting in a timber harvest. Some of the largest tracts of old-growth longleaf pine are maintained through alternative ‘harvesting’. Ray explains how many of the intact old-growth longleaf ecosystems in northern Florida are “kept by wealthy northerners as hunting preserves, and the intactness of the longleaf ecosystem there can be attributed to that self-serving but tremendously effective method of preservation, sport hunting by the well-off” (154).

And many of these hunting preserves surround Leon Neel's forests creating extended habitat for many of the animals associated with this type of forest.

A multigenerational and multispecies forest, represented by Neel's forests, provides a spaced out canopy allowing light to flow toward the forest floor creating a vital understory that supports many other species. A multigenerational forest hosts snag trees, or standing deadfall, that house wildlife and older live trees, 'candle trees', offer the red-cockaded woodpeckers an essential source for their cavities. Candle trees are recognizable because the red-cockaded woodpecker cavity holes drip white tree resin giving off the appearance of candle wax (152). Ray provides us with a descriptive list of some of the animals that live in Neel's multigenerational forest:

Leon's woods are full of deer. Quail and turkeys abound, and gopher tortoises. Fox squirrels shimmy up the flaky, gray-brown boles of the pines, and hundreds of migratory songbirds stockpile provisions. There are great horned owls and red-tailed hawks. Red-cockaded woodpecker candle trees pepper the woods. Leon, through his work is responsible for the largest population of red-cockaded woodpeckers left on private land anywhere... (253)

Ray's list here uses full sentences and terms such as, abound, shimmy, and pepper giving this scene life, activity, and plentifulness. It is a contrast to the lists I will be critiquing below that feature threatened forests and species (many the same as above) which are either endangered or proposed for the Endangered Species Act list, but because in Neel's forest these species are not 'endangered' or as threatened there is a much different tone—one that focuses on life instead of loss, beauty instead of doom. The work going on in Neel's forests is important and there is much we can learn from his forestry practices, but there is also hard work to do in focusing on life in places that are less than perfect, too.

Ray gets caught up—she’s often unable to *see* past the doom—when a place is less than perfect. It is interesting to note that in regard to Neel’s forest she comments on how it is “a handsome, functioning grove” (251). Yet Ray is not the only one to get caught up in this forest’s beauty. Obviously, any one who works in such a place for over forty-five years must love not only what he is doing, but where he is doing it and Neel even admits, “I use this forest as my model...This is what heaven should be” (252). Neel’s forestry ‘model’ exhibiting trees over two hundred years of age is, I imagine, a breathtaking sight. The feelings projected onto this forest are representative of something more than beauty and aestheticism and cross over into what William Cronon explains as the historical move toward a belief in the sublime landscape, a rare place, “where one had more chance than elsewhere to glimpse the face of God” (73). In modern America, some of these beliefs are imbedded in our dominant views of wilderness and Cronon discloses, “To gain such remarkable influence, the concept of wilderness had to become loaded with some of the deepest core values of the culture that created and idealized it: it had to become sacred” (73). If something, such as wilderness, is sacred it holds a privileged spot in our culture. A privileging of pristine nature or old-growth forests exposes strands of deep ecology and brings out the Paradise Lost narrative and Eden-grief and longing that run throughout Ray’s text.

Although I believe Ray’s work is scientifically comprehensive, such as her work emphasizing how the gopher tortoise is a keystone species to over three hundred other species in the long leaf pine ecosystem and her efforts at exposing the negative effects of replacing multigenerational and multispecies forests with monoculture tree farms,

ultimately her ecocentrism always leads her back into the morally charged philosophies of deep ecology. In *Primitives in the Wilderness: Deep Ecology and the Missing Human Subject*, Peter C. van Wyck explains how deep ecology is mainly concerned with “defining a new *ethical* relationship between humans and the natural world” (33). Social ecologists contest that this ‘new *ethical* relationship’ is formed at the expense of ignoring social problems and the ensuing destruction of environment due to aspects of human domination of other humans (van Wyck 33). In “On the Search for a Root Cause: Essentialist Tendencies in Environmental Discourse” Jeffrey C. Ellis discusses some of the disputes between social and deep ecologists. He discloses how some critics argue that deep ecology has challenged mainstream environmentalism and pushed for a deeper critique of “social and cultural complexities of environmental problems” (Ellis 268). Contesting such claims, others say that these critiques do not go deep enough or do not consider the differences in people of various classes, gender, or race (Ellis 264-66). Unfortunately, deep ecology’s efforts to lump all humans into a categorical oneness whereby all humans are equally responsible for ecological degradation ignores a social critique that actually takes away from the ‘deep’ critique the name invokes.

The concept of the oneness of humankind is espoused in deep ecology, but other environmental politics also advocate the idea of ‘oneness with nature.’ This getting back to nature theme is meant to be a fix for our current environmental problems. Oates explains that this ideal is loosely borrowed from the Romantics and suggests that even as we are separated from nature “we may know privileged moments not just of contact or enjoyment, but of total immersion: loss of separate identity: merging” (92). Some

theorists suggest that deep ecology has worked toward breaking down the separation between nature and culture by including humans into the realm of the ‘natural’ encouraging us to work toward an ecological identity that detaches the self from an anthropocentric view into a more concerned and caring relationship toward nature and ourselves. These ideas are contested by ecofeminists who point out that men and women have been socialized to experience “the self” differently and challenge the idea of an “ecological self” if it is based on ideas of the male self (Spretnak 428). We may add to this critique that there are also inevitable differences in the ways we experience nature due to our cultural orientation and the neglect to investigate these differences not only reinforces an idea that Nature is knowable, but also asserts the uncritical “naturalness of our own views” (Cronon 52). It is within these differences that we may begin to see just how unknowable nature is.

The philosophy of deep ecology essentializes Nature. The discourse of deep ecology repeatedly works toward fixing nature into something that is not only morally vested with intrinsic value, but it is something that is totally identifiable. Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka expose how deep ecologists not only see nature as an original source of value but also feel that “if only we learn to attune ourselves to this morally significant order can we overcome the drive for mastery underlying our environmental problems” (x). This vision simplifies all of our complex environmental problems into what some theorists call the ‘master-slave narrative’ where power over nature inherently results in destruction. Social ecologists who wish to push this critique further analyze capitalistic economies to expose issues of production as part of, or the main cause of, our

environmental problems. Ecofeminists take this critique further to reveal how such master-slave narratives extend past human domination over nature, but is also representative “in the domination of women by men and in the treatment of both nature and women as commodities in class society” (Merchant 205). What these various views expose is how some environmental theorists are working toward a deeper critique of nature, culture, political economies, class, and gender but simultaneously fall short by oversimplifying any of these invariably complex categories especially when their view of Nature is essentialized in the first place.

