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Ecospatial Orientation and American Literature

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ECOSPATIAL ORIENTATION AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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BY
LOWELL DAVID WYSE
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation took shape over the course of many years and many places. The first few pages were written in Chicago’s Rogers Park and Logan Square neighborhoods; the bulk of the project originated in the many coffee shops and university libraries of Tacoma, Washington (most notably the venerable Antique Sandwich Company); and it was completed in the desert metropolis of Lima, Peru. These places and the people who live there have shaped me as a person and have therefore mapped themselves onto these pages.

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Two-dimensional Rand McNally travelers who see a region as having borders will likely move in only one locality at a time, but travelers who perceive a place as part of a deep landscape in slow rotation at the center of a sphere and radiating infinite lines in an indefinite number of directions will move in several regions at once.

—William Least Heat-Moon, *PrairyErth: A Deep Map*
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ABSTRACT

Place is complex, and it undergirds and influences our fictional and nonfictional narratives in ways we often fail to recognize. In this dissertation, Lowell Wyse argues for a more holistic understanding of place’s role in literature while asking what it means to read environmentally—spatially, ecologically, and historically. Drawing from ecocriticism, which emphasizes the biological world, and geocriticism, which privileges the spatial, Wyse proposes a hybrid “ecospatial” criticism, with a particular emphasis on the role of maps in reading for place. With individual chapters on the nonfiction of William Least Heat-Moon, John Steinbeck’s Salinas Valley fiction, Richard Wright’s Native Son, and the central New Mexico novels of Willa Cather, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Ana Castillo, this project demonstrates how maps, travel guides, biographies, and environmental history can contribute to new understandings of literary place(s) on the continental, regional, and local scales.

The underlying message of this dissertation is that place matters, both in the world and in the text. To the extent that we fail to understand the cultural, ecological, and spatial dynamics of place, we miss the many significant ways that social and environmental issues overlap. This project thus aligns neatly with the message of the environmental justice movement and the related branch of ecocriticism. It also stands as a corrective to the relative indifference of the ecocritical and geocritical communities to each other’s core concerns.
CHAPTER ONE

ORIENTATION: TOWARD AN ECOSPATIAL LITERARY CRITICISM

In the opening paragraph of John Cheever’s 1964 short story “The Swimmer,” the protagonist, Neddy Merrill, has an epiphany while lounging by his friends’ pool. Realizing that, at the Westerhazys’, he is eight miles north of his house in Bullet Park, it suddenly occurs to Neddy “that by taking a dogleg to the southwest he could reach his home by water”:

His life was not confining and the delight he took in this observation could not be explained by its suggestion of escape. He seemed to see, *with a cartographer’s eye*, that string of swimming pools, that quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county. He had made a discovery, a contribution to modern geography; he would name the stream Lucinda after his wife. (726–727, emphasis added)

Armed with this new insight, Neddy proceeds to traverse the entirety of what he deems the “Lucinda River,” traveling the full distance to his house by water and on foot. The trip takes him through the pools, lawns, hedges, woods, and patios of his friends and neighbors. In his conquest of this heretofore-unrecognized watercourse, Neddy considers himself a modern explorer, and he undertakes his project with all the requisite doggedness. To Mrs. Halloran, one of his unsuspecting hosts, he announces simply, “I’m swimming across the county,” and receives a benign response: “Why, I didn’t know one could” (733).

Despite some physical and social difficulty and growing doubts, Neddy finally arrives at his destination. However, the story concludes with a simple, tragic twist. When Neddy reaches his front door, cold, exhausted, and inebriated, he discovers that he is locked out; his wife and daughters have left him, and the house no longer belongs to him. For both Neddy and the reader,
time and place are not what they had seemed. In the end, his journey is successful only insofar as he reaches his destination, navigating his way home according to his mental map of the territory. By every other measure—self-awareness, mental health, social relationships—it is a failure. Through its final twist, the story attempts to undercut Neddy’s project. His eventual realization of the events of his recent past (financial, familial, and social failure) speaks to a fundamental lostness that is conveyed more powerfully through the ironic frame of his navigational prowess. Cheever, in other words, uses Neddy’s radical sense of orientation to demonstrate his fundamental disorientation.

Yet the fundamental premise of this character’s temporary worldview is one that merits further consideration by literary critics and environmental thinkers: the ability to interpret a given environment—or a literary text—according to a unified geographical/ecological framework. This story is propelled by its premise of orientation, by Neddy’s newfound ability to see “with a cartographer’s eye.” In conceiving his spontaneous journey, he relies upon a latent spatial awareness, on maps and charts that are “remembered or imaginary” but nevertheless “clear enough” (727). Neddy (via Cheever) powerfully reimagines the local environment as a natural landscape lying hidden within the suburbs, an ecological space that has been obscured by the primacy, in the community’s perception, of various physical and social structures. From this new perspective, swimming pools form a kind of watershed, the spaces between them challenging portages, the swimmer himself no longer a disenchanted socialite but rather “a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny” (727). Through this simple shift in orientation,  

1 Such descriptions are certainly ironic. By fashioning Neddy as a self-styled hero-explorer, Cheever makes him the object of a joke about the state of mid-twentieth-century American culture in the suburbs,
Neddy enters into a new relationship with the place where he lives and becomes an explorer in his own (or, as it turns out, someone else’s) backyard.

In this dissertation, I interrogate what it would mean to reimagine literature (and literary criticism) from a similarly altered perspective, reading literary texts with something of a “cartographer’s eye.” When Neddy Merrill reimagines his environment according to the hidden hydrology of suburbia, he adopts what I will refer to as an ecospatial orientation, a way of comprehending place in simultaneously ecological and geographical terms. For Neddy, the “Lucinda River” represents a natural and built environment that has always existed in the background of his lived experience, and his decision to swim that “river” is his way not only of coping with his ennui, but also of engaging more deliberately (to borrow from Thoreau) with the physical surroundings he has always taken for granted. I have often experienced this kind of orientation from the window of an airplane, when my existing map knowledge of North America comes to bear upon the view I have looking down on the continent. Once, from thirty-thousand feet above Northwest Ohio, I managed to locate my sister’s house; another time, flying from Denver to Los Angeles, I spotted not only several familiar peaks in Colorado’s Front Range, but also the very section of the Colorado Trail I had hiked the previous summer. In such moments, the map seems to merge with the territory, and my personal memories become contextualized within a larger environmental framework.

In the same way, I argue, contemporary literary criticism stands to benefit from a fuller understanding of how place operates—both in the world and in the text. Place is complex, and it

where the notion of a Frontier mentality (not to mention ecological awareness) seems patently ridiculous. He is, at best, a misguided adventurer, less a Meriwether Lewis than a Don Quixote.
undergirds and influences our fictional and nonfictional narratives in ways we often fail to recognize. This claim is the foundation for my dissertation’s argument that we must read twentieth-century writing with an awareness of the real places in which its dramatic events unfold. In this project, I argue for a more holistic understanding of place’s role in literature while asking what it means to read environmentally—spatially, ecologically, and historically. Building on the work of scholars in fields as diverse as geography, sociology, ecocriticism, and geocriticism, and particularly on the nonfiction of William Least Heat-Moon, I propose a theory of *ecospatiality*, an understanding of place as simultaneously spatial, ecological, and historical. *Ecospatiality* encompasses both nature (in natural as well as built environments) and culture (as constituted and delineated by human narratives and measures), pointing toward the integrated realities of geography, natural science, and history that undergird the human construction and experience of place. Place, in my formulation, is the convergence of nature, space, and story, and fully appreciating its dynamics is as critical to our interpretation of literary texts as it is to understanding our physical and ethical relationship to the world around us.

Within this theoretical framework, I focus on works of nonfiction and fiction whose primary settings are on the North American continent, using maps as a way of thinking about how these narratives invoke, and sometimes retell, certain aspects of this country’s environmental history. Drawing both from ecocriticism, which emphasizes the biological world, and geocriticism, which privileges the spatial, I propose an *ecospatial* criticism that maps the

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2 The term also diverges in important ways from the concept of *geoecology* (or its subdiscipline, *biogeography*), an interdisciplinary science that investigates the relationship between living species and the geological world, “between substrate and biota” (Rajakaruna and Boyd).
underexplored terrain where these two fields overlap, demonstrating how geospatial and ecological realities coincide with and inform literary representations in twentieth-century America. By studying the sites of literature—what we might term *site-reading*—a place-based approach provides insight into the situatedness of texts and characters, supplementing, through environmental contextualization, a variety of cultural and psychological readings.

As a critical term, *ecospatial orientation* applies to the ways in which human beings comprehend place (a way of knowing and seeing), as well as to the narrower issue of how place operates in literary texts (a way of reading). Just as *ecospatiality* helps us bridge the conceptual gap between space and nature, geocriticism and ecocriticism, *orientation* addresses the gap between the physical and the discursive, nature and culture. We have orientation in the world, the sense of knowing where we are, often by navigating or orienteering according to a cartographic representation. Yet we also have orientation in the text, the sense of how a story unfolds within in the real and imagined spaces of literature. Like maps, texts produce geographical orientation through place names and descriptions, telling readers, “You are here.” Indeed, geocritic Eric Prieto has observed that orientation is not only a fundamental geographic skill (being able to situate oneself and find one’s way) but also a universal theme of literature that has important psychological, sociological, and philosophical implications…. It takes on particular importance in texts…where spatial orientation is linked to the theme of personal identity. The comparative study of spatial orientation in such texts has much to teach us about the links between spatial awareness and self-awareness….

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3 I was tempted to utilize the term *ecospatial imagination* as a nod to ecocriticism’s history. Lawrence Buell’s *Environmental Imagination* was the first book to use the term, and Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster later adopted it for their *Bioregional Imagination*. Ursula Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, another touchstone work, is likewise subtitled *The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. As a critical term, however, *imagination* lacks an important spatial resonance that *orientation* provides.
In this way, Prieto asserts, orientation offers a promising example of how we might read to understand not only place but also people’s relationship to it.

As an approach to literature, an ecospatial orientation suggests that our understanding of literature is incomplete if it fails to account for the complex dynamics of nature, space, and story, both with regard to the text itself and to its cultural-historical milieu, the spatio-historical setting(s) it registers, represents, and/or refracts. My disciplinary approach in this dissertation is broadly inclusive—bringing maps, travel guides, biographies, and environmental histories into conversation with literary texts—but also grounded in practices of close reading, particularly with respect to how literature often represents place as simultaneously geographical and ecological. Through readings of literary and historical texts, settings, and contexts, I combine various geocritical principles and methodologies—particularly tracking place-names and reading maps—with ecocritical and historical insights to demonstrate the interpretive challenges and benefits of reading for place. Fully understanding the complex workings of place in narrative texts, I argue, requires not only literary knowledge but geospatial and environmental knowledge as well.

What Is Place?

Just as a word like environment has both ecological and political connotations (e.g., “Protect the environment!”) as well as spatial or even emotional ones (e.g., “How can you work in such an environment?”), place is a similarly complex term, one that encompasses a number of interconnected phenomena to form what sociologist E.V. Walter has called a “topistic reality.” “A thing has an objective reality,” he writes, “a person has a subjective reality, a human relationship is a social reality, and a place is its own kind, which may be called topistic reality”
While, as sociology, Walter’s work privileges human factors over physical ones, it is useful in accounting for the distinct actuality and identity of places, and the following definition of place is particularly cogent:

The totality of what people do, think, and feel in a specific location gives identity to a place, and through its physique and morale it shapes a reality which is unique to places—different from the reality of an object or a person. Human experience makes a place, but a place lives in its own way. Its form of experience occupies persons—the place locates experience in people. A place is a matrix of energies, generating representations and causing changes in awareness. (131)

Walter’s framing points to an understanding of place as where things happen, as the site and repository of human meaning. If places can be said to have identity, it is something derived as much or more from morale as from physique. This sociological understanding of place aligns with the work of human geographers like Yi-Fu Tuan who emphasize the social aspects of locale, the elusive “spirit of place” that derives, fundamentally, from the stories it contains, the history it conjures.\(^4\) Such work—though it might be called anthropocentric—helpfully supplements the work of those environmental thinkers, ecocritics, and geographers whose attempts to account for nature, place, and space tend to emphasize physique, the more objective, physical, and quantifiable aspects of place.\(^5\)

Walter’s conception of place as “a matrix of energies” is particularly useful, and it accords well with geographer Doreen Massey’s understanding of place as a “plurality of trajectories; a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (12). Massey’s work breaks down the common

\(^4\) Tuan’s best-known work is *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977).

\(^5\) As a portmanteau of ecology and spatiality, my own term, *ecospatiality*, also derives more from physique than morale. Yet my hope is that it will help literary critics come to terms with nature and space as discourses, to understand the extent to which these concepts are always determined by the stories we tell as much as by the empirical world that contains them.
distinctions between space and time, as well as space and place, moving beyond a flat-surface view of space and place toward a more active and three-dimensional conception. Massey also takes both natural and built environments into account, positing a view of spatiality that I find compatible with contemporary ecocriticism’s more holistic view of nature. She recognizes place as “open (‘a global sense of place’), as woven together out of ongoing stories, as a moment within power-geometries, as a particular constellation within the wider topographies of space, and as in process, as unfinished business” (131). In this view, places are intersections of trajectories, of energies, always in flux, and these intersections are ecospatial as well as discursive. Human stories are trajectories, as are the ostensibly non-human stories of geology and ecology, and they all coincide and collide to generate the matrix of place. The more trajectories we understand, the better we can comprehend a place—both its physique and its morale. Applying Massey’s theory to literature means understanding that literary texts are also “trajectories,” stories that are plotted within geographic sites and ultimately assist in the process of constituting those sites as places.

With these expansive, energetic theories of place in mind, the question becomes how best to comprehend it from a literary standpoint, how to ascertain and characterize what is at stake in what ecocritic Lawrence Buell describes, broadly, as “the reciprocity between text and environment” (Future 45) or, more precisely, “how art registers environmentality” (Future 44, emphasis added). Buell’s notion of reciprocity echoes Cheryl Glotfelty’s capacious and formative definition of ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xix), while the notion of art’s (or, more specifically, literature’s) environmental register points toward the actual ecocritical work of reading texts and interpreting
their environmental implications. From this perspective, in order to understand literary texts to the fullest extent, readers must recognize those texts’ “environmentality,” both as an important formal element, related but not limited to setting, and as a thematic element, a pressing sociopolitical issue demanding attention.

**Thinking Through Literary Cartography**

Another way to think of literature’s environmental register is to think of writing or storytelling as a kind of mapping. One of the best examples and examinations of literature as cartography comes from Heat-Moon’s *PrairyErth: A Deep Map* (1991). Among the many stories Heat-Moon draws upon to tell the story of Chase County, Kansas, is one from a retired railroad worker named Fidel Ybarra, who has spent four and a half decades building and maintaining tracks. As Fidel recounts his personal history of the area, he draws a crude map on a long piece of paper, sketching in the sites not only of his labor, but also of bunkhouses he has lived in, the grade school he attended, the place where a white barber first agreed to give him a haircut. The author listens, rapt, while Fidel continues to sketch and relate his story: “And he draws on and turns it into a picture, chart, chronicle, handbook. The clock has struck off the hour again, and he keeps drawing. Then he seems to begin to rise out of his cartograph slowly, and he speaks more and nods less, and something between us, a caution, has disappeared, the way it will between people who travel some distance together” (234). When Fidel finally finishes, he signs his name on the drawing and hands it to his visitor, who prizes it as among the best gifts anyone in the county has given him, “a portrait of sixty years spent along the skinny rail corridors of the county” (234). One assumes this scene to be particularly meaningful to Heat-Moon because it expresses in a literal way what he set out to accomplish through his travels in Chase County and
his writing about it: to inscribe a map of the place in literary form. His interaction with Fidel Ybarra is a complex spatial-textual transmission: Fidel tells stories and plots them on a map, a process which Heat-Moon later reinscribes in narrative form (another form of plotting) while asking readers to interpret the text as a different kind of map.

In *PrairyErth*, stories like Fidel’s (most of them far less symbolic) become a part of what geocritics call the book’s *literary cartography*, a term that likely originated with Peter Turchi’s interesting writing guide, *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer* (2004). In his foundational *Spatiality* (2013), Robert Tally builds on Turchi’s work in explaining the concept of literary cartography: “Like the mapmaker, the writer must survey territory, determining which features of a given landscape to include, to emphasize, or to diminish; for example, some shadings may need to be darker than others, some lines bolder, and so on. The writer must establish the scale and the shape, no less of the narrative than of the places in it” (*Spatiality* 45). As a metaphor of the creative writing process, literary cartography refers to the authorial practice of narrative world-making, and decisions about the kind and amount of description to include have important consequences for the literary work and its interpretation. Most crucially to the present discussion, an author’s literary cartography dictates the extent to which his or her work is open to spatial interpretation, the *literary geography* practiced by the reader.

When it comes to literary geography, we might imagine a kind of continuum of representation, from inwardness to outwardness, from interiority to ecospatiality. The continuum represents the textual difference, say, between the set direction for a production of *Hamlet* and the protagonist’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy; the former concerns a purely

---

6 In his reflections on place writing, Heat-Moon has used the more active metaphor of centrifugality and centripetality, whereby one text draws its energy inward while another presses outward (*Here* 263–270).
environmental reality—set design, staging, lighting—while the latter expresses a purely psychological one. (Granted, the set also sets the drama’s “mood,” and Hamlet speaks of “undiscovered country.”) Whereas some place texts strive for objectivity, others favor personal experience. The most powerful writing about place charts a balanced course between these forms, incorporating environmental description of place as well as personal experience in place.

To borrow Massey’s terms, an individual’s experience forms but one trajectory in the production of place, one story in a constellation of stories personal and scientific, cultural and natural. In these terms, the most ecospatial literary cartography represents not just one trajectory, but also the entire matrix, producing a non-anthropocentric, ecospatial literary topistics.7

Just as there are outward-looking and inward-looking texts, then, the literary cartography of a text can be more or less substantial. The best literary cartography, in my view, invests in representations of space and place, evoking a strong sense that the story transpires in an environmental context, within a matrix of spatial relationships and natural phenomena. This is not to say that to qualify as strong literary cartography a text must also represent actual places in the world, as we know it, although the majority of texts appearing in this dissertation are highly referential in this regard. Rather, the degree of correspondence with real places is another element of the author’s cartographic calculus. As Tally puts it, “the literary cartographer, even one who operates in such non-realistic modes as myth or fantasy, must determine the degree to which a given representation of a place refers to any ‘real’ place in the geographical world” (45).

7 In my concern for the more-than-human world (to borrow David Abrams’s term), I am referring to literary cartography in the most literal sense, the way that literature registers ecospatiality. Other scholars use the term more loosely, as evidenced by the wide variety of approaches in Tally’s recent edited collection, Literary Cartographies: Spatiality, Representation, and Narrative (2014).
Much has been said and remains to be said, for example, of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County and Tolkien’s Middle Earth, whose specificity of place (along with their creators’ maps) makes them mappable if not *locatable* on the Earth their readers inhabit. In the process of generating such narrative worlds (whether realistically or not, deliberately or not), authors create and represent environments from which readers then derive some sense of ecospatial meaning. Or, as Tally states, “The critical reader becomes a kind of geographer who actively interprets the literary map in such a way as to present new, sometimes hitherto unforeseen mappings” (79)—to which end, the more detail, the better. In the case of highly referential, outward-looking texts, the concept of literary cartography moves beyond its metaphorical meaning to describe the authorial practices that make many forms of environmental literary criticism viable.

The most evocative literary cartography demonstrates a deliberate commitment to including the physical environment in its stories, making the representative act its primary objective and enabling a kind of orientation for the reader. Such texts would include, for example, the narratives of 19th-century explorers like Lewis and Clark and John Wesley Powell, whose objective it was to survey, describe, and inscribe new terrain for a wondering nation. Travel guides provide another example of this overt kind of literary cartography; they, too, describe places, where to go, where to find things. Travel guides represent their territories, and they also (thanks, in part, to the maps they include) serve to orient the reader in space. In nonfiction narratives of place—by which I mean the rich, related traditions of travel writing and nature writing—for which the experience of traversing and sensing spaces and environments is a primary (if not always *the* primary) subject, the literary cartography is also frequently strong.
Of course, this sense of writing as cartography is not at all limited to nonfiction, with works of poetry, drama, and fiction all participating to varying extents. A poem like Robert Frost’s “After Apple-Picking,” beautifully depicts a New England orchard in the fall through the speaker’s dream-like recollections of particular sensory details. In Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, the staging instructions stipulate that the set be “a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home” (11), depicting a changing corner of Brooklyn that is literally crowding out the main character and his way of life. Likewise, in a novel like *The Violent Bear It Away*, Flannery O’Connor, renowned for her depictions of a more psychological terrain, relies on contrasts among rural and urban landscapes in the American South to explore questions of morality, ancestry, and destiny. Each of these texts is representative of a place in time and may be considered part of the literary geography of its respective region, country, or continent.

While this geocritical characterization of literature as cartography and of critic as geographer is certainly productive, we should be wary of relying too much on the mapping metaphor. Indeed, Tally’s recent volume *Literary Cartography* demonstrates the extent to which critics have already begun to utilize the concept in much more metaphorical ways. For one thing, the cartographic metaphor emphasizes representation over other thematic concerns, allowing less space for what literature and criticism can do—namely, understanding the relationship between the human and the more-than-human. On this question, I follow critics like Robert Kern and Lawrence Buell who have argued for a more capacious understanding of environmental textuality and criticism. In a 2003 article, Kern suggests a form of ecocritical reading that sets out “both to assert and to test the assumption that all texts are at least potentially environmental
(and therefore susceptible to ecocriticism or ecologically informed reading) in the sense that all texts are literally or imaginatively situated in a place, and in the sense that their authors, consciously or not, inscribe within them a certain relation to their place” (259). Likewise, Buell has suggested that we “think inclusively of environmentality as a property of any text—to maintain that all human artifacts bear such traces, and at several stages: in the composition, the embodiment, and the reception” (Future 25, emphasis added). Thus, although the terminology differs—spatiality versus environmentality—geocritics and ecocritics are both invested in coming to terms with literature’s environs, understanding the workings of space and nature in the text.

Reading Environmentally: Connecting Ecocriticism and Geocriticism

My theory of ecospatiality grows along the theoretical fencerows both around and between the fields of ecocriticism and geocriticism. As an epistemology (a way of comprehending place), ecospatiality can be understood as an umbrella category that brings together the separate but related discourses of nature and space. And as a critical approach (a way of reading), an ecospatial literary criticism may be productively considered in similar terms, as a banner under which both ecocritics and geocritics may assemble. However, my own methodology, as modeled in this dissertation, is more suggestive of a hybrid approach; it is both a geocritical ecocriticism (mapping nature and human relationships to it) and an ecocritical geocriticism (animating and humanizing literary spatiality). As I imagine it, an ecospatial approach is a form of literary criticism in which discourses encompassing space and nature are

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8 Often consisting of wire, posts, trees, and weeds, a fencerow is a kind of borderland, a line of demarcation that is both natural and built, spatial and ecological. In PrairyErth, Heat-Moon observes how white settlers in Kansas planted Osage orange trees between fields because their natural, gnarled growth patterns made more effective than wooden fencing (286-287).
understood as productively intertwined and mutually constitutive. It is an approach that takes seriously the physical, biological, and social environments in which our stories take place. In other words, an ecospatial literary criticism will account not only for the environmentality of texts but also for the ecospatiality of place—using insights from bioregionalism, cartography, and environmental history—demonstrating how geospatial and ecological realities coincide with and inform literary representations.

As I understand it, a place-based approach to literature involves two primary levels of interpretation: setting and ideology. As a literary construct, the notion of setting is deceptively simple. The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory defines it as merely “The where and when of a story or play; the locale. In drama the term may refer to the scenery or props.” Setting is different from place in that it refers primarily to a structural element of a text while place connotes a location in the world and the human experience of it. Although critics might be tempted to take it for granted, setting—especially when it includes real place names—operates within a matrix of reference that includes all imaginable information related to a place, including details related to history, geography, and ecology. In this sense, an ecospatial approach means explicating the setting more fully, foregrounding the background of literature and explaining how and why place matters. At the same time, maintaining an ecocritical approach means not overlooking what we might call the human-environment dynamic in a given text, from character actions to any philosophical, ethical, and political positions in the text. While such ideology might be considered separate from place-representation in a narrow sense (i.e., representation of landscape), it remains an important part of a text’s environmentality and its
literary cartography, and thus to a wholly ecospatial understanding of it. To the extent that a text is open to a place-based interpretation, then, both setting and ideology are relevant.

This holistic understanding of place as ecological, geographical, and historical (nature/space/story) is largely absent from two camps of literary criticism that attend to questions of the environment within the text. Now in its third decade of institutional recognition, ecocriticism focuses on the biological world but far too often fails to recognize the spatial. As geocritical theorist Bertrand Westphal notes in his foreword to Robert Tally’s 2011 collection, Geocritical Explorations, ecocriticism “has reintroduced the question of the referent, a reflection upon the eventual links between realia and representation” (xi). What it has not yet done, he argues, is engage with the “spatial turn” in critical theory heralded by Edward Soja and Frederic Jameson nearly thirty years ago.

This is where the new and exciting field of geocriticism has begun to intervene. Westphal’s Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces (published in French in 2007 and translated into English by Tally in 2011) is the founding text, with Tally’s Spatiality (2013) following close behind. As an outgrowth of spatiality studies, geocriticism posits that geographical knowledge is attainable through reading, especially when a given place is portrayed in multiple works of literature. Geocriticism charts a new course for the study of literature’s mimetic capacity, but it does so in a way that differs slightly from ecocriticism’s insistence on the “real world” of rocks and trees by pointing to geography instead of (just) nature. In Tally’s poetic phrasing, “Geocriticism explores, seeks, surveys, digs into, reads, and writes a place; it looks at, listens to, touches, smells, and tastes spaces” (2). Or, as Eric Prieto clarifies, summarizing Westphal’s approach, “the geocritical study of literature is not organized around texts or authors but around
geographic sites” (20), as a course on Chicago literature would be organized, for example. In other words, Westphalian geocriticism studies literature, atlas in hand; but “the ultimate objective is spatial” (Prieto 21).

In Westphal’s understanding, the most important aspect of ecocriticism has been its renewed attention to literature’s referential capacity. Indeed, the question of referentiality has been a vexing one for ecocritics, many of whom insisted in the discipline’s early stages (certainly influenced by the commitment to nature writing as an object of study) upon literature’s mimetic capacity, a position arising from the environmentalist stance of advocating for real places in the world; as a way of reading, ecocriticism insisted (and, to a large extent, still insists) upon an extratextual notion of place. Ecocriticism thus set itself up in a perceived conflict with poststructuralism’s emphasis on textuality.

Westphal’s work revives the old debates about mimesis, referring to literature as one among many of the “mimetic arts” and positing referentiality as one of the central tenets of geocriticism. For Westphal, a spatial approach to literature means negotiating between the referent (which he terms the *realeme* or real space) and its representation (literary space), between source and derivative, actual and virtual. “The literary place,” he writes, “is a virtual world that interacts in a modular fashion with the world of reference. The degree of correlation

9 Geocriticism has already expanded beyond Westphal’s definitive if somewhat narrow conception of it, with other critics resisting the notion that place need be the primary object of study. Certainly any form of literary criticism must also allow that understanding textuality is an equally important objective. In other words, we may read for place (or gender, or race, et cetera), but we also read to understand reading itself, and how texts operate.

10 As Kate Soper famously put it in *What is Nature?* (1995), “It isn’t language which has a hole in its ozone layer” (qtd. in Barry 252). Heat-Moon’s *PrairyErth*, in addition to the ways I use it in this dissertation, is in many ways postmodern and could serve as an interesting touchstone in a study of ecocriticism and poststructuralism.
between one and the other can vary from zero to infinity” (101). He goes on to theorize three types of relationships between real and literary spaces: homotopic consensus (assuming a one-to-one correlation—e.g., Paris in the world is accepted as the referent for the Paris in the text), heterotopic interference (whereby the referent becomes a kind of springboard, e.g., as the real space regions of Mississippi or the South do for William Faulkner’s imaginary literary space of Yoknapatawpha County), and utopian excursus (imaginary representations of imaginary places—that is, non-places, like Thomas More’s Utopia). Westphal explains:

> Whereas homotopia implies a compossibility between referential space and its fictional representation, and heterotopia sets the two instances in contradiction to one another, utopia activates an incompossibility, one that does not involve contradiction but rather vice-diction: the narrative unfolds at the margins of the referent or around a projected referent in a derealized future. (109)

Of these three categories, I am most interested in homotopia, in the element of compossibility that exists between text and world, so the literary texts I address in this study all suggest a strong degree of correlation with actual places. Such correlation (or compossibility, compass-ability?), I argue, allows us to align texts with the sites in which they take place, tying the fictional representation to a real environmental history. This is not to say that all the texts I read are strictly realistic in their modes of representation, only that they proceed more from actual places than imagined ones.

Though its history is much shorter than that of ecocriticism, the field of geocriticism has already expanded in some promising ways. Robert Tally has led the way in the United States by edited collections on geocriticism and literary cartography, as well as Palgrave McMillan’s Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies series, in which most of his recent books have appeared. Tally also co-edited, with Christine Battista, the 2016 collection Ecocriticism and
Geocriticism: Overlapping Territories in Environmental and Spatial Literary Studies. That collection represents an important step toward an institutional recognition of the ways in which ecocriticism and geocriticism had been engaging with the mutual goal of interpreting literature’s environs. The foundational texts of geocriticism, Westphal’s Geocriticism and Tally’s Spatiality, tend to follow critical geography in privileging the abstract over the material and the urban over the rural, something of a reversal of ecocriticism’s own early (and ongoing) biases. Such work risks misunderstanding place by reducing or excluding its biological aspects. On the whole, however, geocritics seem much more receptive to ecocritical concepts than vice versa. Westphal and Tally both recognize ecocriticism as something of a predecessor to geocriticism, and a number of the essays collected in Tally’s Geocritical Explorations (2011) incorporate ecocritical concepts, most notably Sten Pultz Moslund’s work on “topopoetics” as a mode of reading and Battista’s discussion of how Thomas Jefferson’s theory of geography led directly to environmental exploitation in nineteenth-century America.11 Like these critics, I am calling for an enrichment of geocriticism through the incorporation of greater ecological and historical analysis.

Likewise, I contend that ecocriticism deserves a theory of place that includes spatiality. While ecocriticism has correctly alerted readers to what are often narrowly referred to as “environmental” (read: “ecological”) issues, it has not always grappled effectively with the situatedness of texts in all their geographical and historical contexts. In her Sense of Place and Sense of Planet, Ursula Heise analyzes and rebuts the glorified “sense of place” which has been

so important within ecocriticism and environmentalism and which has amounted to a
célébration of the local, especially in the discourse of bioregionalism with its foci on dwelling
and reinhabitation. Heise’s work, which analyzes different influential visual representations of
Earth—from the first “Blue Planet” photographs to the more recent Google Earth Internet
mapping platform—demonstrates the inherent spatiality of environmental perceptions and the
implications this has for theory. It provides one example of precedence for the type of work I’m
undertaking in this project, of bringing spatiality to bear upon ecocritical literary studies.