Going back to Leon Neel’s alternative forestry methods, it is worthwhile to note that even Neel’s forestry practices are a form of control over and domination of the forest to a certain extent simply by means of management even though his methods are, I think, quite desirable. Yet, as deep ecologists claim to know some identifiable Nature that is heavenly and pristine wilderness, like that which Neel cares for, there is no self-reflexive critique of their ideas about Nature within their philosophy. Not only is it problematic to pin nature down to a heavenly, pristine forest, but it also neglects to consider the real problems we face with less than perfect nature(s) too. Deep ecology might look for problems that stem from cultural or social behavior, consumption, and production but it fails to question the social or cultural aspects of our ideas about nature itself. Shane Phelan explains in “Intimate Distance: The Dislocation of Nature in Modernity” that many theorists are “not alone in this failure to ask the nature of nature” (58). Asking such a question encourages us to think about: What is Nature? What is Natural? What is the culture of nature? And whether or not Nature *is something?*

What I find most confusing is that some theorists say that deep ecologists reduce the gap between nature and culture by placing humans into the realm of the ‘natural’ and others claim that deep ecology sees all of our environmental problems as a result of our separation from nature. In this deep ecology paradigm we are a part of the ‘natural’ world, but because modernity, technology, capitalism, and other modern forces disconnect us with the ‘natural’ world we need to (re)place ourselves into that ‘natural’ world if we are to resolve our many environmental problems. This (re)placing could be associated with Merchant’s discussion of the recovery narrative resulting in both a restored Eden and a restoring of our own place with(in) that pristine nature. Some radical deep ecologists, whether they see humans as natural or not, posit that humans do not belong in nature because our very presence is destructive—as if we were a disease; therefore the only restoring necessary is Eden for Eden’s sake. Yet this is where I think it is worthwhile to ask: What is Eden? What is pristine Nature? When was nature ever pristine and therefore what are we trying to ‘restore’? Who benefits from this ‘restoring’ and who does not? Should we begin to think about the restoration of environments differently, incorporating a view more inclusive than Eden as a model?

These questions are not to imply that restoring areas suffering from environmental degradation is unnecessary. On the contrary, this is part of the real work we will always be faced with. In fact, both Oates and Ray refer to an idea similar to restoring that they call “undoing” our mistakes. This ‘undoing’ process is different than trying to re-create Eden (although Ray might argue); undoing is more about detoxification and cleaning up and working toward undoing certain practices that are harmful to our health, our soils,

our water, and other species. It is when Ray discusses her ideas of undoing, however, that she leads herself further into the *Paradise Lost* narrative and this ultimately undermines her preservationist goals. This is an example of one of deep ecology's paradoxes. Deep ecologists have an awareness of the problematics humans face when believing they are outside of nature, their doctrine however with its religious tones and apocalyptic prophecies toward the total annihilation of all nature by industrial culture works to reinforce the chasm between nature and culture, rather than theorizing the gap. This is the great paradox of deep ecology, how can we work toward merging with Nature to create our ecological selves if we are simultaneously the cultural poison that destroys Nature. This creates an either-or paradigm. I say this because if we are going to get serious about preservation—in the sense that includes a wider range of understanding for this term beyond a 'wilderness ethic'—then we need to get out of old ways of thinking about ourselves and nature. We will have to fess up to the fact that there is no outside of culture, just as there is no outside of nature. Granted there are better conditions we can imagine for ourselves and hope and work toward them in terms of how we think, live, and get along in both culture and nature. In this regard, Ray's efforts should not be dismissed.

Janisse Ray is not only a nature-writer, but is also a poet, naturalist, and an environmental activist working toward educating and 'saving' the longleaf pine forests and wiregrass communities of her native south in and around Georgia. Just as David Oates is working with his community of Portland in dealing with urban growth boundaries, Janisse Ray is working toward reestablishing boundaries where the longleaf

pine can host its communities of wiregrass and associated animal and plant species. Ray employs both the science that explains why several species of plants and animal do best, or only live, in longleaf pine forests, as well as deploys metaphorical and allegorical views that rely on that science. *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* combines naturalist views of the longleaf pine environment; critiques of social issues that are connected to environmental degradation that involve discussions of education, class, poverty, and race. She offers personal vignettes that give accounts of her ancestry, family, and fundamentalist upbringing. In this sense, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* also fits into the genre of environmental memoir.

Her chapters sway between personal narratives and narratives about the longleaf pine and its related animal and plant communities. Title chapters such as “Child of Pine,” “*Forest Beloved*,” “Poverty,” “*Hallowed Ground*,” “Driving and Singing,” and “Heaven on Earth” give some sense of the emotional context that is involved in this text. The italicized titles relate specifically to the ‘ecological’ chapters and print denotes personal narratives. The ‘eco’ chapters are also garnished with an ornamental vignette illustration of a pinecone, in case the italicized text doesn’t catch the reader’s eye. Interestingly, David Oates’ table of contents works in ways where his ‘palimpsest’ chapters/vignettes are italicized and lean toward the personal, creative, introspective, and reflexive (which contrasts with Ray’s use of italics for ‘eco’ chapters). I see this as a move, either way, toward emphasizing some chapters in opposition to others as a way to signify the various deployments of genre at work. David Oates’ text works with genre in more complex, overlapping ways that are not so easily segregated while Ray’s text has

clearer demarcations of genre boundaries. Overall, however, her text works toward complicating the notions of nature writing through an incorporation of self-reflexive personal narratives about family, religion, and class. Although the environmental writing and personal narratives are separated by chapter demarcations they still inform and play off each other in intertextual ways.

Janisse Ray grew up in a junkyard and it was all she knew. It was an environment that fueled her imagination and curiosity, but also shame. The Ray children did not socialize outside of school, but she had the keen sense to know that other children did not live like they did. Ray knew her father was a junk dealer. She confides, “The junkyard was stuffed with junked, wrecked, rusted, burned, and outmoded automobiles and parts of automobiles...It was like sticking your head into a wide-angle trash can” (21). The junkyard was not only filled with automobiles, but also any failed machine possible. “Between car bodies were swales of scrap” Rays admits, “bathtubs, motors, an airplane wing, the bucket to a crane, tractor tires, sparrow nests” (22). There was no shortage of adventure to be found in the junkyard that spanned the ten acres surrounding the family home. Janisse Ray and her brothers and sister discovered that the bluish green paint of 1950 Nash worked well as chalkboard and the treasures people left behind in their cars always amazed them. The “Thingfinders Club” was something Ray and her brothers and sister formed when she was in middle school. She explains, “the objective of which was to ransack cars for whatever valuables we could find under seats, in arm rests, beneath floor mats: coins, combs, jewelry” (20). The Ray children were not the only ones concerned with turning junk into something more. Ray explains, “Daddy collected hills

of aluminum cans out of dumpsters and off roadsides because he intended to roof the house with aluminum shingles one day” (22). Franklin Ray went as far as to invent his own machine that cut off the tops and bottoms of the cans and sliced them open to make shingles.

In the introduction I referenced Ray’s discussion of her father as a man who ‘kept all the parts,’ meaning he never threw anything away and always felt that any given junkyard part could someday fulfill its destiny by helping him fix something else. In the chapter titled, “How the Heart Opens,” (no italics) Ray claims her father would agree with Aldo Leopold’s ethic “that if you are going to tinker with the earth, at least keep all the pieces” (139). Although our mechanistic society grants a tremendous amount of authority to the concrete, absolute, and objective realm of science, it is worth considering that science, like all knowledge is also subject to social and political influences. I too agree that it makes plain good sense to ‘keep all the pieces;’ however, we must understand that this desire is motivated by ideological as well as scientific beliefs.

Phillips cites “the distinguished evolutionary theorist and ornithologist Ernst Mayr” (52) who observes, “An ecosystem, does not have the integrated unity one expects from a true system” (66). As Phillips continues this idea he explains that not all species living in a given habitat are necessarily “integral participants” in that habitat (66). He refers to the natural historian Sue Hubbell to further the problematics of ‘ecosystem’ ideology. Hubbell writes about the many species within the natural world explaining, “not all of them may be ‘necessary’ to the function of an ecosystem. Some may be extras, spare parts, or, to use the currently fashionable word, redundant” (qtd. in Phillips

66). I know, 'redundant' is not really a term we wish to applied to our favorite creature "out-there," however, it reminds us that the possibility of redundant species exist and furthermore who are we to think we know everything. David Oates cautions us against the hubris of the 'total-control fantasy' mode of thinking that supports a belief that we can engineer our way through, around, and over nature. He turns to the former Forest Service chief Jack Ward Thomas to emphasize our naiveté in a phrase: "not only are ecosystems more complex than we think, they are more complex than we *can* think" (qtd. in Oates 203). This type of philosophy does not exactly match our American political and scientific desire for total control, but didn't our parents always tell us that 'life isn't always fair'? We will never have total control over nature which brings about the real challenges that scientists must face and the real challenge for ecologists in deciding which species are 'spare parts' or redundant and which are keystones to the health of their habitat (Phillips 67). To this end, Janisse Ray along with other scientists and foresters are working toward understanding which species are vital to the health of longleaf pine forests and which species rely on a healthy longleaf forest to survive.