As a contribution to ecocriticism, an increased attention to cartography in literary studies
offers another way to approach the question of referentiality and representation. I find maps
useful because they participate overtly in the same kind of literary work that some writing does
only incidentally: they represent places in the natural world in visual/textual form. As
representations of place, maps convey information and tell stories about locations in the world.
Yet those stories are not always straightforward. Maps require interpretation. (We read maps
rather than merely look at them.) They are theoretically all-encompassing, containing everything
within their scope, yet something is always left out, whether for scale, perspective, or intention.
(The same is true, Turchi points out, of literary texts, and in Maps of the Imagination he argues
that selectivity is among the chief problems of literary writing.) All these properties of
cartographic texts can be productively applied to literary texts, providing clues about how the
(eco)spaces of literature operate. Indeed, because of these shared textual functions vis-à-vis
geography, I view maps, as well as literature, as nature-culture interfaces, texts that help us think
through our relationship to the geophysical, biological world.
Heise’s critique of it notwithstanding, bioregionalism emerges as another important touchstone for this project. The 2012 essay collection, *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*, brought bioregionalism firmly into the ecocritical conversation. A decades-old sociopolitical movement advocating sustainable human habitation within local ecosystems, bioregionalism takes environmentalism down to the level of the local, stressing things like eating locally grown foods, eschewing political borders, and caring for watersheds. This discourse is especially relevant here because bioregionalism’s framing of place, particularly through the notion of the watershed, is essentially ecospatial; it places natural and social systems in a very particular geography, effectively recognizing the spatial and social aspects of nature and bringing it further into the realm of place. The emphasis on natural borders (e.g., watersheds, climate zones) over political ones has powerful implications for environmental history, political science, and border studies. Other themes such as dwelling, reinhabitation, and the implicit notion of orientation—of knowing where one is in relation to existing natural and cultural resources, one’s “bioregional address”—attend to how human beings live in relationship to place. As the editors of *The Bioregional Imagination* put it, “By foregrounding natural factors as a way to envision place, bioregionalism proposes that human identity may be constituted by our residence in a larger community of natural beings—our local bioregion—rather than or at least supplementary to, natural, state, ethnic or other more common bases of identity” (4). Indeed, another way of saying that geography is ecological, as this project proposes, is to say that place is bioregional, recognizing that locality only exists within one or more larger geographical and ecological frameworks. Reading ecospatially means recognizing the ways in which literature registers

12 Indeed, Lawrence Buell has referred to the bioregion as “the new environmental criticism’s most distinctive contribution to the taxonomy of place-scales” (*Future* 83).
place, and place registers bioregion. Sarah Orne Jewett’s story “A White Heron,” for example, speaks to the experience of living in a certain kind of place—a cabin in the woods, far from the nearest town—but it also registers that place as part of a particular bioregional setting, the tidal marshes and second-growth forests of the North Atlantic Coast at the turn of the twentieth century.

My emphasis on mapping constitutes another connection between bioregional criticism and the ecospatial criticism I propose. Because bioregionalism is a political position based upon an ecospatial construct, its practitioners have utilized cartography as a means to articulate their ideas and “reterritorialize their lives and places” (Lynch, et al. 6). This means challenging the traditional orientation of maps that emphasizes political borders and built infrastructure in favor of mapping that portrays more ecological constructs. As Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster put it, “Mapping is so much a tool of bioregional thought and practice that we felt inspired to present maps with the essays in this collection” (7). Such a framing somehow posits mapping as both instrumental and incidental to bioregional literary criticism; bioregionalism’s ecospatial imaginary makes cartography essential, but maps are treated more as window dressing than as fundamental tools for literary criticism, as I envision them.13

Eric Bulson’s excellent work on the role of maps in literary realism, modernism, and postmodernism serves as one methodological model for my study. Bulson’s move is to treat the presence of maps and place markers (toponyms) in literary texts as part of an overarching literary strategy or device. Whereas authors like Dickens referred to real places in order to orient readers in the geophysical world, he argues, the place markers in Joyce and Woolf have the effect of

13 This holds true, to different extents, for each of the essays included in The Bioregional Imagination.
disorienting readers. In contrast to Westphal other geocritics, Bulson shows how using literary works as place maps can be a shaky proposition since there is never a stable, objective referent by which to become oriented—that is, places (especially urban ones) don’t always remain “in place.” While Bulson’s argument attends primarily to the non-referentiality of maps in literature, I am more interested in their referentiality. (I understand this to be a matter of emphasis and not a fundamental difference.) From my perspective, toponyms are the literary device by which authors connect fictional stories to real environmental histories, and a crucial part of my methodology is tracking the use of toponyms throughout a given text. In this project, I follow Bulson’s lead in interrogating not only the presence of maps in literary texts but also the use of maps by American authors, like Richard Wright, in constructing their literary worlds.

It is also worth noting that the ecospatial approach is grounded in historicism. With place, histories matter. Literary texts evoke not only places, but places in time. Richard Wright wrote about places in *Native Son* that today he might have found unrecognizable. They are likewise unrecognizable to us, looking backward in time, and envisioning the novel’s literary environs requires a feat of imagination. One goal of this dissertation is to reconstruct some aspects of the historical places to which these literary texts refer so as to comprehend more fully the literary device of environmental representation. Historical research helps to establish the grounds for analysis.

The underlying message of this dissertation is that *place matters*, both in the world and in the text. As Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster argue, “By reflecting and respecting the context—

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14 An interesting exception can be found in Thomas Hardy’s Wessex novels like *Return of the Native* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which take place in an imagined region but invoke real land use issues in England, notably the Enclosure Acts of the late 1800s; in such cases, we have real environmental history without real toponyms.
both cultural and natural—of specific places, bioregional literature and criticism make a powerful statement that where you are matters” (18). To the extent that we fail to understand the cultural, ecological, and spatial dynamics of place, we miss the many significant ways that social and environmental issues overlap. My project thus aligns neatly with the message of the environmental justice movement and the related branch of ecocriticism. It also stands as a corrective to the relative indifference of the ecocritical and geocritical communities to each other’s core concerns.

**Ecospatial Orientation: The Example of *Paddle-to-the-Sea***

I order to demonstrate how literary ecospatiality and ecospatial criticism function in practice, I would like to turn briefly to a classic work of children’s literature, Holling Clancy Holling’s *Paddle-to-the-Sea* (1941). In this story, Holling offers what may be the definitive fictional depiction of the Great Lakes, the largest freshwater system on the planet, a single watershed that contains about one fifth of the world’s fresh surface water (USEPA, “Great Lakes”). The protagonist of Holling’s tale is not a human, but a toy carving of a man in a canoe who, through a combination of time, currents, and human intervention, enacts the geographer’s fantasy of traveling the watershed from headwaters to saltwater (3). *Paddle* is a first-rate travel narrative, replete with adventure, ecological and geographical description, and beautiful illustrations depicting the boat’s epic journey. Colorful maps and consistent place references create a strong sense of geographical orientation, ensuring that readers never forget where Paddle is on the map. The book is also an accessible, albeit somewhat dated, natural and cultural history of the region’s water system, full of text and diagrams explaining various facets of regional industry. In the Great Lakes region and beyond, *Paddle-to-the-Sea* remains widely read, with
numerous print and online teaching resources attesting to its staying power in U.S. and Canadian classrooms. More importantly, I argue that Paddle-to-the-Sea is relevant to contemporary scholars of literature and the environment for its representation of nature, geography, and culture as interconnected phenomena—its ecospatial orientation.

My own interest in Paddle-to-the-Sea goes back as far as I can remember, to when I was a boy growing up on a farm, in Hillsdale County, Michigan, just one county south of where Holling spent his childhood. To this day, a copy of the book remains in the tiny library of the tiny church I attended, and the library card shows that I checked it out every few months in my later elementary school years. I remember, as a kid, loving the book’s sense that the Great Lakes mattered, and that they were somehow connected to all the other waters of the earth. I also liked imagining the life of the Native American boy who carves the toy, a small connection to my own identity as a descendent of the Lake Superior Ojibwe. (I am of Swiss, French, and Ojibwe descent, with a tribal relationship to the Lac Courte Oreilles and Fond du Lac bands of Lake Superior Chippewa in Northern Wisconsin and Minnesota.) Paddle taught me that I lived in a watershed—specifically, I later learned, on the East Fork of the West Branch of the St. Joseph River of the Maumee River Watershed, which drains to Lake Erie. But it was only recently, in the midst of drafting this dissertation, that I realized the book’s influence on my own literary and environmental thinking: Paddle-to-the-Sea taught me about ecospatial orientation before I conceived of the term; in that sense, Holling’s book is the seed from which this project grew.

Holling had an impressive career as an author and illustrator in the mid-twentieth century. He wrote and illustrated most of his books, collaborating frequently with his wife, Lucille

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15 He was born Holling Allison Clancy in 1900 in Henrietta Township, a rural area between the cities of Jackson and Lansing.
Webster Holling, whom he met in the 1920s while both were training in illustration at the Art Institute of Chicago. While Holling wrote and illustrated a number of texts early in his career, his post-1930s works, beginning with *Paddle-to-the-Sea*, demonstrate the kind of sophistication that garnered one Caldecott and two Newberry Honors. By blending the travel motif with regional environmental history, *Paddle* established a successful formula for works to come, with imaginative stories like *Tree in the Trail* (1942), which depicts two centuries of Santa Fe trail history from the perspective of a prominent cottonwood, and *Minn of the Mississippi* (1951), which follows a snapping turtle hatchling (Huck Finn-like) all the way down the Mississippi River. Books like these demonstrate Holling’s passion for instilling in readers an awareness of history and the environment in North American places.

*Paddle-to-the-Sea* is a unique travel narrative that, like Heat-Moon’s *River-Horse*, imagines a significant portion of North America from water level. In the story, an Indigenous boy from the part of Ontario just north of Lake Superior carves the canoe figure in response to a dream he has had. He claims to have learned in school “that when this snow in our Nipigon country melts, the water flows to that river. The river flows into the Great Lakes, the biggest lakes in the world. They are set like bowls on a gentle slope. The water from our river flows into the top one, drops into the next, and on to the others. Then it makes a river again, a river that flows to the Big Salt Water” (3). After the boy places him on a hillside in late spring, Paddle is propelled on his journey by snowmelt, currents, winds, ships, and even a dogsled. He is nearly destroyed by a buzzsaw, stranded in a swamp, lost in a forest fire, put in a museum, and abandoned as so much driftwood. His inscription—“PLEASE PUT ME BACK IN WATER
I AM PADDLE TO THE SEA” (1)—is often what saves him. As the toy travels from one place to the next, those who find it begin carving place names into its hull, creating a list of where the boat has been. In this way, the toy itself becomes a traveling text, an atlas-like index of Great Lakes locales, enabling at least one fisherman (along with readers) to trace his course on the map from river to ocean, source to mouth. In its four-year journey, the boat makes it through every Great Lake and into the Gulf of Saint Lawrence before hitching a ride all the way to France.

As Paddle traverses the watershed, the reader can track his progress through a series of maps appearing in the margins. These maps explicitly pose the major events of the story, as well as other pertinent facts and illustrations, alongside Paddle’s course, often with labels indicating, “Paddle is here” (33) or “where Paddle is now” (17). In effect, Holling uses the illustrative cartography of his maps to supplement the literary cartography of the narrative; indeed, the two
are ultimately inseparable. The effect is a watershed orientation that functions on multiple scales at once—from the level of a one-foot-long toy canoe to that of a vast freshwater sea, or even the entire fluvial system.

An additional set of maps and drawings focuses on teaching Great Lakes geography. As Paddle travels through each new lake, a new series of illustrations appears, generating a comparison between the shape of the water body and an image relating to the local natural and/or cultural environment. In each series of illustrations, a drawing of something from the area gradually morphs into a topographical representation of the lake, forming an image that is truly ecospatial. So Lake Huron, the marginalia tell us, is “in the country of the old French and Indian trappers [and] makes the outline of a trapper with a pack of furs” (39). Lakes Ontario and Michigan, both described as surrounded by farming country, are likened to a carrot (43) and “a squash with leaves” (33), respectively. Lake Superior is a wolf’s head (15), and Lake Erie, owing
to its position “in a land of coal mines and steel mills,” is likened to a lump of coal (43). This imagery not only encourages readers to memorize names and concepts surrounding Great Lakes geographical and cultural identity, but also promotes an ecospatial viewpoint that supplements the primary plot of travel in and through the watershed.

The first map that appears in the book reinforces this perspective (4). In it, the headwaters in Ontario appear at an exaggerated elevation, as a mountain of snow with a colorful sun blazing down on it. The map’s orientation toward the northeast allows Holling to capture the majority of the watershed—from the Great Lakes headwaters to the St. Lawrence River—with a blue horizon suggestive of the Atlantic Ocean in the distance. The drawing includes lines of latitude and longitude, major rivers and lakes, and the political boundaries of the United States, with each state appearing in a slightly different color. Paddle also appears in exaggerated form, heading south upon Lake Huron, at a midpoint on his journey. Yet the most interesting feature of this illustration is the way in which the hydrological features—lakes, rivers, and piles of snow—are made to obscure the lines of latitude and longitude. In effect, Holling has cleverly superimposed a painting of the watershed on top of a U.S. political map. It is as though, once the snow melts, the map will be revealed instead of the earth itself. This image supplements the text and graphic on the opposite page, in which the Great Lakes are described as “bowls on a hillside” and Paddle’s creator reveals his plans to place Paddle in the snow to await the start of his journey.

In conjunction with its geographical premise, *Paddle-to-the-Sea* includes some memorable representations of Great Lakes ecosystems. Dozens of species—mammals, birds,
fish, and plants—make their appearance in this book, and its focus on particular habitats in particular seasons is really insightful. At one point, for example, the craft comes to rest in a beaver pond. The pond is inhabited not only by the beavers, which have engineered it for their own uses, but also by a mink and a muskrat, as well as a porcupine and a skunk, which have a brief standoff on a log. One memorable description is of a buck deer wading in the shallows. “He
had only one antler,” Holling writes, “and the weight of it made him walk with his head turned aside. He swung the antler hard against a stump. It came off easily and dropped into the mud. He shook his head and bounded off into the forest, glad to be free of the weight” (7). Even as Paddle gravitates toward the open water or the industrial coastline, Holling misses few opportunities to describe the various living things that populate and animate each site, as well as the natural systems in which they participate.

At the same time, the book gives equivalent attention to the built environment, demonstrating the extent to which human beings in the region are manipulating nature through industrial development. As Paddle travels, for instance, through a sawmill on Lake Superior or the locks at Sault Ste. Marie, Holling includes illustrations about how each process functions. Through such descriptions, Paddle-to-the-Sea presents the Great Lakes as a crucial transportation corridor for industrial goods, with raw materials as well as finished products traversing the watershed with regularity. When Paddle arrives at Superior, Wisconsin, Holling explains how “most of the ships at the dock were unloading coal from Indiana and Ohio and reloading iron ore” (21), which will later arrive in Detroit to be transformed into automobiles.16

By emphasizing these constructed elements of life in the Great Lakes, Paddle offers a balance of natural and cultural aspects of the watershed.

For all that it does well, Paddle-to-the-Sea suffers from a number of failings, particularly from an ecocritical perspective. Written at the dawn of World War II, it is hardly an environmentalist text, according to our current understanding of the term. In particular, the book

16 Incidentally, Superior, Wisconsin, is where my ancestor, Chief Joseph Osaugie, founded a canoe-building company in the 1800s, and where The United States Steel Corporation removed an Ojibwe burial ground 1918 to construct its shipping operations.
adopts an overly optimistic approach to the kinds of American industrialization that would rapidly increase as the nation prepared for war. Indeed, Holling depicts the Great Lakes as a major engine of the national economy, never pausing to consider the impacts that activities like mining, deforestation, shipping, or commercial fishing might have on the ecosystems he so carefully describes. Perhaps most tellingly, Holling’s illustrated map of Lake St. Clair likens it to a pumping heart through which flows “red iron ore, the life blood of industry” (41). This is the same ore that has come from “the largest iron ore mine in the world” and stained Lake Superior (and our protagonist) “brick-red” (21). Yet Holling never ponders the negative consequences of something as basic as water pollution, a failure that appears particularly short-sighted as we look backward from the Rust-Belt era.17

In addition, Paddle-to-the-Sea invokes, if not explicitly traffics in, some Native American stereotypes, despite the Hollings’ considerable experience traveling and living among various Native peoples of North America. The boy who carves Paddle wears jeans and goes to school like most Canadian children, yet he is given neither a first name nor any tribal affiliation; he is an anonymous Indian.18 One article identifies the boy, vaguely, with “an Ontario band of Chippewa” (Hoffman and Hoffman), while another ties him, citing no evidence, to the Lake Helen Indian Reserve (Dempsey and Dempsey 72), an area near Nipigon that is occupied by the

17 A short film version of Paddle-to-the-Sea, which was released in Canada twenty-five years after the book and nominated for an Oscar, adopts a more strident environmentalist position, in opposition to industrial pollution (Mason).

18 To be fair, none of the children in the story are named, while several adults are.
Red Rock Indian Band. The carving itself is a somewhat cartoonish version of a stoic Native man, and when, at the end of the story, the boy (now a teenager) overhears the news that his “Paddle Person” has completed his journey and made it all the way to France, he is described as moving in his moccasins “so silently across the dock that the others did not hear him” (53-54).

Such caricatures demand to be called out and contextualized when discussing and teaching the many merits of this book. On both subjects—what we might now call environmental and cultural politics—it might be fair to say that Holling was insufficiently ahead of his time.

Such failings aside, Paddle-to-the-Sea stands as an important text for both ecocritics and geocritics due to Holling’s salient treatment of an important subject: human orientation and participation within environments—watersheds and transportation routes, ecosystems and social systems. Through its unique premise, maps, and other illustrations—its literary cartography—Paddle-to-the-Sea deftly demonstrates the connectedness of nature, space, and story. Most importantly, it invites us to think about where we are, educating readers about key environmental, geographical, and cultural forces in the Great Lakes region and beyond—from forest fires and shipwrecks to habitats and industry. In so doing, it exemplifies a kind of regional ecospatiality, a radical orientation that brings natural and cultural systems together in the story and on the map.

Just as Paddle-to-the-Sea embodies a kind of ecospatial orientation, as I have just argued, the preceding reading of the book is also intended as an example of what an ecospatial literary criticism can do, a model of the kind of reading I carry out across the landscape of this dissertation. Such a reading is geocritical in its interpretation of the text as literary cartography.

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19 Geography does support the idea that he would be a member of one of the Ojibwe or Chippewa tribal groups, making him a distant relative of mine.
and in its emphasis on other cartographic representations and symbols in the text, from Holling’s maps and related drawings to the image of Paddle as a traveling index of place names. It is also ecocritical in its attention to Holling’s rendering of species and ecosystems and the text’s refusal of the nature-culture binary, as well as in its critique of the book’s outmoded environmental politics. While each of these critical perspectives is fruitful and valid on its own terms, it is my contention that each one also, in some way, misses the point, which is the representation of place as a simultaneously ecological, geographical, and historical phenomenon. It takes an ecospatial reading, in other words, to understand this text’s fundamental ecospatial orientation. Reading ecospatially is akin to viewing literature with “a cartographer’s eye,” to invoke Cheever’s phrase once again; or, rather, it is a way of seeing place and reading texts with a cartographer’s glasses, with an ecocritical lens on one side and a geocritical lens on the other. Neither lens, on its own, offers an adequate account of what place is doing in the text. Paddle-to-the-Sea, for example, is registering place in a way that goes beyond what we are accustomed to seeing. It is only when we utilize both these lenses at once that we achieve a truly ecospatial perspective.

**What Are We Reading?**

In this dissertation, I analyze U.S. literature of the twentieth century that is based on places in the real world, examining each text with respect to the history and geography it depicts and invokes. For readers of American literature, literary places like John Steinbeck’s Salinas Valley, Richard Wright’s South Side Chicago, and Leslie Marmon Silko’s New Mexico conjure images and memories of different literary landscapes and the events that happen there: Adam Trask staking out his homestead in *East of Eden*, Bigger Thomas being boxed in by police in
Native Son, Tayo hiding out in a uranium mine in Ceremony. What these scenes have in common is the authors’ commitment to placing their characters in fictional locales with strong real-world correlations, plotting their stories “on the map.” As a result, each character acts in relationship with a place that readers can identify and perhaps discover for themselves, whether by traveling or reading maps, guidebooks, history, or nature writing. Using ecocritical and geocritical methodologies, I call attention to the literary cartography of these prose narratives, the ways they register ecospatiality while invoking, and sometimes retelling, various aspects of the country’s environmental history. In addition, I suggest that ecocritical and geocritical approaches prove most effective in tandem, not in exclusivity; ecological issues buttress the spatial critique, and vice versa.

To begin, I explore the writing of contemporary nonfiction author William Least Heat-Moon, positioning him as a model theorist (and practitioner) of place. In Heat-Moon’s narratives of travel through various underprivileged places, Heat-Moon offers what I call (adapting Walter’s term) an ecospatial literary topistics, a blended representation of place as space, nature, and story. In Blue Highways (1983), Heat-Moon chronicles a driving trip he took around the back roads of America, mapping mostly rural spaces with a keen awareness geography, ecology, and history. By deliberate contrast, PrairieErth: (A Deep Map) (1991) is a study of a single county: Chase County, Kansas, in the heart of the Flint Hills bioregion. PrairieErth is staunchly multifocal, combining local knowledge with written knowledge, oral history with natural and cultural history, descriptive detail with philosophical reflection, and narrative text with attractive maps (drawn by the author). Heat-Moon’s “deep map” thus tests the possibility of conveying a comprehensive sense of place. Finally, in River-Horse (1999)—the account of Heat-Moon’s
transcontinental boat trip from the Atlantic Ocean, near New York Harbor, to the Pacific, at the mouth of the Columbia River—Heat-Moon again displays his ecospatial orientation, this time through his discussions of the highly managed nature of America’s waterways and the ongoing spatial development of its river towns. Taken together, these three books constitute prolonged interactions with the American map and with writing itself as a cartographic act, the deliberate textual production of place. In the process, they also engender alternative cartographies, encouraging readers to rethink their understandings of America as a place and, indeed, the meaning of place itself—from the local to the continental scale. Heat-Moon’s writing not only models ecospatial awareness, demonstrating the author’s own place-consciousness, but also effects, thereby, an ecospatial orientation in his readers, who are rarely allowed to forget the narratives’ emplacement within the larger environmental and historical contexts.

In subsequent chapters, I discuss American fiction of the twentieth century that lends itself particularly well to an ecospatial reading. Focusing primarily on texts that utilize real place names allows us to identify places in the text with places in the world, to see them on the map and connect to their cultural and environmental history. The fundamental questions are these: What does reading for place reveal about how these texts are operating, whether on an individual or collective basis? What can/does setting/environment teach us about theme and character? And how does knowing more about the novel’s environmental aspects and spatial relationships (i.e., its ecospatiality) further our understanding of the novel’s thematic contents and/or structural logic?

In Chapter Three, I discuss the work of John Steinbeck with respect to literary geography and bioregional thinking. As a starting point, I discuss the development of concept of “Steinbeck
Country” in California’s Salinas Valley and Monterey Bay region. What may be considered a
decritical response to Steinbeck’s fiction, with maps and travel guides tying the author’s
fictional settings to the local geography, is also a political and economic engine in the region.
Then, following the example of the scholars collected in The Bioregional Imagination, I go on to
discuss the Salinas Valley as a watershed and highlight moments in Steinbeck’s work that
demonstrate his understanding of ecospatiality and environmental history. While ecocritics have
discussed many aspects of Steinbeck’s environmental vision, they have so far overlooked the
spatial and bioregional aspects of his work. By highlighting Steinbeck’s portrayals of
environmental history, well drilling, and drought in East of Eden (1952) and To a God Unknown
(1933), I demonstrate the author’s view that in order for human settlement and agriculture to
persist in the Salinas Watershed, people must be prepared to deal with a precarious hydrological
situation and address the crucial problem of water access. In these novels, Steinbeck displays his
understanding of the region as a watershed, as a changing spatial and ecological system. This
conception is founded not only upon his well-documented ecological holism but also his
geographical and historical awareness—his ecospatial (and bioregional) vision.

If this study of Steinbeck leans slightly toward the ecological in its discussion of
watersheds and mostly rural spaces, my chapter on Richard Wright’s Native Son discusses a
more urban ecospatiality, focusing on the role of geographical reference and spatial imagery
within the larger cultural context of the novel. My dual premises are that Native Son presents
something about its setting—Chicago’s Depression-era “Black Belt”—that holds geographical
and historical (not to mention, literary) value, and, moreover, that research into the dynamics of
that historical environment lends additional resonance to the textual representation. Through the
first two of the novel’s three sections, Wright consistently uses detailed place markers (e.g., streets and intersections) and directions, placing his protagonist, Bigger Thomas, within a realistic cartographic and ecospatial framework—which is to say, putting him “on the map.” This technique culminates at the moment when Bigger consults maps of the Black Belt on the front pages of the newspaper as he is systematically boxed in by a police manhunt. Thus, the issue of Bigger’s mobility emerges as fundamental to the novel while the novel’s broader thematic concerns reveal a preoccupation with the spatial aspects of his experience of dwelling in and navigating around sites of racial segregation and enforcement, particularly in Chicago’s racist housing policies. I contend, therefore, that Wright’s choice of South Side Chicago as the novel’s setting deepens its sociopolitical critique, revealing its attention to housing segregation as an environmental justice issue. My analysis also underscores ecocriticism’s potential for reading urban literary landscapes, continuing along the theoretical trail blazed by ecocritics of the “second wave.”

I conclude with a chapter on the three well-known novels of Central New Mexico—Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977), and Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God* (1993). Following Westphal’s suggestion that the geocritical

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20 Lawrence Buell first introduced the “wave” terminology in *Future of Environmental Criticism*, and updated his chronological account of ecocriticism in a later article, “Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends.” To summarize, first-wave ecocriticism placed a strong emphasis on nonfiction nature writing, other ecocentric texts, and natural history. Second-wave ecocriticism expanded the field of view, emphasizing that “nature” should include built as well as “natural” environments, urban spaces as well as rural ones. In suggesting future directions for the field, Buell avoids articulating a third wave, but he acknowledges the more recent productive overlap of ecocriticism with postcolonial theory and social ecology: “The prioritization of issues of environmental justice—the maldistribution of environmental benefits and hazards between white and nonwhite, rich and poor—is second-wave ecocriticism’s most distinctive activist edge, just as preservationist ecocentrism was for the first wave” (“Ecocriticism” 96).
approach should involve multiple texts and authors, I consider these novels together as a means of interrogating their collective representation of Central New Mexico from an ecospatial and historical perspective. These texts, written by women of different ethnic backgrounds at various historical moments, map the physical and social geography of New Mexico in very different ways. Cather’s novel is invested in the issue of white settlement in the mid- to late-1800s era of early United States control, but it adopts an intimate approach to place, focusing on episodes in the life of a Catholic priest and his colleagues while hinting at the social and environmental costs of colonization in the region. Ceremony moves us to the mid-twentieth century, depicting a Native American man whose attempts to cope with personal trauma lead him deeper into the landscape and culture of his homeland of Laguna Pueblo, a place that is particularly affected by the environmental legacy of uranium mining. Lastly, in So Far from God, Ana Castillo grounds her story in the geography of New Mexico’s Rio Abajo region while highlighting environmental justice issues such as the human health impacts of a local chemical plant. Together, these texts portray Central New Mexico as a regional environment defined by its varied history of settlement and development, extraction and pollution, dwelling and resistance. It is a place rich with natural and cultural resources, a geographical and cultural crossroads whose identity becomes more apparent through the multifocal practice of ecospatial criticism.

I have selected these texts and authors primarily because of their theoretical promise for the literary approach I am describing in this dissertation. As a study of American places and literatures, this project does not presume to offer comprehensiveness, either in geographical, cultural, or historical terms. While Heat-Moon’s writing offers a sense of geographical coverage, and the subject of PrairyErth—Chase County, Kansas—is near the geodetic center of the
continental United States, the other nexuses of Salinas, Chicago, and New Mexico give the dissertation a somewhat southwesterly leaning. The highly storied regions of the American South and Northeast, for example, are notably absent. At the same time, I have attempted to include some racial, cultural, and gender diversity among the authors. I am devoted to the notion that American literature should reflect the diversity of America, that the canon of works we study should be an expansive one, including voices from all corners of our geography and society. Nor am I committed to the political borders by which we define our national literature; I am much more interested in the United States as a place than as a nation, and I prefer the hemispheric definition of “America.” My scholarship on literature and the environment proceeds from an understanding of place that begins and ends with gathering as many different perspectives as possible, a multifocal orientation that is reflected in the texts included here.

The formal structure of this dissertation was conceived in part, as a response to Bertrand Westphal’s notion of multifocalization, which he asserts as “the chief characteristic of geocriticism” (122). In Geocriticism, Westphal describes a place-centered critical practice that requires multiple texts and multiple authors. Westphal, who comes from a comparative literature background, is seemingly skeptical of single-author projects. Most unequivocally, he writes: “If confined to the study of a single text or a single author, geocriticism becomes lopsided. Outside of a network of perspective, we run the risk of generalization. But the goal is neither to present the psychology of a people nor to reinforce more or less tenacious stereotypes, but rather to banish them” (126). To Westphal’s way of thinking, a multifocal literary criticism helps the scholar avoid egocentric and stereotyped formulations of place. Because he is arguing for the primacy of place itself over that of a narrow, subjective perspective on it (e.g., a famous
author’s), his insistence upon multifocalization is valid. But his argument is also predicated upon the assumed availability of multiple textual perspectives on a given place. He writes that “the moment that the ‘writing’ of a place is circumscribed by a single author, we return to the egocentered form of imagological analysis. That the representation of a given realeme would be isolated, and thus not representative, is all the more likely because the vast majority of places on this planet have been transcribed into texts more than once” (117). For Westphal, in other words, geocritical practice must always be comparative; because place is multifocal, geocriticism should be, too.

The following chapters are intended to demonstrate the importance of multifocalization for understanding place in literature while expanding Westphal’s limited notion of what geocriticism can do. In my analysis of Heat-Moon’s nonfiction, I show how his work—particularly PrairyErth—actually embodies a multifocal perspective, presenting place as something constructed out of fragments from a literal and figurative archive. My chapter on Native Son is the least Westphalian in this regard, being based primarily on a single text and single author; yet my reading of the novel reveals an essentially geographical logic that demonstrates the ecospatiality of the text and its setting, showing how a single-text geocritical approach can operate. In my chapter on Steinbeck (single-author, multiple text), I examine the geography of Steinbeck Country, an ecospatial literary construct that spreads across nearly a

21 Here Westphal echoes Heat-Moon (e.g., Blue Highways [241], PrairyErth [269]), as well as Lawrence Buell and other ecocritics who have suggested that choosing ecocentrism over egocentrism is a central objective for place-based writing and criticism. Buell discusses ecocentrism extensively in The Environmental Imagination (1995), and Renee Bryzik builds on Buell’s ideas in her ecocritical analysis of Blue Highways (“Repaving America: Ecocentric Travel in William Least Heat-Moon’s Blue Highways).

22 Realeme is Westphal’s term for the object of representation, the space or place to which the text refers.
dozen book-length works of literature; with Steinbeck, we encounter not a single novel but many, an entire place-based oeuvre. Finally, my chapter on Cather, Silko, and Castillo’s New Mexico novels is perhaps the most Westphalian, showing how each author’s literary cartography overlaps with and adds to that of the other. Such a vision calls to mind Donna Mendelson’s image of “transparent overlay maps” in human geography and ecocriticism, where several understandings of place combine to form a single, multiperspectival one. By utilizing these different approaches with respect to Westphal, I seek to affirm the idea of multifocalization as an essential way of understanding place while expanding geocritical methodology beyond a strict comparativist model. While my approach is place-based, its objects are both the topographical and the textual; this reciprocity I hold as fundamental (as does Westphal). For this reason, I give literary texts and their geographical referents equal standing in my analysis, recognizing the extent to which text and place continually inform and reinforce one another. In an ecospatial literary criticism, in other words, place matters (both on its own terms and as an underappreciated aspect of literary interpretation), literature matters (particularly, in this context, as a site of ecospatial meaning), and the relationship between them (both the environmentality of the text and the textuality of the environment) matters most of all.

23 While Mendelson’s metaphor of plastic transparencies projected on a screen might seem outmoded, the image is still a powerful one: while place remains relatively constant, its literary representations converge and map themselves onto it and onto each other in a palimpsestic manner.