Ray cites ways that certain species are not surviving because of reduced longleaf pine habitat, or more specifically multigenerational longleaf pine forests representative of 'real' forests, rather than monoculture pine plantations. She makes a strong case for the way some of these birds, moths, insects, snakes, frogs, gophers, turtles, and salamanders rely on the wiregrass that grows as the understory of the longleaf forest and some rely on the trees themselves. Ray depicts the various degrees of diversity within the longleaf forest in a chapter titled, "*Forest Beloved*":

In a fully functioning longleaf woodland, tree diversity is low. A single species of pine reigns...The trees grow spaced so far apart in pine savannas, sunshine bathing the ground...they are as much grassland as forest. The ground cover...contains diversity. *Wiregrass* dominates...From this sinewy matrix of wiregrass all manner of forbs, grasses, and low shrubs poke up. (66)

Famous naturalists/botanists, William Bartram and John Muir, both wrote of the longleaf pine forest's "stately" and "magnificent realm" (66-67). William Bartram, who made the long solo journey from Philadelphia south and across Georgia, the Carolinas, and Florida was, along with his father, "regarded as the first Americans to systematically research the plants of the New World" (Oates 58). He is also David Oates' kinsman through his great-grandmother Nellie. Ray quotes Bartram from his 1791 book, *Bartram's Travels*, claiming the longleaf pineland is a "vast forest of the most stately pine trees that can be imagined" (66).

This descriptive section is followed by a lengthy list of italicized plant species: "*Meadow beauty. Liatris. Greeneyes. Summer farewell. Bracken fern. Golden aster. Sandhill blazing star. Goat's rue. Yellow-eyed grass*" which is followed by somber facts (67). Ray states, "One hundred ninety-one species of rare vascular plants are associated with longleaf/wiregrass, 122 of these endangered or threatened" (67). The reduced longleaf/wiregrass habitat can no longer support the species it once did. Many of the related species that once lived in this environment are gone, most likely gone forever, from this region and may not exist elsewhere. Ray's list signifies species on their way to the same fate. These extinct and endangered species are what Oates might categorize as "real losses." Dana Phillips discusses some of these ecological community concepts to question if there are any gaps or misunderstood underlying assumptions from ecology's

early days. Questioning assumptions does not mean that losses are not felt, that extinction is not extinction; rather questioning gives us in the end a much more complex view of nature, culture, science, and their textual representations through language so we may be better prepared, more critical, and hopefully more effective citizens.

Phillips refers to Robert P. McIntosh's 1985 *The Background of Ecology* to explain more fully some of the complexities of ecological science, practice, and data collecting. Phillips describes how "Quantification is essential to modern scientific practice...scientists have to have something to count before they can generate any data" (67). The reality or better yet the impossibility of obtaining as McIntosh says, "precise measurements of biological characteristics of communities or ecosystems" is further complicated by Phillips who asks whether or not one can actually "identify those communities or ecosystems in the first place" (264). The question is valid. What do we include and what do we not include in an 'ecosystem'? How do we know if everything that should be accounted for is actually included and not left unnoticed, unseen, or overlooked because it is microscopic? Are Ray's lists exemplary of a selection of the species within the ecosystem rather than 'the ecosystem'? In this sense do the lists serve as analogous instead of definitive of the ecosystem or community? More specifically, are these plant species lists more closely related to describing habitats rather than 'ecosystems'? As Phillips explains early ecologist's plant lists represented habitats rather than associations or communities, "These lists were evidence of the fact that the habitat in which the plants on the lists were found just happened to be hospitable to those particular plants. Like strangers in a bar, they were there at the same time, but they

weren't really there *together*" (68). How does this analogy change our ideas and popular ideological beliefs toward ecosystem politics I wonder?

The chapter following the personal narrative about Ray's father and her subtle reference toward ecosystem politics is titled, "*Longleaf Clan*" and discusses the many parts that make up the longleaf ecosystem. She begins this short essay:

A clan of animals is bound to the community of longleaf pine. They have evolved there, filling niches in the trees, under the trees, in the grasses, in the bark, under ground. They have adapted to sand, fire, a lengthy growing season, and up to sixty inches of rain a year. Over the millennia, the lives of the animals wove together. (141)

It is not difficult pick out the rhetoric of ecology in this passage: clan, community, evolved, niches, adapted, the lives of the animals wove together. Yet I wonder what is meant by the idea of lives being woven together, because I want to know how this is defined, who is included, are humans part of the 'animal' equation? Are these lives, and in respect to Ray, 'the lives of the animals,' woven together in the sense of co-adapting, that one could not have 'made' it without the other or will one not make it further without the other now? Or are these woven lives part of a co-evolving process, which includes humans? Oates poses a question that relates to matters of co-evolution, "Haven't humans, like other animals, been altering, changing, influencing the environment since...well, virtually since forever?" (67). Or are the animal's lives woven together in their shared need for what it is that the longleaf pine forest has to offer in terms of plenty of light, grassland, and spaced apart trees? Like the strangers at the bar, are they all there because of roughly common needs but not really linked to one another? These questions complicate our views of ecology and are not meant to disservice some scientific data.

There are indefinitely connections, interconnections, and consequences of such relationships but that does not mean all ‘systems’ work exactly the same way.

“*Longleaf Clan*” is just barely over a page, but details three interspersed paragraph length lists typed in italics detailing the different ‘parts’ of the ecosystem, such as, “*Yellow-breasted chat. Carolina and dusky gopher frog. Red-cockaded woodpecker. Brown-headed nuthatch. Blue-tailed mole skink. Striped Newt*” (141). I must admit, that I too find particular interest and desire in ‘knowing’ my surroundings. I hike with my ‘guidebooks’ and study our short summer season wildflowers, trees, birds, and geology more voraciously now than I did in my peak-bagging twenties. It may be part of that slowing down to take notice of Nature mentality and in some ways is similar to what Oates recommends via a popular mantra, “pay attention” (155). Paying attention, however, employed in a postmodern sense lends itself to a more critical ‘view’ and not just an aesthetic view; to pay attention not only to what environs us. But to ask why we think about nature in the ways that we do.

What Ray’s lists involve is that ‘naming’ business where we learn the constructed language of Nature without really questioning that it is a discursive construction, a mediated version and not the ‘real’ thing. That ‘innocent’ Thoreauvian identification tactic, however, gives us some kind of power over nature, because *we* name it. And we too often absorb these names and take them as givens, as natural as the pristine, untouched nature itself, forgetting that those names re-present to us those who have gone before us. In the next two lists we see names of birds, moths, and a butterfly: “*Carter’s noctuid moth. Bachman’s sparrow...Mitchell’s satyr. Henslow’s sparrow. Buchholz’s*

dart moth” all of which are named after someone by someone and all are proposed for endangered status (141-2). I know this because there are accompanying appendixes at the end of Ray’s text that list recently extinct, endangered species, and proposed species for Endangered Species Act status that the reader can reference to see where the ‘longleaf clan’ members are positioned. These species have obviously all come into contact with humans at some point in order to be ‘named’, but humans are the absent presence within this short chapter. Well, humans in general, but loggers specifically are pointed to for the destruction, stress, and negative impact on these creatures.