24 Westphal addresses this linkage in his final chapter, titled “Reading the Text, Reading Space, and the New Realism.” “The text,” he writes, “is in space, but space is also in the text. Interaction is the underlying principle” (164). He continues: “Space, grasped through the representation that texts sustain, can be ‘read’ like a text; the city, that paradigmatically human space, can be ‘read’ like a novel. One reads space; one traverses a text; one reads a text as one traverses space. In this expanded view of textuality, which encompasses equally bookish architecture and spatial architecture, textuality eventually escapes the closed logic that confines the text within a textual ‘system’ (another name, perhaps, for the ivory tower). The alter-junctions between the text and the space go beyond the radical otherness that separates the world and the library, reality and fiction, the referent and representation” (168).
CHAPTER TWO
THE PRODUCTION OF PLACE: WILLIAM LEAST HEAT-MOON’S
ECOSPATIAL LITERARY CARTOGRAPHY

One of the best-known literary interactions with the American continent is Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957). A novel in five parts, *On the Road* details the adventures of narrator Sal Paradise and his crowd of friends as they crisscross the nation at high speeds—whether by public bus, flatbed truck, or borrowed limousine. As the title suggests, the novel invests in travel for the sake of movement and experience, and the characters bounce from New York to Denver to San Francisco and back, according to their intervening whims and obligations. *On the Road* is powerful, typifying not only the Beat Generation it helped to define, but also the spirit of restlessness so often associated with much American history and travel literature. It is also highly geographical, indexing an impressive array of towns and cities across the continent, tying events to real locations in the world, sometimes down to street level.¹

But for all its exuberant reference to (and reverence toward) actual places in America, *On the Road* is not particularly referential of those places. With a few exceptions, Kerouac limits his

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¹ When Sal first arrives in San Francisco on the overnight bus, he struggles to get his bearings: “…I was rudely jolted in the bus station at Market and Fourth into the memory of the fact that I was three thousand two hundred miles from my aunt’s house in Paterson, New Jersey. I wandered out like a haggard ghost, and there she was, Frisco—long, bleak streets with trolley wires all shrouded in fog and whiteness. I stumbled around a few blocks. Weird bums (Mission and Third) asked me for dimes in the dawn” (60). Through this kind of geospecificity (mileage, street coordinates), Kerouac provides a kind of map of the action, effectively orienting the reader through his character’s attempts to orient himself—a kind of disorientation in service to literary orientation.
topistic descriptions to a few words, opting instead to let the toponyms speak for themselves.

In typical fashion, Sal describes the beginning of his third trip to Denver from New York thusly:

I took the Washington bus; wasted some time there wandering around; went out of my way to see the Blue Ridge, heard the bird of Shenandoah and visited Stonewall Jackson’s grave; at dusk stood expectorating in the Kanawha River and walked the hillbilly night of Charleston, West Virginia; at midnight Ashland, Kentucky, and a lonely girl under the marquee of a closed-up show. The dark and mysterious Ohio, and Cincinnati at dawn. Then Indiana fields again, and St. Louis as ever in its great valley clouds of afternoon. (255)

As Kerouac’s characters traverse the continent, the toponyms continue to accumulate, so that much of Kerouac’s strategy of topistic representation amounts to a kind of name-dropping, a mere mentioning of places rather than a description of them.

Indeed, from the standpoint of place, On the Road rings strangely hollow, offering scant sense of environments in spite of its basis in actual American geography. Even an especially evocative passage about the Mississippi River—“a washed clod in the rainy night, a soft plopping from drooping Missouri banks, a dissolving, a riding of the tide down the eternal waterbed, a contribution to brown foams, a voyaging past endless vales and trees and levees…”2—eventually devolves into a kind of index: “…down along, down along, by Memphis, Greenville, Eudora, Vicksburg, Natchez, Port Allen, and Port Orleans and Port of the Deltas, by Potash, Venice, and the Night’s Great Gulf, and out” (156). While toponyms have a certain evocative power (particularly for locals, travelers, and map-readers), the names themselves mean

2 Kerouac reserves his most ecospatial thinking for the Mississippi, conveying a strong sense of relationship between ecological and geographical elements. In another instance, he writes: “On the rails we leaned and looked at the great brown father of waters rolling down from mid-America like the torrent of broken souls—bearing Montana logs and Dakota muds and Iowa vales and things that had drowned in Three Forks, where the secret began in ice. Smoky New Orleans receded on one side; old, sleepy Algiers with its warped woodsides bumped us on the other” (141). Sal’s recognition that the river is derived from sites and elements upstream runs counter to his general disregard for the complexities of environment.
less without additional social or geographical context. Kerouac seems interested in geography but not invested in it, and the book is more about traversing America than about America itself. The country does possess a certain character and livelihood—only it passes by so quickly that this hardly registers; it is America behind a pane of automotive glass. This is not to take away from Kerouac’s literary achievement in *On the Road*, which deserves its status as a quintessential road book and great American novel. Rather, it serves here as a counterpoint to the work of a contemporary writer who does some greater justice to the kinds of places Kerouac goes zooming by.


Heat-Moon himself has discussed Kerouac’s novel as a contrast to his own work, if only to assail it in genre terms. In an interview with *Salon*, he stated, “I don’t think *On the Road* is travel writing, nor do I think *On the Road* is a travel book. It’s a novel that has travel in it, true, but so do a lot of other novels. *Robinson Crusoe* is not a travel book. Homer’s *Odyssey* is not a travel book. We could go right down the line. No, if we’re talking about travel writing, then we’re talking about truth and reporting” (Miles). Years later, Heat-Moon was invited to Lowell, Massachusetts, to speak at the unveiling of the legendary first draft of Kerouac’s novel, an experience he writes about in *Roads to Quoz*.

Heat-Moon rightly resists for himself and his writing the labels of “travel writer” and “travelogues.” A better categorization can be found at Powell’s City of Books in Portland, Oregon, “that Beulahland of bibliolatry” which Heat-Moon visits in *River-Horse* (489), where most of his work is now filed under the more capacious heading of “Americana.”
(1999), and Roads to Quoz: An American Mosey (2008)—all of which narrate some form of travel experience within the confines of the continental United States and convey a high degree of place awareness. A fifth book, Here, There, and Elsewhere: Stories from the Road (2013), compiles Heat-Moon’s shorter travel essays published in periodicals like The Atlantic Monthly and National Geographic over the three decades since the enormous success of Blue Highways established Heat-Moon’s career as a “scrib[e] of the road” (Quoz 219).

The first three of these works are the most cohesive and form what has been called Heat-Moon’s travel trilogy, each unified by distinct conceits of travel experience, literary structure, and mode of transit—driving, walking, and boating, respectively. Blue Highways, Heat-Moon’s first and best-known work, documents a trip the author took around the perimeter of the United States while avoiding major interstates and thoroughfares. This circumferential journey narrative encompasses its territory figuratively even as it represents it literally, rendering places along the way for readers who might never travel the same byways. PrairyErth, by contrast, is a study of a single U.S. county: Chase County, in the heart of the Kansas Flint Hills bioregion. Heat-Moon’s

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5 An English Ph.D. turned popular writer, Heat-Moon is also the author of Columbus in the Americas (2002), a historical examination of Christopher Columbus based on his expedition logbooks; Writing Blue Highways: The Story of How a Book Happened (2014); numerous introductions and contributions to books of American photography and travel; and a new novel, Celestial Mechanics: A Tale for a Mid-Winter Night (2017). He is also co-editor and co-translator (with James K. Wallace) of An Osage Journey to Europe, 1827–1830: Three French Accounts (2013). His dissertation for the University of Missouri was entitled “Classical Mythology in the Poetry of Robert Herrick” (Banga dissertation), and he asserts that he chose to write on Herrick “only because I could hold his entire corpus between thumb and forefinger” (qtd. in Chisholm 68–69).

6 I omit Roads to Quoz due to its more fragmentary nature. While most of the episodes are interesting and worthwhile evocations of place, the book itself is less focused and cohesive than the earlier trilogy, a fact seemingly acknowledged in its subtitle, “An American Mosey.” Here, There, and Elsewhere is unique among Heat-Moon’s writings in that it includes a number of essays on places overseas—including Italy, Scotland, and New Zealand—as well as several from his more familiar, domestic territory. Prior to the publication of Blue Highways and PrairyErth, excerpts from each appeared in The Atlantic.
second book is the product of intensive walking and surveying (over several years, the author covered nearly every square mile of the county on foot), extensive historical research (he spent countless hours in the county archives), and personal interview (he also spoke with scores of local residents). Formally, *PrairyErth* combines local knowledge with written knowledge, oral history with natural and cultural (notably, indigenous) history, descriptive detail with philosophical reflection, and narrative text with attractive maps (drawn by the author). Thus the book tests the possibility of conveying a comprehensive sense of place in writing. In *River-Horse*, Heat-Moon returns to breadth, narrating another long-distance journey across the United States, this one by water. In the account of his transcontinental boat trip from the Atlantic Ocean, near New York Harbor, to the Pacific, at the mouth of the Columbia River, Heat-Moon again displays his ecospatial orientation, furthering his literary attention to underprivileged places while pointing to the highly managed nature of America’s waterways. These three books, averaging over five hundred pages each, constitute prolonged interactions with the American map and with writing itself as a cartographic act, the deliberate textual production of place. In the process, all three books engender alternative cartographies, encouraging readers to rethink their understandings of America as a place and, indeed, the meaning of place itself.

Heat-Moon’s interest in travel is immediately evident from his writing; however, he has also gained recognition, particularly since the publication of *PrairyErth*, as an important American nature writer. Nor are his credentials as a cultural documentarian at all lacking; his books are full of memorable interactions with idiosyncratic characters, a cultural component that arguably lends his work its wide popular appeal. It makes sense, then, that Heat-Moon's works

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7 A short biography of Heat-Moon, by David Teague, appears in *American Nature Writers* (1996). The article includes synopses of *Blue Highways* and *PrairyErth* with emphasis on their environmental aspects.
have been put to use by scholars whose concerns (happen to?) reinforce preexisting generic classifications: the ecocritic emphasizes Heat-Moon's environmentalism (nature); the geocritic studies his mapping techniques (space); and more traditional literary critics discuss issues like authorial voice, textual form, and genre (story). All these approaches are effective enough on their own terms, for Heat-Moon's work accommodates them all.

Yet the most significant aspect of Heat-Moon’s work is the way he attends to each of these concerns simultaneously, effectively uniting geography, environmentalism, and discourse in an ecospatial literary topistics. In this chapter, I discuss Heat-Moon’s first three books with respect to space, nature, and story as the conceptual pillars not only of Heat-Moon’s work, but also of a more comprehensive theory of place. Heat-Moon’s writing not only performs ecospatial awareness, demonstrating his extensive topistic knowledge and research; it also effects, thereby, an ecospatial orientation in his readers, who are rarely allowed to forget the narratives’ emplacement within larger environmental and historical contexts. Place, these narratives demonstrate, is ecospatial: it is both natural and cultural, mapped and storied, ancient and alive.

**Blue Highways**

*Blue Highways* is the book upon which Heat-Moon’s popularity primarily rests. A *New York Times* bestseller, Heat-Moon’s first book has become, along with *On the Road* and John

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8 Here I am thinking of the following examples: Renée Bryzik’s article on Heat-Moon’s “ecocentric travel” was published in *ISLE*, the founding journal of ecocriticism; Christopher Gregory-Guider’s 2005 article on Heat-Moon’s “psychogeographic cartography” might qualify, retroactively, as geocriticism; meanwhile, Pamela Walker’s “The Necessity of Narrative...” is grounded in narratology. Meanwhile, in her dissertation at UC-Davis, Shellie Banga effectively demonstrates Heat-Moon’s versatility, situating his work within four different literary-historical contexts: Native American literature, American transcendentalism, contemporary travel writing, and bioregionalism.
Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*, one of the quintessential road books in American literature. Originally conceived as a photojournalism project in the manner of *National Geographic* (Afterword 418), *Blue Highways* derives from a single cartographic premise: to travel the continental United States along its less-traveled routes, the roads that, within the Rand McNally road atlases of the day, appeared in blue, in contrast with the interstates (still relatively young in the late 1970s), which were red. As he puts it in the book, “I was going to stay on the three million miles of bent and narrow rural American two-lane, the roads to Podunk and Toonerville. Into the sticks, the boondocks, the burgs, backwaters, jerkwaters, the wide-spots-in-the-road, the don’t-blink-or-you’ll-miss-it towns. Into those places where you say, ‘My god! What if you lived here!’ The Middle of Nowhere” (6). By seeking out and writing about such underappreciated places, as he does in so many of his travels, Heat-Moon upends dominant perceptual geographies, combining the curiosity of the traveler with the genuine interest of the documentarian in order to restore some cultural value to the kinds of places most Americans ignore.

9 Heat-Moon had not read *On the Road* prior to writing *Blue Highways*, but Steinbeck’s book was a direct influence and receives mention in the text (Heat-Moon, “Afterword”). For a discussion of *Blue Highways* with respect to *On the Road*, see Bryzik.

10 Heat-Moon finished a second Bachelor’s degree (postdoctorate) in photojournalism at Missouri in 1978 (*Contemporary Authors Online*). A number of the author’s photographic portraits do appear in the text alongside several key characters, but, due to cost concerns, Heat-Moon had to fight his publisher to keep them in. So crucial were the photos that he threatened to withdraw the manuscript if they were excised. He writes of the episode: “…I couldn’t see things as just a matter of money. The pictures of thirty-seven people, two cats, and one dog were integral and critical: A photograph can go where words cannot” (*Writing Blue Highways* 126). He continues: “The incentive for the journey began with an urge to make environmental portraits of authentic habitants of the American backcountry. … Origins, seeds, and impulses belonged to the work as much as did their results: *Blue Highways* began not with a typewriter but with a camera” (127).
A lifelong Missourian, William Trogdon grew up in Kansas City, where coast-to-coast federal highway 40 intersects crosswise with the longitudinal U.S. 71. This geographical quirk became a fundamental life principle for the boy who would one day reclaim his Boy Scout name of Least Heat Moon (his Scout-leader father, who was part Osage, was called Heat Moon, his elder brother, Little Heat Moon) and travel to every continental U.S. county and within twenty-five miles of every place between Canada and Mexico except Nevada’s remotest deserts. Heat-Moon’s boyhood years were formative, lending him the sense of national geography and identity that would become so crucial to his writing. In Roads to Quoz, he explains:

For six consecutive Augusts, starting near the center of America at Kansas City, Missouri, my father would pack up the family and strike a course along a cardinal direction down one of those routes we’d follow to its terminus. After a half-dozen summers, those three highways had taken me coast-to-coast twice and to Canada and the Gulf once. By the time I was twelve—all six birthdays of those years celebrated on the road—in my mind was a paved grid of latitudes and longitudes, a geometry useful in visualizing a continent. It was a way to see the face of America. (354)

The magic, for Heat-Moon, lay not only in the “geometry” of the grid, but also in the sense of connectedness it offered with far-off but related places, a network of topographies and ways of life unique to each region depicted in his atlas. In another version of this account, he writes:

I believed in this country far beyond the morning pledge of allegiance or even the propaganda movies of the war because I encountered the land itself and the faces and voices that went with it. Highways led to native accents, regional cookery, local hopes and notions and ancient bigotries, the scent of a farmer’s loam after rain, the smell of a Gulf shrimp boat. As different as the miles were, they still lay connected so that I could see the street in front of our house was a continuous strip reaching all of them. (Here 218–219, my emphasis)

Heat-Moon considered the 1950 road atlas a favorite book, “a kind of snapshot album or personal diary” (Here 219) through which he could engage in a form of imaginative travel to the places he had seen from the passenger’s seat of his father’s 1947 Pontiac Chieftain: “I could prop
up in bed on a winter night and take a journey through certain parts of the country and see again stretches of territory that highway numbers or town names elicited: Manti, Utah, with its old stone temple improbably big in such a small place; Frederick, Maryland, with Barbara Fritchie’s home; the buckwheat cakes in Plainfield, Indiana…” (Here 219). Heat-Moon returns to this story of childhood awakening frequently in his writings and interviews, with good reason: his career as an author depends—perhaps more than any other’s—upon the map and its insights, upon forging connections between places and people. The work he began as his father’s navigator is the work he has continued to this day, memorizing and documenting, through his travels, “the face of America” and showing, through his writing, that face—that map, those places—to his readers.

Space

*Blue Highways* details a travel experience equally steeped in cartographical awareness and (by some contrast) deliberate derivation from prescribed courses and well-traveled routes. Not only the roads traveled, but also the towns visited often derive their significance from the atlas. Heat-Moon writes: “I was heading toward those little towns that get on the map—if they get on at all—only because some cartographer has a blank space to fill: Remote, Oregon; Simplicity, Virginia; New Freedom, Pennsylvania; New Hope, Tennessee; Why, Arizona; Whynot, Mississippi. Igo, California (just down the road from Ono), here I come” (*Blue Highways* 4). Indeed, Heat-Moon’s interest in such provocative toponyms frequently dictates his routes throughout his three-month journey around the United States’ perimeter, as when he goes in search of a place called Nameless, Tennessee—“I was looking for an unnumbered road named after a nonexistent town that would take me to a place called Nameless that nobody was sure
existed” (28)—where he eventually meets the owners of an old-time general store in an encounter that makes him exclaim, “It is for this I have come” (33). Such explorations, spontaneous and otherwise, form the core of Heat-Moon’s mission in the book of visiting and documenting the places of backroads America, where he delights in his meaningful interactions with strangers and in his perpetual hunt for authentic and affordable local cuisine. All the while, the careful documentation of his route and descriptions of topography and ecology continually fix his narrative in place.