This makes me wonder if scientist’s (not associated with the logging companies, of course) and nature-loving hikers hold a special place in nature whereby their penetration of ‘pure’ nature leaves it untainted? May they come and go as they please and nature remains as intact as ever? Can anyone do this or only certain people, because as Ray’s list implies, we humans do not belong in this community? Does Ray herself belong? If so, is it because she is a naturalist, activist, or because she is a ‘native’ of the territory? We know all too well the declining conditions of the famous National Parks around the world, famous peaks, and other fabulous places around the globe that are exclusively preserved for recreational and aesthetic reasons just how great an impact humans have upon soils, plants, and wildlife. I don’t have to look around the globe; I can look to my own alpine region and see the impact of humans, not just loggers, on the myriad forest trails and wildlife of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, as scientists coin my home region. I can also look up at the mountains and steep riverbanks and see the intertwining game trails up eroding and scantily vegetated slopes. Many such game trails

became the earliest of 'hiking' trails. Logging is not the only culprit of natural degradation, although it certainly has swift and drastic results. Hikers, mountain bikers, and horses can also have drastic results on such delicate 'ecosystems' of alpine tundra, yet the results occur less suddenly. Sprawling communities, golf courses at 7,500 feet, and just general population growth in my community affects wildlife habitat. Yet, Ray specifically cites, "As Southern forests are logged, these species of flora and fauna, in ways as varied as their curious adaptations to life in the southern plains, suffers. All face loss of place" (142). Loss. Loss of species is no delicate matter. I am not advocating clear cutting either; but we need to be careful how we address such problems politically, rhetorically, and scientifically so that we may gain positive results rather than reinforce opposing battles between the people who will inevitably be faced with figuring out how to get along with the particular nature(s) at hand.

It is quite easy to oversimplify what we classify as environmentally destructive. We are quite good at pointing fingers at others while ignoring our own complicity. I am currently sitting inside my house with a light on and I am working on my computer. I am using electricity that comes from our 'harnessing' of nature. My work will create text that will result in the printing of many pages of paper milled from trees. This activity I am involved in is far from benign. The demarcations between what does or does not directly affect 'nature' become less clear when we begin to break down our dichotomous thinking that separates nature from our own lives. In "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?": Work and Nature," Richard White discusses the importance of reexamining our ideas about the connections between work and nature. White takes to

task modern environmentalism's assumption that either equates "productive work in nature with destruction" or considers "certain kinds of archaic work, most typically the farming of peasants" to be an important way to get closer to nature providing knowledge of nature (171). In either construction the message is clear, modern work is destructive. This may be true in many cases; however, we need to think past dualisms and begin thinking more critically about our ideas involving nature, work, and leisure. Richard White warns us against ideas that "create a set of dualisms where work can only mean the absence of nature and nature can only mean human leisure" (Cronon 174). In this paradigm, nature is a place valued only for its ability to provide us with leisure, recreation, and adventure. Unfortunately, "This distrust of work, particularly hard physical labor," White explains "contributes to a larger tendency to define humans as being outside of nature and to frame environmental issues so that the choice seems to be between humans and nature" (172). Environmentalists tend to uphold this gap between humans and nature by envisioning human work in nature as inherently bad, ultimately destructive. This dualistic paradigm does not serve environmentalists well and White argues, "For without an ability to recognize the connections between work and nature, environmentalists will eventually reach a point where they seem trivial and extraneous and their issues politically expendable" (174). White discourages the nature/culture binary and encourages us to work toward a more theorized understanding of our relationship with nature.

Ray's lists also designate very clear lines between Nature and Humans. I get the sense that this longleaf pine community has no history of humans; rather human history is

tied to Nature. But it does work reciprocally and this is not accounted for. Although Ray does tie her southern Cracker culture to that of the longleaf forests and wiregrass communities when she states, “Culture springs from the actions of people in a landscape...Our culture is tied to the longleaf pine forests that produced us” she ignores the myriad ways that ‘nature’ also springs from the actions of people in a landscape (271). Southern Crackers, along with passerby naturalists such as Muir, Bartram, newsmen, or loggers have all contributed to the way we interpret the longleaf landscape. Yet, Ray’s text works to reinforce the way it all evolved without cultural input. It is as if no one has walked before us. It is an illusion for a moment. It is as if no one has walked before us.

In ski culture there is much anxiety over such an issue. On a fresh powder day, one must get ‘first-tracks.’ The motto that follows is ‘there are no friends on powder days’ because no one can risk losing those coveted runs down virgin snow due to waiting for a friend. It is only fresh once. As a backcountry skier, I know this mentality well. We push on over another ridge, just a bit further to ensure there are ‘freshies.’ We know however that someone else’s tracks lay below the newly fallen snow. Evidence lies in the curving depressions just slightly below the surface. It is an illusion for a moment. Fresh tracks for now or at least for the very first descent of the day. Fresh snow does often warrant nearly effortless turns, but somehow I do not think that is the prize. The prize of having first-tracks, similar to first-descents, is that it coincides with and reinforces the wilderness ethic.

If we do not expose the many ways that nature is constructed by the humans within the landscape we reinforce the wilderness ethic. Pristine Nature. Not ruined by human presence. But humans are always present. Sometimes nature writers try to fool us. The fact that they are there, in nature, doesn't quite count. Just as the many people before us in those nature(s) does not count. They are only reporters or sages. Muir simply states he is thankful that the Lord has granted him admission "to this magnificent realm" of the longleaf forest (qtd. in Ray 67). Muir's account is itself culturally laden with what he believes a forest is and should be. The exclusion of the cultural influence we place upon nature creates both a fantasy and illusion all at once. It reinforces the idea that we must make sure we keep those humans out of *our nature*.

David Oates addresses this fantasy regarding the 'pathless way' so well as he reveals:

At the outset of his venture, Lewis wrote his eagerness to set off on the 'never trodden' way West—then followed Indian paths and 'roads' (his word) nearly all the way there. Muir wrote the same thing—used nearly the same word, seeking the 'least trodden way' for his famous thousand-mile walk—but he ended up on roads and trails and farmer's paths. Same for Bartram ('not quite pathless,' he quips). Our American fantasy of virgin wilderness strangely overlooks this fact: someone was there before you. (59)

Ray's idea of Nature is also a fantasy of virgin wilderness revealed by the absent presence of humans within her multiple 'species' lists and the privileging of ideal old growth forests. Because these species did not name themselves, I wonder about the Cherokees, Cusabos, Yamasees, Apalachees, Timucuas, Catawbias, Creeks, and all the various cultures who inhabited the region of the longleaf pine at least partly during that millennial period of adaptation and who also likely had names for the red-cockaded

woodpecker or striped newt. The longleaf pine was surely a part of those cultures too. I also get a twinge of the ever-present Eden-grief from these lists. Ray has already told us early in the text that the longleaf pine's "Natural stands—meaning not planted—have been reduced by about 99 percent" and she follows this data up with a one word paragraph, "Apocalyptic" (15). The reference to apocalypse really points a finger at Good Nature destroyed by Evil Humans. David Oates reminds us that the eco-apocalyptic tone is always "shrill and the intent is sincere as hell: the End is in sight, unless we repent" (63).

This might be a good time to remind you that Oates was raised in a fundamentalist Baptist home as discussed in the previous chapter. He had to search for many years to find new myths that helped him understand his own life where fundamentalism had failed him. Janisse Ray was also raised in a fundamentalist Christian home. She describes her father as "fervent, holy-rolling, hungry to explain human existence on the planet, and eager for a reason to live" (105). Ray's autobiographical subject is not entirely concealed; however, she is mostly revealed through her relationships with her family or nature. Her family was greatly isolated by her father's beliefs: no friends, no after school playtime with children from school, no TV, no newspapers, library books were censored, no swimming because too much skin was exposed, and no pants for the girls—only dresses, in short she and her sister and two brothers were 'different.' Ray explains, "Even in worship we were different, not only because the Apostolic following was small and in retrospect marginalized, but because it was a black church...six white faces in a sea of black" (108). What mattered though was

that Franklin Ray's children would understand the meaning of purity and sin, faith and sacrilege, and the hardships of spirituality.

For the Ray family, nature was not an important issue; they had neither time nor money to spend leisurely in the 'woods.' In fact, much of Janisse's time outside of school was spent with her sister, brothers, mother, and father working in the junkyard. They cleaned parts, hauled junk, tore and broke down old lumber, handed their father tools, and took care of the sheep who in turn kept the weeds down between the junked cars. She explains, "Daddy had neither the time nor the inclination to take us hiking or camping or fishing...Nature wasn't ill regarded, it was superfluous, Nature got in the way" (128). Not having leisure time to enjoy nature through hikes, camping, and fishing is just one small reminder of the way our American ideas about wilderness and preservation politics are often centered on 'saving' places for the purpose of those leisure class activities. In this regard, Nature becomes a playground only for those who can afford to take the time away from work to enjoy it. This speaks to what Richard White calls modern environmentalism's celebration of "the virtues of play and recreation in nature" while simultaneously scrutinizing 'productive' work in nature because it is seen as inherently destructive (Cronon 171). It is important to recognize that not all people have access to wilderness. Just as Ray was excluded from such leisure activities as a child, many people are excluded because of economic issues.

A major concern for the environmental justice movement is to expose the ways that an ideological privileging of wilderness, such as we see with mainstream environmental groups or more strikingly with eco-fundamentalists, and the consequent

neglect of other environmental issues is exemplary of an ‘ecology of affluence.’ Ray avoids, for the most part, a serious critique of the class issues that appropriately relate to the dire economic situations and environmental problems of the south. She has chosen instead to align herself more closely with mainstream environmental beliefs toward preservation, deep ecological views toward Nature as intrinsically valuable in its own right, and an eco-fundamentalists ultimate faith in Nature as a literal Eden.

Although the Ray family did not have leisure time to participate in nature activities, Franklin Ray had quite a soft heart when it came to animals and wildlife. His desire to fix things was not limited to the realm of metal, engines, and old appliances. Ray includes narratives about her father’s veterinary work, such as administering pain medication to a dog that was hit by a car, a surgery on a frog he had stepped on, and his efforts at nursing an injured pondscoggin (a heron) name Clyde Scoggins back to health—a project that lasted several months. After an episode where Janisse and her siblings witnessed an older and bigger neighborhood boy stomp a turtle to death, their father whipped each of them with a belt several times for not stopping such cruelty. Throughout this narrative Ray defends her father claiming, “He never hit us in a fit of rage, but he believed if you spared the rod you spoiled the child” (133). She continues with, “He wanted us to make good decisions” and his intentions were “to mold his children into good people” (136 and 139). In the Ray family, good people made good decisions and lived a life of purity based on what the bible said.

Ray’s autobiographical subject tells us that their family lived a life of the soul, “When I was growing up, the world about me was subverted by the world of the soul, the

promise of a future after death. Much of my time I spent seeking purity” (121). Ray’s ‘subverted’ world re-placed by a soulful one deploys similar dichotomies found in certain environmental philosophies, such as those promoted by eco-fundamentalism and deep ecology. These eco-philosophies both agree that Nature is best left alone. And even as they try to avoid obvious distinctions between nature/culture, they often fail due to their desire to leave Nature unquestioned, claiming it as purely knowable and intrinsically valuable, good, pure. Nature is always Authentic (Phelan 58). Nature becomes apotheosized. And as such, nature as authentic and glorified automatically sets up a way of thinking about nature and culture in dichotomous ways. If Nature is authentic, then culture must be inauthentic and if Nature is glorified, then culture must be demonized. Similarly, fundamentalism in any situation whether Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or Environmentalism reifies binary thinking to the extent that it unconsciously becomes part of everyday thinking—good/evil, virgin/whore, god/man, man/woman, nature/culture, and so on. Ray’s subject ultimately finds herself searching for different myths other than those offered by her strict Christian upbringing; although, her revised myths still carry much of the fundamentalist beliefs that were a part of her childhood. A sampling of a few chapter titles expose some of these underlying influences: “Heaven on Earth,” “*Second Coming*,” and “Afterword: Promised Land.”

Of course, it is not fair to say that Ray is solely a product of her ultra-religious, poverty-stricken home. She went to college outside of Baxley, Georgia and later attended the University of Montana, receiving an MFA in creative writing. She has experience with various environmental organizations, has been a visiting professor of

creative writing at a University, and now resides on her farm in Georgia with her son.

Obviously, there is much more to this activist than can be discussed here or can be known through the re-presentations of an autobiographical 'I'. Ray's text does occasionally try to break the mold of *Paradise Lost* and reach into the depths of finding 'new' options for nature as shown by an interest in the work of ecological foresters like Leon Neel. Ray also tries to complicate our ideas of pristine wilderness by acknowledging that most of the old growth longleaf forests exist on military reservations (some with toxic waste), air force bases, sport-hunting preserves, and even the cemetery where her grandparents rest is a place with "a sparse stand of remnant longleaf pine, where clumps of wiregrass can still be found" (4). Deep within her narratives however lies the language of deep ecological beliefs. She admits, "I carry the landscape inside like an ache. The story of who I am cannot be severed from the story of the flatwoods" (4). Yet the opposite is also true in that the story of the flatwoods cannot be separated from the story of who she is—Ray *tells* the story of the flatwoods, it is a story that rises out of her and not the physical trees themselves. It is easy to see how we put upon nature our own stories.

Deep ecologists invest in the idea of Nature as a moral imperative. As mentioned earlier deep ecologists believe in nature's value and in our need to attune ourselves with such order so we may overcome our environmental problems. This attuning process is the same as the 'One with Nature' attitude that ecofundamentalists are so fond of and that David Oates criticizes because "undifferentiated merging [with Nature] ...does not do justice to the paradox of simultaneous belonging and separateness" (91). These philosophies are just too simple and do not theorize views about nature or culture very

well. They do not handle the complexities we are really faced with. It is easier to create a glorified ideal of what Nature is so that all else may lie in comparison.

In a chapter titled, “Poverty” Ray does, for a moment, take advantage of a discussion regarding how issues of economic strife takes hold over people and their environments. She explains how Crackers:

...hadn't had the means, the education, or the ease to care particularly about its natural communities...The land itself has been the victim of social dilemmas—racial injustice, lack of education, and dire poverty. It was overtilled; eroded; cut; littered; polluted; treated as a commodity, sometimes the only one, and not as a living thing. (164-5)

Here Ray connects social problems to problems that directly effect environment that take her outside of radical deep ecology for a moment. In “On the Search for a Root Cause: Essentialist Tendencies in Environmental Discourse” Jeffrey Ellis critiques some of the arguments between deep ecology and social ecology. He turns to Murray Bookchin's claim that deep ecology “has no real sense that our ecological problems have their roots in society and in social problems” (Cronon 264). Ray is very much aware of such links between social problems and a lack of concern for inherent ecological ones. Her people she claims were “worried about getting by, and when getting by meant using the land, we used it” (165). Because ‘getting by’ was, and in many places throughout the world still is, a primary concern for people, issues resulting from a lack of education toward sound land use practices continues to be part of environmental problems. Ray does bring such interrelated problems into her text; yet along with it there is always this overwhelming sense of grief and loss for all that has been destroyed rather than suggestions pointing toward a future that incorporates resolutions for these complicated problems.