The continued value of Blue Highways—which has never been out of print since its initial publication in 1982—lies in its depiction of American culture in a particular time (the late 1970s), in its voyeuristic appeal to would-be travelers everywhere, and, most importantly for my purposes, in its literary cartography, a way of mapping the continental United States as a place and as a conglomeration of places. Heat-Moon’s route is clockwise and circular, starting from his home in Columbia, Missouri, near the center of the nation, and the book’s 413 pages are divided into ten sections in accordance with directions of travel—Eastward, East by Southeast, South by Southeast, and so on. Yet these delineations are surprisingly arbitrary, correlating neither with major directional changes nor narrative insights.

The narrative concludes with a map, a striking example of alternative cartography attributed to one G.W. Ward (and not Heat-Moon himself, who drew his own maps for PrairyErth). Labeled simply “THE ROUTE,” its basis is the political map of the U.S., with its recognizable shape of coastlines and international borders. Yet it is devoid of state borderlines and traditional sites of political, economic, and demographic influence, like Washington, D.C., New York, and Los Angeles. Such places have been scrapped or ignored, replaced by the likes of
Dime Box, Texas, Ninety Six, South Carolina, and Hat Creek, California, places where, in Heat-Moon’s narrative, something happens, if only his passing through. The territory appears in a uniform gray, the route indicated by a thick black line almost approximating a smaller version of

THE ROUTE

Figure 4. *Blue Highways* Route Map

the country’s perimeter. This line is accompanied by eight directional arrows, some straight, some curved, reminiscent of wind indicators on a weather map; more artistic than explanatory, these arrows do not correspond to the directions indicated by the chapter headings. At the country’s center lies Columbia, Missouri (Heat-Moon’s home), indicated by a circled star, as the national capital might be on a traditional atlas. Other toponyms are indicated by smaller black stars, appearing like the traditional markings for state capitals and marking sixteen place names of varying size and narrative significance. The map is far from comprehensive—for a full
compendium of towns and cities visited or referenced in the text, look no further than the six-page atlas-like index in the back—but it is profound in its suggestiveness of an alternative national identity: America as defined by its backroads places. This view of America, so crucial to Heat-Moon’s traveling and narrative strategies, calls into question which places are most valued by cartographers and citizens alike. “City people don’t think anything important happens in a place like Dime Box,” Heat-Moon writes. “And usually it doesn’t,” he adds sarcastically, “unless you call conflict important. Or love or babies or dying” (136). In this way, Heat-Moon calls attention to the underprivileged status of these places, granting them significance in the framework of the place-based narrative.

Similarly, Blue Highways also raises questions about the meaning of topistic designations such as national and local. Indeed, in an important sense, Blue Highways and its radical route map represent the national as the local, toying with yet ultimately refusing the logic of microcosmic representation. For some of Heat-Moon’s readers, a place like Melvin Village, New Hampshire, may represent the “true” America, but such a view is predicated on a notion of national identity that actually over-privileges local culture. Blue Highways contains few statements of the national qua local variety, instead investing in the local on its own terms, for its own sake. If the narrative itself makes such a statement, then (as Heat-Moon’s route map seems to do), it does so in counterpoint to the myriad cultural representations of this country that overlook and undervalue all things rural and remote.

Heat-Moon writes in a documentary journalistic style, and his technique extends not only to representing experiences and dialogues accurately (including the use of nonstandard spellings to represent regional dialect) but also to the geographic precision with which he locates himself
and the events he records. He takes great pains to document his route in *Blue Highways*, thereby providing a literary map much more detailed than the visual route map with which the narrative concludes; in effect, such descriptions make his travels mappable, performing geographical orientation while also educating readers about how a given place appears. The following passage is typical:

> On Georgia 155, I crossed Troublesome Creek, then went through groves of pecan trees aligned one with the next like fenceposts. The pastures grew a green almost blue, and syrupy water the color of a dusty sunset filled the ponds. Around the farmhouses, from wires strung high above the ground, swayed gourds hollowed out for purple martins.

> The land rose again on the other side of the Chattahoochee River, and highway 34 went to the ridgetops where long views over the hills opened in all directions. Here was the tail of the Appalachian backbone, its gradual descent to the Gulf. (91)\(^{11}\)

This passage covers a lot of territory—not only from Troublesome Creek to the Chattahoochee, but also from the conceptual level of the creek to that of the Appalachian mountain range and the southeast United States, an imaginative zooming out (to apply a photographic metaphor that is now a crucial aspect of Internet mapping platforms).\(^{12}\) The specificity of road numbers and creek names points to specific places on the map while the cartographer’s perspective of “long views over the hills” produces the sense of regional orientation, at the base of the continent’s great

\(^{11}\) Here are two intersections: Georgia 155 at Troublesome Creek (near the town of Griffin); and Georgia 34 at the Chattahoochee (near Franklin). These two places are some sixty miles apart, and 155 and 34 do not intersect. So Heat-Moon does not document every single aspect of his route.

\(^{12}\) In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, Ursula Heise discusses the compatibility of the *Google Earth* platform with her theory of eco-cosmopolitanism, which involves comprehending the natural world as equally local and global. While Heat-Moon displays a pretty staunchly American (i.e., not transnational) orientation in his major works, his frequent perspectival shifts—these zoomings in and out—have much in common with Heise’s theory. This method, then, whereby nature connects with geography, world with map, is not only ecospatial but also eco-cosmopolitan, re-mapping place by toying with scale.
eastern mountain range. The passage exemplifies Heat-Moon’s narrative strategy throughout: delineating travel routes and depicting events within a host of geographical contexts, a textual union of world and atlas.

In a later passage, as Heat-Moon crosses what he perceives to be the border between the continent’s eastern and western portions, he discusses the significance of this boundary for American geographical and cultural (self-) perceptions. Simultaneously building upon and revising the mythological tradition of the American West, Heat-Moon posits that the critical difference, the characterizing factor between one side and the other is space itself:

The true West differs from the East in one great, pervasive, influential and awesome way: space. The vast openness changes the roads, towns, houses, farms, crops, machinery, politics, economics, and, naturally, ways of thinking. How could it do otherwise? Space west of the line is perceptible and often palpable, especially when it appears empty, and it’s that apparent emptiness which makes matter look alone, exiled, and unconnected. Those spaces diminish man and reduce his blindness to the immensity of the universe; they push him toward a greater reliance on himself, and, at the same time, to a greater awareness of others and what they do. But, as the space diminishes man and his constructions in a material fashion, it also—paradoxically—makes them more noticeable. Things show up out here. No one, not even the sojourner, escapes the expanses. (132)

Setting aside for the moment Heat-Moon’s personal attachment to this particular imagined boundary (his various accounts of where the West begins include his own boyhood backyard, on the Kansas-Missouri line),¹³ what stands out here is the author’s suggestion that space itself

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¹³ Heat-Moon prefaces his assertion about the East-West border by recognizing the national debate about where the West begins: “Texans say the Brazos River; in St. Louis it’s the Mississippi, and they built a very expensive “Gateway Arch” to prove it; Philadelphians say the Alleghenies; in Brooklyn it’s the Hudson; and on Beacon hill the backside of the Common. But, of course, the true West begins with the western state lines of Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota. It’s a line, as close to straight as you could hope to find, that runs from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada; fewer than a hundred miles from the geographical east-west division of the continental states, it lies close to the hundredth meridian, the twenty-inch rainfall line, and the two-thousand-foot contour line—all of which various geographers recognize as demarcations between East and West” (131). In one of my favorite lines, he then goes on to
might be the definitive element of a vast geographic region, determining everything from land use to cultural attitudes. Of course, the operative word in Heat-Moon’s depiction of the West is not *space*, but, more correctly, *openness*, a certain type of space—dictated by differences in landscape—that is “perceptible” and “palpable.” The distinction matters, for the lesson here is not that space influences culture in the West, but that it does so in all places—but perhaps nowhere more palpably and perceptibly than in the West.

Not only in his western travels, but all across the country, Heat-Moon demonstrates how space and culture produce one another. *Blue Highways* is a book about, among other things, how people’s lives are influenced by geography. It is also a book made possible by the topographical and sociopolitical changes brought on by the Eisenhower interstate system and the rapid advancement of suburbia, related phenomena of modernization in an increasingly automotive culture (in which Heat-Moon paradoxically yet knowingly participates). Privileging things like speed and periphery, interstates and suburbs produce a certain kind of space: they flatten and regularize landscape, certainly, but they have the additional effect of hiding or erasing altogether local history and culture. Designed as thruways, interstates sever travelers’ connections with the places they traverse. As Heat-Moon puts it in *Blue Highways*, “Life doesn’t happen along interstates. It’s against the law” (9).

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claim, “I’m an authority because my family lives two hundred feet from where this line passes through Kansas City. I’ve hit numerous backyard homeruns from the East into the West” (131). In *PrairyErth*, however, Chase County marks the boundary: “The traditional hundredth meridian be damned; at this latitude the West starts here, obviously, definitively. What’s more, Chase County, Kansas, is the most easterly piece of the American Far West” (12).
In this sense, Heat-Moon’s project is a deeply nostalgic one. In a time of personal crisis (following the simultaneous loss of his college teaching job and separation from his wife), recognizing that his country is changing before his eyes, the narrator of *Blue Highways* goes out not to explore the new but to get in touch with the old. As he puts it, “With a nearly desperate sense of isolation and a growing suspicion that I lived in an alien land, I took to the open road in search of places where change did not mean ruin and where time and men and deeds connected” (5). Accordingly, *Blue Highways* occasionally reads like elegy, and three decades on, it remains relevant for precisely that reason: it demonstrates that places change over time, frequently in ways detrimental to culture and nature alike. As a document of such transitions, the book contains a strong argument for preservation, both cultural and ecological. It requires that readers consider the relationship among landscape, history, and culture, a negotiation we must recognize as ongoing, perpetual: ecospatiality as historical process.

Heat-Moon highlights this negotiation especially well in one complex passage, in which he posits the construction of the highway as a metaphor for the homogenization of culture that so often accompanies it: “Highway as analog: social engineers draw blueprints to straighten treacherous and inefficient switchbacks of men with old, curvy notions; taboo engineers lay out federally approved culverts to drain the overflow of passions; mind engineers bulldoze ups and

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14 In a 1991 interview, Heat-Moon remarked that he disliked the nostalgic aspect of *Blue Highways* that helped it become popular and aligned it, to some extent, with a conservative wave of nostalgia at the time. “Were I to write it again,” he said, “I would make sure that the seeds of nostalgia in there were more stringently controlled…. If *Blue Highways* in any way contributed to Reaganizing the 1980s, then I apologize for it. But I do think the book helped to make Americans think differently about who we are” (Bourne 105).

15 The narrative includes, for example, his encounter with men restoring an old barn in Kentucky, and another man on the East coast attempting to preserve an entire town’s historical integrity.
downs to make men level-headed. Whitman: ‘O public road, you express me better than I can express myself’” (38). This observation transpires east of Bulls Gap, Tennessee, where Heat-Moon notices “surveyors’ pennants snapp[ing] in the wind” and laments “[a]nother blue road about to join the times” (38). Anticipating the leveling of land and erasure of history concomitant to modern highway construction,\(^{16}\) he indicates the ways in which the country’s spatial and environmental politics compare to a more insidious processes of cultural leveling,\(^{17}\) whereby landscapes as well as ideas are straightened and homogenized. In this context, Heat-Moon’s quest in *Blue Highways* for the unusual and remarkable reads as an act of resistance against the twin forms of cultural and spatial homogenization that he regards as threats to backroads America.

Nature

While *Blue Highways* proceeds from and maintains a geographical premise, its ecological orientation is equally potent. In its avoidance, whenever possible, of major urban centers, Heat-Moon’s journey favors places rural and wild. Heat-Moon seeks out seemingly empty spaces and the people who occupy them, and he fills the narrative with descriptions of the natural world. Not only does he drive his Ford Econoline van, Ghost Dancing, through some of North America’s

\(^{16}\) In a later passage, while driving on the newly restored Natchez Trace Parkway in Mississippi, Heat-Moon praises its construction, which contrasts with that of most American highways: “The new Trace, like a river, followed natural contours and gave focus to the land; it so brought out the beauty that every road commissioner in the nation should drive the Trace to see that highway does not have to outrage landscape” (104).

\(^{17}\) To the extent that *Blue Highways* presents places and histories as under threat, most of them are the small towns and roadsides associated with mid-twentieth century highway culture. But the broader context of his work suggests that my term, “cultural leveling,” would also apply to more urban and more rural spaces, as well as deeper histories we often fail to acknowledge, especially the stories of Native Americans.
remotest spaces; he also stops listen to birdsong, to hunt for headwaters (Mississippi, Hudson), and to walk in woods and estuaries. His route and timing allow him both to escape winter and to delay summer, following a “perpetual spring” around the country (319). In the process, he conveys a strong sense of participation in environmental history, establishing it as a fundamental component of place knowledge. Ultimately, as Renée Bryzik argues, his form of travel is “ecocentric,” and Blue Highways offers a portrait of a nation grounded firmly in—and indeed inseparable from—its natural spaces.

On the subject of nature and Blue Highways, Bryzik’s article contains a number of insights worth reiterating here. She builds on David Teague’s comment that, in its interactions with people and resources across multiple regions, Blue Highways constitutes a “multiperspectival non-linear approach to landscape” (qtd. in Bryzik 669). She emphasizes Heat-Moon’s “ecocritical tools,” including his mode of travel and “his critical awareness of language and land” (679), which allow him to transcend the egocentric tradition of American road narratives like Kerouac’s On the Road. In his travels, Heat-Moon’s accesses not only unique bioregions but also “local environmental imaginations through stories of how people adapt to the topography, animals, water, and other environmental features of their region” (673). In addition, Bryzik points out that his ecocritical sensibility extends to the syntactic level, pointing out several aspects of what she deems an “ecosensitive writing style” (670): “In order to represent both human and landscape as equal, unprivileged entities with interconnecting characteristics, [Heat-Moon] does not use simple anthropocentric similes or metaphors” (671), choosing instead figurative comparisons in which plants and animals retain their individuality.
Building on Bryzik’s insights, I wish to contextualize Heat-Moon’s environmental imagination, to borrow Lawrence Buell’s terminology, as particularly *ecospatial*, relying equally upon geography and ecology, as well as history. Heat-Moon’s observations of the natural world are frequently enhanced by his cartographical awareness, and vice versa. When driving into Nevada from Utah, for example, he remarks: “Within a mile of the Nevada stateline, the rabbit brush and sage stopped and a juniper forest began as the road ascended into cooler air. I was struck, as I had been many times, by the way land changes its character within a mile or two of a stateline” (188). Heat-Moon’s crossing of an arbitrary, invisible line—here an arrow-straight border approximating the one hundred fourteenth meridian—alerts him to changes in the landscape. As Bryzik argues, “This alliance between human concept [i.e., border, longitude] and the physical world shows how ‘mapped reality’ can inform and inspire narrative maps” (670), and Heat-Moon’s awareness of geographical markers often contributes to his environmental insights.

As in the above description of the “Appalachian backbone,” many of Heat-Moon’s observations of nature occur in passages narrating his travel. Thus they mingle (ecospatially) with the ongoing account of his route, reminding readers that he traverses not only highways and villages but also unique bioregions. While this fact is often implicit in his descriptions of the changing topography, one passage conveys his brand of bioregional awareness especially well. Of western Texas, somewhere west of Devil Ridge, he writes: “Bugs popping the windshield left only clear fluid instead of a yellow and green pollen-laden goo of woodland insects; it was as if they extracted their colorless essence from the desert wind itself” (152). Whereas, for most travelers, bugs on the windshield generate inconvenience or disgust, for Heat-Moon they are a
sign of changes in the natural world outside his windshield and, indeed, a key ecological component of that world. He considers not only these insects, but also their diets, as well as the diets of previous insects on his journey. *Blue Highways* is full of details such as these, reminders that Heat-Moon is interacting with a living and impassive world, even when traveling at (relatively) high speeds.