These problems are all part of larger social, political, and economic concerns as Ray admits, “the land has been the victim of social dilemmas” (165). She faults her people however for not respecting the land as a ‘living thing’ that exists ‘out-there.’ In this view, Nature is a valuable life in its own right that deserves an existence apart from us. We may be able to merge with Nature for our own benefit, attuning ourselves to our ‘real’ needs, as well as Nature’s need to be left alone to take care of itself. Here lie a couple of problems: 1.) we are also a part of nature—our bodies are always already involved in processes that are part of nature and in this sense it is never completely ‘out-there’ and that version of nature is one we have in fact, created via our social realm. And 2.) because nature ‘out-there’ is a construct, it can never be fully left alone. There is no way of getting around issues of management. If we designate an area ‘wilderness’ in which it can be respected as a ‘living thing’ in its own right and exist without our interference, we must admit that on some level there will always be interference, whether passive or aggressive. We cannot escape the complex interrelatedness that is always already there whenever we are dealing with nature-culture.

On some level, I think Ray acknowledges the way we cannot escape the issue of management of environments to a certain degree as she states, “We don’t mind growing trees in the South; it’s a good place for silviculture...What we mind is that all of our trees are being taken. We want more than 1 percent natural stands...We know a pine plantation is not a forest” (272). This is a valid argument. Ray wants to see the restoration of longleaf forests and a halt against a total conversion to monocultures of fast growing slash and loblolly pine tree farms that offer fast economic turnover and possibly

fast ecological degradation. It should be noted that not all tree farms are negative, such as those planted on already established agricultural land and some tree farms, such as those planted with poplars, which “sequester atmospheric carbon dioxide very efficiently...mitigating global warming” (Oates 100-1). We need to also recognize that even in restored longleaf forests a certain level of management will always be present, always at work—government employees maintaining the health of the forest, making sure that laws and regulations are being adhered to, and constantly working on making those hard decisions that effect the next step in the management game. These forests may appear to be ‘literal Edens’ for some, but in reality they are part of a regulated system. There is no way, as unfortunate as it may seem to some, to separate the Edens we imagine from the culture we have also created. This does not mean that they are any less meaningful or valuable to the many species that exist within them and in this sense Ray’s work toward restoration of these forests for those species and for the Southern people is part of the real work being done.

Through a master narrative of Paradise Lost, however, Ray falls into an old storyline rather than offering us new ways to envision the real work that still needs to be done. Within this narrative the end result of our environmental problems is nothing less than apocalyptic. Even as alternative environmental politics tries to find new ways of thinking about nature, David Oates argues how difficult this is to do when the space is already filled with the Paradise Lost narrative. When all our focus is on how we have destroyed Nature, that all is lost:

No new way of feeling, no new way of being in the world, no new myth emerges, despite the breathless announcements that it's almost here, it's happening, here it comes. It never does. We're left like Millerites on hilltops in our Deep Ecology bedsheets. Eden is still lost. And we are still to blame. (62)

I'm pretty sure that this cycle of blame is not getting us anywhere. It's not a new way to think about the complexities we face. In fact, Oates reminds us that "what's really emerging in these narratives is not 'a new myth' but the last act of the old one: the apocalypse" (62). Such eco-apocalyptic depictions have been the result of many causes in the last forty years such as overpopulation, pollution, global cooling, global warming, and insatiable resource depletion. These are all real concerns. Unfortunately, these 'root' causes are always turned into the culprit of our ultimate End. Oates tells us and as I have been hearing my entire life, "the battle might be already lost, the atmosphere fatally polluted, deforestation too far gone" (63). This fatalistic thinking that always places humans in a state of blame does not move us forward; rather it places us into either despair or apathy.

Trying to move beyond blame does not mean it's all right for reckless, irresponsible behavior that causes people and environment harm, such as unchecked industrial chemical and toxic pollution in poor neighborhoods or clear-cutting on an unstable slope in the wet Pacific Northwest. Moving beyond the fire-and-brimstone mentality of eco-apocalypse and blame means that we have hard work in front of us. Work that Oates claims will require not only acknowledging that we must get our own hands dirty, realize our own stake in what is going on around us and our own complicity with environmental problems, but will take a rejection of an idealized pure Nature along

with, “a lot of dirty little compromises, arrangements, and *ménages*, to fix up what we’ve done” (88-90). This is the real work, the hard work that is not focused on loss and blame, but the moving forward into what we may achieve now and for our future.

I cannot help but feel taken aback when in one of Ray’s final chapters, “Afterword: Promised Land” she incites, “We recognize that the loss of our forests...of the infinite hopefulness of a virgin forest where time stalls—is a loss we all share” (271-2). There are certainly real losses not to be taken lightly; however, there is no such thing as stalled time. We cannot think that some ideal of a ‘virgin’ forest is in any way representative of a literal place where time stands still. A forest is always changing, always in flux. And what good or hope can such a ‘stalled’ place offer? A forest—or any nature, nonhuman or human—is always working through states of decay and life simultaneously. To think otherwise is certainly not offering us any new way of being, a new way of working outside or beyond the apathy or despair so prevalent in today’s cultural and political views about nature.

Ray’s narratives about her homeland and its longleaf forests and wiregrass communities are well honed and beautifully crafted, yet I cannot see past the despair and great sense of loss. What message are we gaining that might bring us forward into a future other than envisioning a landscape that is once again virginal and that will exist completely separate from the human world? In “*Second Coming*” Ray announces, “I have a dream for my homeland. I dream we can bring back the longleaf pine forest...that we can bring back all the herbs and trees and wild animals, the ones not irretrievably lost, which deserve an existence apart from slavery to our own” (270). As anti-

anthropocentric as it may sound to envision a forest that may exist apart from human ‘enslavement,’ management, or use, it is greatly unrealistic. I agree we can seek a style of management that is not based on the ‘master-slave’ narrative of domination; however, at some level decisions are being made—choices toward either passive or active management. As mentioned before, even a designated wilderness area is subject to human regulations—who may enter and how—and unfortunately mapping an area to set it apart from most human activity will not make it exempt from changes caused by acid rain, air pollution, or large-scale global environmental changes that effect the atmosphere.

Ray’s deep ecology dream continues in the final chapter, “*There Is a Miracle for You If You Keep Holding On*” and she imagines herself rising from the grave to witness her “granddaughter’s granddaughter, to see what we have lost returned” (273). And in this restored forest that now covers over “*Where once a golf course began. That was houses and fields long, long ago*” she follows her descendant through “the forest so grand” and she may finally say, “And in the evening of that blessed day, I will lay to rest this implacable longing” (273). And so her story ends. A *story* full of Eden-longing. Laid to rest?

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION: TOWARD SEEKING THE MIDDLE GROUND

I ask if what Ray envisions in her ‘dream’ really lays to rest her Eden-longing because I do not see the resolve between all those complexities being worked through in any significant way. What is present is an undoubtedly dedicated effort toward restoring some of the Southern pine woods, but equally present is the Paradise Lost narrative embedded within deep ecological views that unfortunately reinforces either-or thinking, rather than working toward a middle ground. I understand where restoring forests, or for that matter how restoring any environment be it ‘the city’ or ‘the country’ or anyplace in between, is a greatly worthwhile and important endeavor for both human and nonhuman nature. Ray does not offer us a realistic *way* to get there. Where is the ground to walk on that will help us to do the ‘real work’? Is it to remain locked into desire or despair for that timeless Eden? Or do we find our way to some middle ground through Oates’ advice that we need to arm ourselves with excellent ecology degrees and chainsaws (88)? Or should we listen to Dana Phillips suggestion summarizing Bruno Latour’s idea that “contemporary intellectuals need to come to terms with the fundamental continuity of human life throughout history and of ‘nature, society, and discourse’” (34)? Phillips discussion points out the ways Latour sees a lack in postmodern theories that do not account for such complexities humans face in regard to ‘nature’ because ‘it’ has become virtually a non-topic, an ultimate construct and nothing more. Phillips similarly criticizes ecocriticism for its over-reliance on an essentialized version of Nature. Latour suggests a

way to help us understand these continuities, or in other words to help us create better theories about ourselves in relation to nature and vice versa, Latour claims, “I may use an electric drill, but I also use a hammer” (34). Phillips is fond of Latour’s metaphor because he knows rethinking our ideas about nature will not be easy and claims, “theory itself must be subject to still more theory” (40). This game may not be about how many hand tools we carry, but how well we use them. In order to rethink our given ideas about nature and culture we will need some sturdy tools, but we will also need open minds that resist dichotomous thinking and work toward seeking the middle ground.

What Latour may also be getting at is that we cannot refuse our past—humans do not exist without a past and we still need tools as ‘primitive’ as a hammer. Likewise, we do not exist without a present or a future, ideas represented by the electric drill. Acknowledging the need for such critical thinking ‘tools’ represents how such a complex situation, trying to better understand a postmodern sense of nature and culture, will require many different tools that in the end may not actually ‘fix’ or resolve anything. We may never have the ability to fully understand what is important in an ecosystem and therefore our theories must be constantly rethought and reworked. We must theorize our theories. Phillips suggests, “We will have to think differently and from a different perspective, one less coolly objective than the one we have been imagining” (43). What this suggests is that various theorizing needs to be done in order to get us to that ground where we can try to get some of the ‘real work’ done. Yet, our theories will also need to take us beyond that ground, to what I think we already know is, unstable ground—unknown and potentially unknowable. In some theoretical circles we have reached this

point of accepting instability when it comes to identity. The biggest challenge we face is reaching beyond academic theories and exposing the larger public sphere to these ideas. These challenges encourage us to continue thinking about the ways we may begin to take notice of the invariably linked realms between nature and culture in various textual productions. Our experiences of nature, informed by the sociocultural, historical, economic, and political environments we live in, all work toward shaping our ideas about nature and are ultimately quite personal as shown through Oates' stake in rethinking nature and gender and Ray's cultural and emotional stake in wanting to 'save' nature. We should ask how can we think differently and deeper about both our ideas of nature and ourselves? In this final chapter, what is less of a conclusion and more of what I hope represents some new beginnings, I will be looking ahead toward new ways of theorizing nature that may bring us to an environmental philosophy of the middle ground.

Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* can be read in a way that looks past the deep ecology and into the way she incites us to begin looking at the nature close by, in our own backyards—whether that is within or just beyond the junkyard or in the multigenerational forests maintained by caring and innovative foresters. Although, her preference is clear and she wants more of the 'pristine' longleaf forests that once covered the South, she also tells us that the pitcher plants she found in her father's junkyard have given her hope about how things can "Evolve. Adapt. Survive." in even the direst situations (215). Just as the pitcher plant has grown in nutrient deficient soil by adapting into a plant that utilizes insect bodies captured in its stemmed leaf, we will also need to adapt our views so we may be able to better utilize our own theories about nature for the

sake of both nonhuman and human nature in all its various forms. Ray knows there is much work to be done, the undoing, and she is up to the task. I only hope she is also willing to work toward finding the middle ground that will help us begin working toward a better way to imagine and write about nature that extends beyond the wilderness ethic.

William Cronon explains the middle ground as a place worth exploring so we may “learn ways of imagining a better world for all of us: humans and nonhumans, rich people and poor, women and men...The middle ground is where we actually live. It is where we—all of us, in our different places and ways—make our homes” (85-6). For Cronon, the middle ground represents a local ethic, a place to start some of the undoing of actual environmental and social misdeeds and the place where appreciation begins for the wild that exists right outside our homes, “if only we have eyes to see it” (86). This middle ground is important if we want to expand our ideas about what counts as nature, culture, and sound environmentalism.

David Oates also discusses his version of the middle ground claiming that there is something we can work towards that is “between control-all engineerism and don’t touch-touch romanticism” (206). This middle ground acknowledges how little we really understand when it comes to nature and as such we may want to respect that our “limited ability to know what really matters in an ecosystem” can lead us into a style of management that allows for some passivity. In a discussion regarding the Northwest’s salmon, river, and dam issues, Oates encourages us “To *allow* the rivers, you might say, rather than to control it” (206). He cites what a 1994 text, *Wild Forests: Conservation Biology and Public Policy*, calls such an approach—“passive management”—a

somewhere in between methodology—the middle ground between ‘pristine’ and ‘controlled’ (206). What this approach recognizes, Oates contends, is the fact that “management is going on, whether active or passive; and that human choices are being made at each step” (207). Passive management will not be applicable everywhere, but it suggests the option of leaving some places—some large tracts of forests or some rivers—well enough alone, with little or no intervention so we may at least study the processes of nature naturing. This method of management, Oates explains, “will have to be by definition, ‘adaptive’—it will deal in degrees of intervention, and be ready to keep trying until it discovers what works. Its contrast with the either-or prescription of the ‘wilderness ethic’ is profound” (207). This contrast is important to Oates because it works against the Eden myth of exclusion. The wilderness ethic reinforces a sense that we/humans do not belong in nature because it is pristine and pure and we are the ruined and impure part of that dichotomous equation. The middle ground is exemplified by Leon Neel’s forestry methods and Cronon’s suggestion that we seek out the middle ground where we can find “an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about *using* nature as about *not* using it” (85). It is also found in Oates’ explication of ‘passive management,’ which leads us toward a middle ground environmental philosophy that can help us reimagine American nature within our culture, literature, art, society, and politics. This philosophy also applies to postmodern textual production in that it strives to be ‘adaptive,’ somewhat like Gayatri Spivak’s notion of strategic essentialism as opposed to concretely and absolutely essentialized.

What these middle ground philosophies suggest may appear obvious, maybe commonsensical, or easily achievable, however, I do not wish to simplify the work of reimagining nature or undermine its importance. It will not be easy. Nature and culture are so easily taken for granted in our American imaginations that they are seemingly invincible. Our intellectual history from Aristotle to the Enlightenment, and still today, values the act of making assertions. Making a definitive claim using the rhetoric of assertion is antithesis to a middle ground philosophy that recognizes our inability to capture a solid, stable, essential truth—whether based on our ideas about identity, nature, culture, or science. Gary A. Olson explains how “The rhetoric of assertion can be critiqued from a variety of standpoints: that it is masculinist, phallogocentric, foundationalist, often essentialist, and, at the very least, limiting” (Kent 9). We come out of a history that has historically tried to pin knowledge down through the language of assertion. This move is seen in what Olson describes as “*Theory*, the noun” where we believe we have “captured a truth, grasped the essence of something” as opposed to what he refers to as “*theorizing*; the verb” a productive way to “explore, challenge, question, reassess, speculate” (Kent 8). The rhetoric of assertion, the adherence to a singular big Theory, grand narrative, and the literalization of myth will not lead us into the middle ground. In trying to understand the difficulty of reaching the middle ground Richard Rorty explains that we will need to let go of the “distinction between objective fact and something softer, squishier, and more dubious” (qtd. in Phillips 34). This mindset allows for errors, revisions, questions, and rethinking—all vital to seeking the middle ground.