Throughout *Blue Highways*, Heat-Moon confronts preconceptions about nature and humanity, occasionally focusing fully on the ecology of place. Upon his entry to the high desert of Texas, for example, he remarks upon the tendency people have of considering open, arid expanses as mere absence: “It was the Texas some people see as barren waste when they cross it, the part they later describe at the motel bar as ‘nothing.’ They say, ‘There’s nothing out there’” (149). In order “to test the hypothesis,” the narrator pulls to a stop atop a mesa and begins to take account of his surroundings (149). The resulting observation is worth quoting at length:

No plant grew higher than my head. For a while, I heard only miles of wind against the Ghost [his van]; but after the ringing in my ears stopped, I heard myself breathing, then a bird note, an answering call, another kind of birdsong, and another: mockingbird, mourning dove, an enigma. I heard the high *zizz* of flies the color of gray flannel and the deep buzz of a blue bumblebee. I made a list of nothing in particular:

1. mockingbird
2. mourning dove
3. enigma bird (heard not saw)
4. gray flies
5. blue bumblebee
6. two circling buzzards (not yet, boys)
7. orange ants
8. black ants
9. orange-black ants (what’s been going on?)
10. three species of spiders
11. opossum skull
12. jackrabbit (chewed on cactus)
13. deer (left scat)
14. coyote (left tracks)
15. small rodent (den full of seed hulls under rock)
16. snake (skin hooked on cactus spine)
17. prickly pear cactus (yellow blossoms)
18. hedgehog cactus (orange blossoms)
19. barrel cactus (red blossoms)
20. devil’s pincushion (no blossoms)
21. catclaw (no better name)
22. two species of grass (neither green, both alive)
23. yellow flowers (blossoms smaller than peppercorns)
24. sage (indicates alkali-free soil)
25. mesquite (three-foot plants with eighty-foot roots to reach water that fell as rain two thousand years ago)
26. greasewood (oh, yes)
27. joint fir (steeped stems make Brigham Young tea)
28. earth
29. sky
30. wind (always) (149–150)

With this catalogue of his environs, Heat-Moon not only demonstrates his keen observational skills and scientific knowledge, his bioregional awareness; but he also demolishes the hypothesis he set out, ostensibly, to test. His intentionally ironic “list of nothing” stands as categorical evidence against the popular claim of the desert’s emptiness. Such a landscape, when filled with so much proof of life, cannot be so easily dismissed. Furthermore, he acknowledges that his fairly lengthy list is really incomplete: “That was all the nothing I could identify then, but had I waited until dark when the desert really comes to life, I could have done better” (150). He concludes by stating definitively the results of his experiment, which has confirmed, no doubt, his own hypothesis: “To say nothing is out here is incorrect; to say the desert is stingy with

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18 The catalogue or list is one of Heat-Moon’s favorite representational strategies (on which, more below). When it comes to accurately telling the story of place, no list could ever be complete. But in its appearance of completion, a list becomes a quite potent emblem of incompleteness. Its logic might be inclusion, but it also implies what it leaves out. As a seemingly exhaustive account of Chase County, *PrairyErth* wrestles with these issues to a much greater extent, leading Heat-Moon to conclude his “deep map” with a “Black Hole” chapter, an admission of all that has been left out. The chapter culminates with a symbol of incompleteness, a Tristamian black page that theoretically contains everything and allows readers to excavate the narrative’s ultimate meaning (597–600).
everything except space and light, stone and earth is closer to the truth” (150). What most perceive as empty space, in other words, Heat-Moon correctly identifies as living nature; to itemize “nothingness” is really to recognize biodiversity.

From the perspective of literary cartography, Heat-Moon’s “list of nothing” does a great deal of representational work. It becomes the story (in the absence of other, collectible stories) of that particular mesa, of western Texas, of much of the Southwest, and, one might argue, of nature itself. The experiment models bioregional awareness, suggesting that if one seemingly vacant spot along this 13,000-mile route contains so much, then other places along the way must be equally rich and interesting, even when he doesn’t speak of them. By filling out a description of a single place, demonstrating how to see it, Heat-Moon opens up all places to a similar radical re-visioning. Just as, by gathering stories from people, he makes small-town America available to readers, he also creates bioregional awareness by highlighting the ecological details that so many of us are prone to ignore. Once we recognize (following Heat-Moon’s implication here) that nature is everywhere and everything, every point along the road becomes a point of interest.

Indeed, the development of an alternative vision seems crucial to Heat-Moon’s strategies as a traveler and writer. Toward the beginning of Blue Highways, he opines about the potentially palliative effects of driving and observing:

Maybe the road could provide a therapy through observation of the ordinary and obvious, a means whereby the outer eye opens an inner one. STOP, LOOK, LISTEN, the old railroad crossing signs warned. Whitman calls it “the profound lesson of reception.”

New ways of seeing can disclose new things: the radio telescope revealed quasars and pulsars, and the scanning electron microscope showed the whiskers of the dust mite. But turn the question around: Do new things make for new ways of seeing? (17)
With this hypothetical question Heat-Moon summarizes, at an early point in his career, what could be called his *modus operandi* as a writer of place: transforming *things* encountered in the world into a *way of seeing* through practices of presence, attentiveness, and literary craft. For the place writer, new things *do* make for new ways of seeing. They must do so in order truly to capture the interest of an audience; otherwise, they are just things. For Heat-Moon, that way of seeing is, in large part, an ecospatial mode, in which nature, space, and story are inextricable. Writing in that mode gives his works a pedagogical bent, urging readers to reexamine their own relationships with the places they presume to know.

Heat-Moon’s representation of environments includes recognition of the imbrication of space and time, a historicization of place. As he guides readers through landscapes, he blends insights from geography with those of ecology, geology, and environmental history, generating brief yet evocative portraits of individual places. When passing through the cotton fields of western Mississippi, “where humid heat waves boiled up, turning dusty tractors into shimmering distortions,” Heat-Moon keenly observes what is no longer there: “Once, a big oak or gum grew in the middle of each of these fields, and under them, the farmer ate dinner, cooled the team, took an afternoon nap. Now, because they interfere with air-conditioned powerhouse tractors plowing the acres, few of the tall trees remained” (107). By calling attention to those large trees now missing from the fields, Heat-Moon writes a brief environmental history, pointing out a former cultural benefit (shade) of a natural entity (trees), both of which have now been sacrificed to industrial agriculture. In a later passage, when crossing another state line, this time in northern Arizona, he writes:

I went up an enormous geologic upheaval called the Kaibab Plateau; with startling swiftness, the small desert bushes changed to immense conifers as the Kaibab
forest deepened: ponderosa, fir, spruce…. On the north edge of the forest, the highway made a long gliding descent off the plateau into Utah. Here lay Kane and Garfield counties, a place of multicolored rock and baroque stone columns and, under it all, the largest unexploited coalfield in the country. A land certain one day to be fought over. (178)

Here Heat-Moon defines the region in several ways: by its vegetation, its political boundaries (state and county), its rock formations (visible and invisible), and its potential use (for fossil fuel extraction). Moreover, the account of travel in the present is informed by a sense of past and future. If the prophecy about the region’s future is dire, it still seems grounded in an understanding of cultural and environmental history, of how natural resources have been used in the past and will likely be used in the future. Together, all these details create a compelling snapshot of the place, the fleeting present blending with geologic time. Such insights recur throughout Blue Highways, providing a sense of place informed by keen observation coupled with painstaking research.

Moreover, Heat-Moon understands the very highways upon which he travels to be a part of American environmental history. He is attentive to the ways in which seemingly modern routes of travel and commerce tend to grow in the tracks of our predecessors, following natural watercourses, mountain passes, and ancient trade routes. Texas highway 21, for instance, began as a buffalo migratory trail, became (logically) a Native American hunting route, and then was

\[\text{Curiously, Heat-Moon neglects to mention this region’s robust (if complicated) history of environmental preservation and recreational use. Kane and Garfield counties contain portions of Zion National Park (established 1919), Bryce Canyon National Park (1928), Canyonlands National Park (1964), Capitol Reef National Park (1971), Glen Canyon National Recreation Area (1972), and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (1996).}\]

\[\text{In a 1991 interview, Heat-Moon points out that, with regard to Blue Highways, “there really were two journeys, the one in the van and the other one in the library after I got home. The van journey took three months, the one afterwards took four years…. One would not be the same without the other” (Bourne 96).}\]
incorporated into the Spaniards’ *camino real* system before assuming its present form (132–133). This sense of natural and cultural history continually informs his travels and his descriptions of the sites he visits. At a key moment in the narrative, Heat-Moon describes standing at sundown on an overlook on the Columbia River’s north bank, just upstream from one of the river’s many dams. The site—actually a cement replica of Stonehenge (“a ferro-concrehenge” [239]) erected in the 1920s to commemorate the Americans killed during World War I, now covered with graffiti—and its surroundings instill in him a feeling of “the curious fusion of time” (139), and the gradual emergence of starlight enhances the effect. Endeavoring to understand the complexities of place and time, of natural and cultural processes, he writes:

What was this piece of ground I stood on? Fifty miles away rose the ancient volcano [Mt. Hood] like those that puffed out the first atmosphere, and under me lay the volcanic basalt ridge the old river had cut through. For thousands of years, Chinook and chum and bluebacks swam upriver to regenerate, and Indians followed after the salmon; and then new people came down the river after everything. South lay the Oregon Trail under four lanes of concrete marked off by the yellow running lights of the transports; south, too, were glinting rails of the Union Pacific. North a ghost town crumbling, and around me a circle of stones for the dead of the first war called a “world war.” (240–241)

The answer Heat-Moon provides to his own ontological query—“What was this ground on which I stood?”—involves many things, among them rocks and air, water and wildlife, technology and war. It is, in other words, simply a *place*, and he stands at the intersection of trajectories, of processes both natural and discursive.

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21 “By looking into the darkness,” he writes, “I was looking into time. The old light from Betelgeuse, five hundred twenty light-years away, showed the star that existed when Christopher Columbus was a boy, and the Betelgeuse he saw was the one that burned when Northmen were crossing the Atlantic. For the Betelgeuse of this time, someone else will have to do the looking. The past is for the present, the present for the future” (240).
The thinking here is ecospatial and transhistorical, incorporating all elements of place, including stories known and unknown. Although this moment—at the midpoint of the book and the trip—suggests a great deal of introspection, the conclusion, significantly, is one of outwardness. Heat-Moon writes here of overcoming egocentrism—“that illusion of what man is”—and embracing self—“that multiple yet whole part which he has been, will be, is”: “Ego, craving distinction, belongs to the narrowness of now; but self, looking for union, belongs to the past and future, to the continuum, to the outside. Of all the visions of the Grandfathers the greatest is this: To seek the high concord, a man looks not deeper within—he reaches farther out” (241). With this quote, the chapter concludes. Although the extent to which Heat-Moon succeeds in transcending ego in Blue Highways is debatable (the author himself didn’t think he had achieved it and sought an even less self-centered approach in PrairyErth), the book does convey a strong sense of “reach[ing] farther out,” of finding meaning in one’s environment and the history that informs it.

Story

In his new memoir, Writing Blue Highways, Heat-Moon relates an anecdote of his early writing process. “You do your best,” his personal friend and editor, Jack LaZebnik, told him, “in

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22 It also echoes, to my mind, the voice of Henry Thoreau on Mount Katahdin, whose reflection is more corporeal but no less inflected by the ground on which he stands: “Talk of mysteries!—Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we? (Maine Woods 150). Following Christopher Hitt’s suggestion that this famous passage from Thoreau exemplifies an “ecological sublime,” I assert that Heat-Moon (himself perhaps a modern transcendentalist) gestures here toward an ecospatial sublime, a radical reconsideration of place and the individual’s role within it.
writing about nature.” Heat-Moon replied, “But the book is about people!” (76). For all the focus I have placed on topographical description and ecospatial awareness in *Blue Highways*, what arguably makes the book indelible is its collage of stories from people living in the places Heat-Moon visits. Along with space and nature, story is the important third pillar of place. In terms of ecospatial literary criticism, the notion of story also extends to the formal aspects of *Blue Highways* itself. Some of these, such as Heat-Moon’s descriptive style, are discussed above. But the role of oral history in *Blue Highways* warrants some additional comment.

In all of his works, Heat-Moon’s authorial strategy depends heavily upon his collecting stories as he travels. In its reliance on local color and authentic dialect, *Blue Highways* tracks in what Kent Ryden refers to as the “folkloric sense of place,” whose elements he identifies as “location, history, identity, and emotion” (88–89). Much of the narrative—perhaps the bulk of it—consists of Heat-Moon’s conversations with those who reside in the out-of-the-way places he visits. These interactions give shape and meaning to the travel and the narrative, and Heat-Moon often gives these characters the last word on their locales. He relies on them as experts, and their personal narratives—along with his descriptions of places, routes, and histories—come to constitute the places in which they live and through which Heat-Moon travels. In many

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23 Steinbeck made this same type of remark about *East of Eden*, which he insisted was “not about geography but about people” (*Journal of a Novel* 15, emphasis in original).

24 While Ryden’s notion of folkloric place-sense is generally sound, I find his metaphor of “mapping the invisible landscape” rather strained. In his formulation, upon the actual topography of a place lies an “invisible landscape” of stories, which the work of oral historians accesses and exposes. Ryden’s metaphor—though well intended and environmentally informed—is not only predicated upon a horizontal view of space but also belies the material, lived-in reality of place, subjugating the actual landscape in favor of an unnecessary abstraction. (I much prefer Massey’s metaphor of trajectories, by which stories seem to maintain their situatedness, and space its three- [or, rather, four-] dimensionality.) Compared to Heat-Moon’s writing, too, Ryden’s own oral history of Idaho’s Coeur d’Alene mining region appears woefully inadequate, in part because he proves far less capable than Heat-Moon of shaping the individual stories into a meaningful narrative form.
instances, the primacy of these personal narratives gives them a synecdochic function in *Blue Highways*, whereby the single story Heat-Moon learns about a place—along with the author’s ecospatial description—is made to represent the place itself.

Thus the account of a place like Bald Peak, in New Hampshire’s Ossipee Mountains, is the story of Tom Hunter’s historic family farm and maple syrup business. Hunter speaks of his decades there and the changes he has seen, including clearing some fields for farming while allowing some others to revert to forest. He also tells of when he learned, a year prior, that Bald Mountain—his family’s regular picnicking and blueberrying spot—is actually a volcanic formation, for him a stunning realization. As with many chapters in *Blue Highways*, this one is primarily comprised of Heat-Moon’s conversation with one person, and it concludes with Hunter’s own words:

> When I’m up on the peak lookin’ down, sometimes I try to imagine the orchards and pastures a generation from now. Or in five generations. I imagine different ways it’ll turn out, but the thing I always end up with is those fields I raked hay on when I was a boy. We’re takin’ timber off them now. People—outlanders—get upset because we cut trees. They don’t see that those trees are growin’ in an old field. I know this, what you think comes down to your point of view. Don’t know where theirs is, but mine’s from up on that old volcano. (340)

Hunter’s story is typical of the ones that made it into *Blue Highways*, an account of how folks live in a particular place on the map, and its tone of cautious environmental optimism seems to align with Heat-Moon’s own views. But beyond that, Hunter’s historical and bioregional awareness and, especially, his cartographical point of view (looking down from above) make his tale particularly fitting. Without such personal, human stories, the understanding of place in the narrative would remain incomplete, no matter the degree of scientific knowledge it contains.
That a large number of the conversations in Heat-Moon’s first book present such environmental lessons makes the case for understanding *Blue Highways* in terms of ecospatiality all the more compelling. The stories from local residents present, in effect, case studies of bioregional dwelling. In Manteo, North Carolina, a town commissioner describes the give-and-take of living on the nearby Outer Banks, where engineers and preservationists stubbornly contend with the natural process of large-scale erosion. In Frenchman, Nevada (population, four), a town Heat-Moon describes as “huddled on an expanse of dry lakebed mudflats cracked into a crazed jigsaw puzzle of alkali hardpan,” the owners of a roadside café tell of life on the edge of a U.S. Navy bombing range (198). In the vineyard country near Cheshire, New York, an aging Italian-American family speaks of battling poverty while raising foster children and living off the land—producing chickens, then cows, then blackberries, then grapes, according to changing market forces. And off the coast of Cape Porpoise, Maine, the skipper of a fishing boat offers a lesson in how “a flounder gets from twenty leagues down to the A and P” (346). Such vignettes form the backbone of *Blue Highways*, providing additional ecospatial context for their speakers’ (and Heat-Moon’s) observations of cultural issues like race, class, gender, and identity.