The field of literary studies is no stranger to working through interpretive strategies. Interpretation is always going on—it is our way of making sense of our world—and it never ceases. In this sense, the ways that we interpret nature, nonhuman and human, is an important and recursive process of textuality. How nature is imagined through discourse, art, literature, myth, religion, politics, science and so on are important details. These details are worth theorizing—worth our attention, our awareness, and our questions because so much is at stake. Not only are our physical, geographical environments at stake, but also people’s livelihoods, health, and future. When we naturalize, privilege, or take for granted ‘nature’ we do so at the risk of excluding certain types of nature and certain classes of people. We risk covering up the many layers of complexity involved between nature and culture. David Oates’ use of the idea of palimpsests emphasizes these layers of complexity and is a powerful metaphor. A palimpsest is some kind of writing tablet, paper, or parchment that may be used again and again. Once written on, the tablet is imperfectly erased so that what was there before faintly shows through, yet can still be written over. Oates’ metaphorical use of palimpsests brings about ideas of regeneration, new beginnings, possibility, layering and complexity.

In a palimpsest titled “Getty,” Oates is standing out on one of the many terraces of the Getty Museum looking out onto a freeway that works its way from the Santa Monica Mountains “over the Sepulveda pass, coastside to valley, valleyside to coast” (264). As he looks down onto the freeway he ponders:

That road—how did it get laid just there? Anyone who’s ever hiked over a pass knows the answer to that. There’s an obvious way to go, and everyone goes that way. It’s first a deer-track. Then a footpath. Then a horse-track. Later, maybe, a freeway.

People have made this journey for a long, long time. (264)

People who are layered one on top of the other, like a palimpsest, “written over the landscape” in a way that is nearly beyond our imaginations, yet we know we have a past on this earth, we have the present, and there will be a future as indefinable as it may be (265). In some ways this speaks to Ray’s dream about her granddaughter’s granddaughter walking through the longleaf forest in that it is a nod to time—past, present, future. Oates, however, takes his critique to a different level because he does not try to capture a virginal past and cast it into the future; rather he envisions a world that is both the same and different:

I’m not sure what sanctified means, exactly. But it seems to be something about the connection that is far, far realer than any of my imagined independence. Biologically, this connection is absolute...Memory of our own passing, so powerful that I seem to be remembering myself, as if I were already gone. And someone else were here in my place, this very place, seeing the same different thing under the same, different, ancient sky. (265)

There is connectedness from the past into the future. We know this from what Oates says is biological, such as DNA, we also know this from our own impact on the environment.

We cannot always have a middle ground when it comes to things like extinction, nuclear waste, pesticides and cancer. But if we are going to work toward a middle ground in dealing with these real losses and real misdeeds then we need to be savvy in our interpretive skills. Oates uses the term “interpretive depth” to emphasize a concept that he refers to as “double vision” (180). He argues, “The damage we do is not less real

simply because someday it will go away or be forgotten” and where we are now, in the present, is where we belong. To work toward a better interpretation of our world and our role in it, Oates calls for “a strangely human double vision we need to read other times and scales simultaneously” (180). Thinking about these other times and scales are a way of theorizing using interpretive depth that takes into account a sense of perspective, wisdom, doubt, foresight and hindsight, earnestness, and sensitivity. This interpretive depth differs from Eden-grief that seeks an already lost past.

The idea that myth is so central to Oates’ philosophy plays into his literary aesthetic of the world. He knows that we are always already operating under myth, whether we are aware of it or not. Oates’ idea the wildness is always available to us is a rejection of the literalized Eden myth where we get kicked out of nature. Paradise Wild is where we can go again and again, over and over. Paradise Wild is mythological and figurative, not literal. It is no place and every place. Oates explains, “The palimpsest of myth asks for this double vision, a figurative reading of the world, surface and depth, recognizing that every time and place (and story) are both themselves and what they represent to us” (270). If we are going to work toward becoming better at our interpretive skills, we will be hard pressed to do so if we are caught up in an idealized past and either-or thinking. Interpretive depth and an appreciation of wildness that blurs some of the boundaries between our ideas about nature and culture may help us to find the middle ground where we begin to look out in all directions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds. *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2002.
- Bawarshi, Anis. *Genre and the Invention of the Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition*. Logan, Utah: Utah State UP, 2003.
- Bennett, Jane, and William Chaloupka, eds. *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics, and the Environment*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Benstock, Shari. "Authorizing the Autobiographical." *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. 145-155.
- Cronon, William, ed. *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. New York, London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995.
- Cronon, William. "Introduction: In Search of Nature." *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. Ed. William Cronon. New York, London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995. 23-56.
- Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. Ed. William Cronon. New York, London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995. 69-90.
- Ellis, Jeffrey C. "On the Search for the Root Cause: Essentialist Tendencies in Environmental Discourse." *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. Ed. William Cronon. New York, London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995. 256-268.
- Freire, Paulo. "The 'Banking' Concept of Education." *Falling Into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature*. Ed. David H. Richter. Second Edition. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000. 68-78.
- Gare, Arran E. *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Gilmore, Leigh. *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994.

- Jaszi, Peter and Martha Woodmansee, eds. *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1994.
- Kaplan, Caren. "Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects." *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988. 208-216.
- Kent, Thomas. *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Process-Writing Paradigm*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1999.
- Kollin, Susan. *Nature's State: Imagining Alaska as the Last Frontier*. Chapel Hill, London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- Landro, Laura. "Livin' Lodge." *Wall Street Journal* 13 Aug. 2004, W1+.
- Lewis, R.W.B. *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955.
- Mazel, David. *American Literary Environmentalism*. Athens, London: The University of Georgia Press, 2000.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Merchant, Carolyn. "Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as Recovery Narrative." *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. Ed. William Cronon. New York, London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995. (132-159).
- Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Rev. ed. New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1973.
- Oates, David. *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature*. Corvallis: Oregon State UP, 2003.
- Olson, Gary A. "Toward a Post-Process composition: Abandoning the Rhetoric of Assertion." *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Process-Writing Paradigm*. Ed. Thomas Kent. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1999. 7-15.
- Phelan, Shane. "Intimate Distance: The Dislocation of Nature in Modernity." *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics, and the Environment*. Eds. Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 44-62.

- Phillips, Dana. *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.
- Ray, Janisse. *The Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*. Minneapolis, Milkweed Editions, 1999.
- Slater, Candace. "Amazonia as Edenic Narrative." *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. Ed. William Cronon. New York, London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995. 114-131.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson, eds. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson, eds. *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1992.
- Smith, Sidonie. *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representations*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987.
- Smith, Sidonie. *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1993.
- Spretnak, Charlene. "Radical Nonduality in Ecofeminist Philosophy." *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. Ed. Karen J. Warren. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1997. 425-436.
- Suleri, Sara. "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition." *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988. (116-125).
- Taylor, Dorceta E. "Women of Color, Environmental Justice, and Ecofeminism." *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. Ed. Karen J. Warren. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1997. (38-79).
- van Wyck, Peter. *Primitives in the Wilderness: Deep Ecology and the Missing Human Subject*. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1997.
- Warren, Karen J., ed. *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1997.
- White, Richard. "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?': Work

and Nature.” *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. Ed. William Cronon. New York, London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995. 171-185.

William, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford UP, 1976.