Providing a fitting climax to these stories is that of octogenarian Alice Venable Middleton of Smith Island, Maryland, in the middle of Chesapeake Bay. In finding Miz Alice (as she prefers to be called), a local historian and former elementary teacher with a love of her home island and the whole natural world, Heat-Moon hit the place writer’s jackpot, and her story provides a culmination to the book’s oral history that is decidedly environmental.25 Over the

25 David Teague goes so far as to assert that Heat-Moon’s time with Middleton on Smith Island “is the culmination of his experience on the blue highways. … Hers is perhaps the only voice in the book that he accords more authority than his own” (518).
years, Middleton instructed her pupils in “what they call ‘ecology’ now. I taught children first
the system of things. Later we went to grammar and sums” (389). She goes on to detail how her
fellow islanders, many of whom catch crustaceans for a living, nevertheless refuse stubbornly to
recognize the environmental consequences of their overfishing. “Now,” she says, “we’ve caught
the bottom and haven’t bothered much to put it back. Fished out the babies for years. But, as I
hope to fly, a man’s deeds count. Everything counts. We live in dependence, not independently.
But don’t tell an islander that or he’ll knock your talk into a cocked hat” (390).

In keeping with one of Heat-Moon’s themes, Middleton also preaches observation and
awareness. “Once your own eyeballs start working,” she tells him, “then you can see what’s
around, you can see history isn’t a thing of the past” (390). Middleton has seen whole islands
disappear in the Bay, junk pile up by the roadsides, and the first gasoline-powered boats
effectively end the island’s isolation from the mainland. Of the latter, she says, “There aren’t
many places in the country that can point to one thing and say, “Right there, that’s the thing
which changed us. That’s what made us the way we are now” (397). With a strong sense of
history and ecospatiality, Middleton serves as Heat-Moon’s final and finest example of a
dweller-in-place, and one of her stories provides one of the most powerful environmental
statements in Blue Highways. Speaking of the island’s namesake, John Smith (of Pocahontas
fame), she says: “He thought heaven and earth had never agreed better in framing a place for
man. He said it best in four words, ‘The land is kind.’ Somewhere in America they should cast
those words in bronze. Cast them big. THE LAND, MY FRIENDS, IS KIND” (389). Indeed,
this statement could be similarly cast as the main theme of Heat-Moon’s oeuvre. In spite of Heat-
Moon’s early insistence that this book “is about people,” it is better characterized as a book
about place—and the human stories that help define it. With Miz Alice’s narrative as its apex, *Blue Highways* is a testament to the interconnectedness of nature, geography, and human history.\(^{26}\)

**PrairyErth**

Two years after the publication of *Blue Highways*, Heat-Moon took the first of many trips to a small county in east-central Kansas, “where the thirty-eighth parallel crosses the ninety-sixth meridian,” at the heart of the tallgrass prairie bioregion known as the Flint Hills (*PrairyErth* 158). Similar to his *Blue Highways* journey, this trip came about because of a blank spot on the map and a few provocative toponyms. In a 1991 interview, Heat-Moon describes his attraction to the place: “…it had to do with my love of names and with looking at a road atlas and seeing a blank spot in eastern Kansas. The names were these: Flint Hills, Cottonwood Falls, Kansas. Those names evoked an image in my mind. I thought they had a certain power…” (Bourne 103). Coupled with the allure of names was his desire for a change in scope—from the expansiveness of his blue highways travel to the much smaller territory of a single county, one with plenty of space to explore on foot. “Early,” he explains, “I aimed to write about a most spare landscape, seemingly poor for a reporter to poke into, one appearing thin and minimal in history and texture,

\(^{26}\) The Miz Alice episode also precedes (and perhaps inspires) the narrative climax of the book, Heat-Moon’s final rejection of ego in favor of broader truth, a new way of seeing that goes far beyond the self: “A human being is not a waxen rubbing, a lifeless imprint taken from some great stony face. Rather he is a Minuteman or a dog soldier at liberty to use inclinations of the past as he sees fit. He is free to perceive the matrix, and, within his limits, change from it. By seeing both the futility in trying to relive the old life and the danger in trying to obliterate it, man can gain the capacity to make anew. His very form depends not on repetition but upon variation from old patterns in response to stress, biological survival requires genetic change; it necessitates a turning away from doomed replication and what of history? Was it different? Etymology: *educate*, from the Latin *educare*, “lead out” (399-400).
a stark region recent American life had mostly gone past, a still point, a fastness an ascetic seeking a penitential corner might discover. Chase County fit” (*PrairyErth* 15).

*PrairyErth: (A Deep Map)*, is a record of Chase County and the author’s “searches and researches” there over a seven-year period in the mid- to late-1980s (*PrairyErth* 14). Compared to *Blue Highways*, *PrairyErth* is a text of a different scope, a greater length, and a more profound artistic achievement, an exhaustive work of literary cartography destined to eclipse *Blue Highways* as the author’s masterpiece. As Scott Chisholm asserts, it is “light years beyond *Blue Highways*,” “a heartland core sample drilled from earth’s mantle” (64). For critic Cinzia Schiavini, *PrairyErth* is the definitive work of a genre of “the literature of place, or ‘deep travel,’” which she distinguishes from classic travel literature: “[F]ocussing on one specific territory, these narratives take into account all strata that become constitutive elements of place: not only the self and nature, but also society, history, sometimes even geology, ecology, politics, economy” (94). Moreover, as Alan Weltzien points out, “Essays of place usually play variations upon the immersion story, wherein the writer achieves, however fitfully, a state of oneness with the chosen landscape” (109). In *PrairyErth*, Heat-Moon adopts this convention and activates it, populating his narrative with stories from diverse voices—both historical and current. As Heat-Moon himself put it, “…*Blue Highways* is a horizontal journey. The goal was to keep moving—lots of places fairly quickly. That was the rootlessness aspect of travel.

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27 Alternatively, Peter Hulme suggests that *PrairyErth* is, rather, an example of “slow travel,” which he aligns with the slow food movement and opposes to highway tourism and fast food.

28 I concur with Schiavini’s list of place’s constitutive elements, but I repeat her metaphor of strata somewhat warily, not wanting to endorse a theory of place as essentially horizontal. These same qualms apply to Kent Ryden’s metaphor of “the invisible landscape” and Donna Mendelson’s “transparent overlay maps,” both discussed above.
*PrairyErth* is a vertical journey. The idea is to take a limited place and travel extensively through time in that single place” (Bourne 95).

Space

*PrairyErth* is perhaps most innovative and provocative in its announcing itself as a work of literary cartography, as an attempt to map the territory, to inscribe as it describes. Indeed, the book’s very structure derives from the geographical notion of the grid, with the county and the narrative divided into twelve equal, corresponding sections. Heat-Moon seized upon this structure late in his writing and research process, a realization he details in the first chapter of *PrairyErth*. Searching for a way to forge connections among all the material he had gathered, he laid the U.S. Geological Survey maps of Chase County—twenty-five in all, “maps so detailed that barns and houses and windmills appear” (15)—on the floor of his writing room and contemplated them:

On the carpet, the county was about seven feet by six, and I had to walk from the north border to read the scale at the south end. As I traipsed around this paper land, a shape came to me: while thirteen of the maps contain only narrow strips of Chase, the central twelve hold almost all of it, and their outlines form a kind of grid such as an archaeologist lays over ground he will excavate. Wasn’t I a kind of digger of shards? Maybe a grid was the answer: arbitrary quadrangles that have nothing inherently to do with the land, little to do with history, and not much to do with my details. After all, since the National Survey of 1785, seventy percent of America lies under such a grid, a system of coordinates that has allowed wildness to be subdued. Would coordinates lead to connections? Were they themselves the only links we can truly understand? (15)

This conception of place and narrative as something mutually to be explored and excavated figures prominently in the text. With the topographical/archaeological grid in mind, Heat-Moon proceeds to walk the county section by section, “digging, sifting, sorting, assembling shards”—his metaphors for the processes of understanding and representing place—following the course
“of a Japanese reading a book: up to down, right to left” (16). Thus he sets out to walk the quadrangles north to south and east to west, traversing the county as part of his simultaneous attempt to tell its story.

One outcome of this method is that *PrairyErth* presents a strong attitude of outwardness, a focus on exteriority over interiority. Indeed, in discovery that the geographical grid could offer a narrative form where no linear story existed, Heat-Moon believed he had hit upon a novel strategy of place-representation, one that would allow him to subvert the subjective, authorial self in favor of the external realities of place.29

That twelve-section grid, I realized, might continually provide an outline that would rarely match up with the pattern of my own perceptions of the territory. In other words, I’d have to leave my interior to travel, as a writer, a course determined by an arbitrary, geometric schema. Because this shape would seldom—if ever—align with my own inner pattern, the grid could keep me fenced off from the temptation of the restrictive, encircling lines of self-exploration. Those barrier grids were continual reminders—initations, actually—to excavate the landscape beyond my own interior topography. (*Here* 268)

This attitude of outwardness, that which makes *PrairyErth* so compelling as a narrative of place, Heat-Moon refers to in this piece as a “centrifugal” perspective, one arising in response to the more “centripetal” logic of *Blue Highways*, wherein the narrator ventures into the landscape, in part, to investigate the self. *Blue Highways* encompasses a wide and circular travel route—13,000 miles around the country—but (according to Heat-Moon’s reading) ultimately spins inward in an strong vein of introspection; *PrairyErth*, on the other hand, describes a small geographic territory—Chase’s 112-mile perimeter—and radiates outward, the narrator’s voice

29 Heat-Moon cites James Agee’s writing in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) as a model.
blending with other voices and with the terrain in a complex rendering of place.\textsuperscript{30} \textit{PrairyErth}

in some ways covers more “ground,” advocating not only a place-based model of selfhood but also an (ecospatial) epistemology of place applicable anywhere and everywhere.

Not only does \textit{PrairyErth: A Deep Map} proclaim itself a work of literary cartography, but it also includes a series of the author’s own cartographic representations of the Chase County sites it examines. Two maps of the whole county appear side-by-side on both the inside covers, one detailing its major watersheds (without their names), the other displaying its infrastructure (roads, rail lines, and town sites)—a bioregional map to supplement the political map. (Indeed, these side-by-side maps produce an image that compares nicely to that of ecocriticism and geocriticism as the two lenses of ecospatial criticism). A map of each geographical section (or quadrangle) also appears as introductory material to the accompanying chapter, and these smaller-scale maps combine the two formats, displaying watercourses and a few natural prominences alongside infrastructure and certain historical sites. Before the final section, an epilogue of sorts, the map of Chase watersheds appears again, this time with a dotted line

\textsuperscript{30} Heat-Moon outlines his centrifugal-centripetal theory of the writer/self-world relationship in an article entitled “Journeys into Kansas” and republished in \textit{Here, There, and Elsewhere} as “Writing \textit{PrairyErth}.” As critical terms, \textit{centrifugality} and \textit{centripetality} might function productively as complementary expressions of \textit{environmentality}, a term used by ecocritics like Lawrence Buell and Robert Kern to discuss how attentive various texts are to the natural world. Whereas asking whether a text is environmental dictates a yes or no response, centrifugal/centripetal connotes the tension inherent in any text between the geophysical world and the human mind, between environment and self. In her essay on Heat-Moon and bioregionalism, Shellie Banga glosses centripetality as “writing about the self” and centrifugality as “writing about the ‘other’” (62) in arguing that “[s]eeking a balance between these forces,” as Heat-Moon does in \textit{PrairyErth}, “is an expository move that models bioregional strategies for creating harmonious, equitable relations with nature” (62). While I concur with Banga’s broader argument, she oversimplifies Heat-Moon’s terms, emphasizing the personal and thereby missing their \textit{geographical} resonance. Jonathan Levin, in his otherwise insightful article on “self, language, and world” in the work of Heat-Moon and Edward Abbey, unfortunately misses altogether the opportunity to discuss Heat-Moon’s centripetal-centrifugal theory.
through it to approximate the nearly vertical route of the Kaw Trail, which Heat-Moon walks with a friend in the final chapter. In all, fifteen of Heat-Moon’s own maps supplement the narrative, and orienting the reader in the spaces of both world and text.\(^{31}\)

Overall, the maps in *PrairyErth* make a less radical statement than the *Blue Highways* route map. Heat-Moon took few liberties with his quadrangle maps, which owe as much to the Rand McNally tradition as to the U.S. Geological Survey. One notable revision of the U.S.G.S. maps was his choice to incorporate all of Chase County in the twelve main quadrangles, annexing those portions of the county that appear in thirteen other maps of counties to the east and south. He also renamed three quadrangles—Cottonwood Falls (renamed Bazaar), Strong City (Fox Creek), and Lincolnville NE (Elk)—in an apparent attempt to focus attention on Chase (Lincolnville is a town in Marion County, to the west) and to cartographically supplant the county’s two largest cities (Cottonwood and Strong). This is consistent with Heat-Moon’s strategy of advocating for underappreciated places, the very reason he chose Chase County as the subject of his deep map. Many of the towns in the county are dead or dying (Heat-Moon calls this the “Saffordville Syndrome,” for the first such town he documents) so to map them is, to some extent, an exercise in preservation or recovery. His indication of certain historical sites—most notably a nineteenth-century homestead where a murder took place and the spot where Notre Dame football legend Knute Rockne’s plane crashed—provides just a hint of the kind of

\(^{31}\) The narrative sections also include pictograph drawings by the author, ostensible reproductions of actual pictographs appearing somewhere in Kansas, possibly in Chase County. One additional map is included, drawn by D.D. Morse in 1878 (50–51) and evidently pulled from the Chase historical archives. Occupying two pages, it is the only other illustration in the book, a birds’-eye-view of Cottonwood Falls and its surrounding terrain. The illustration includes structures and street names, trees and drainages, as well as several horses, travelers, and fishermen.
historical detail included in the narrative. Somewhat lacking in these maps is that sense of topography which is so central to the narrative. Open spaces are merely insinuated—by the lack of roads, for example—and the undulating Flint Hills terrain appears regrettably flat. Nor is vegetation indicated, the shifting borders between trees and grassland—a primary subject of the book—being left to the reader’s imagination. If these maps leave out certain details, however, they still serve as relatively straightforward spatial references points for the narrative material, which more than makes up for these omissions.

Supplementary to Heat-Moon’s maps in *PrairyErth* is a pictographic symbol of the twelve-sectioned grid, a more artistic rendering of the narrative’s topistic basis.\(^\text{32}\) Significantly, this version of the grid is open at the edges, an expanded tic-tac-toe board at once suggestive of the histories of land management and geographical surveys, as well as bioregional thinking, which eschews political boundaries in favor of natural ones. Each chapter begins with the same pictographic grid and a large dot indicating the particular quadrangle in which that chapter’s action is ostensibly located. The maps in *PrairyErth* supplement the narrative in orienting the reader in the geophysical setting of the book, one of Heat-Moon’s primary concerns in all his writings. As he does so faithfully in *Blue Highways* by detailing his driving route, in *PrairyErth* Heat-Moon offers constant toponymic cues that anchor each story to a site within the county, establishing a reciprocal relationship between the narrative and the map. When Heat-Moon writes about what occurs on Osage Hill or a couple of miles south of Elmdale, readers can draw

\(^{32}\) In fact, each of Heat-Moon’s books contains such a thematic pictograph suggestive of his route of travel—the others being the Hopi emergence symbol in *Blue Highways* and a more circular labyrinth in *River-Horse*. 
Figure 5. Chase County Political Map (PrairyErth)

Figure 6. Chase County Watershed Map (PrairyErth)
upon their sense of that place—its *physique* and *morale*, to borrow E.V. Walter’s phrasing—from descriptions throughout the book. Following Heat-Moon’s topistic cues, readers gain a cultural and topographic sense not only of Chase County, but also of each quadrangle. Appearing in every chapter, Heat-Moon’s grid pictograph implies the extent to which, just like the Flint Hills themselves, *PrairyErth* is not confined to Chase County, even if it is set primarily there; its ideas and, occasionally, its action,\(^{33}\) radiate outward, with regional, national, and (I dare say) planetary implications.

But the orienting effects of *PrairyErth* go much further than these kinds of geographical reference points. Much more important is a more holistic sense of place that amounts to what I’m calling *ecospatial orientation*—a way of seeing that accounts for nature and history in addition to geography. Some of the most profound moments in the book result from just this kind of orientation—a sense that the story is situated in the geophysical, mappable world—and it is partly what is involved in the titular image of place depth and the author’s related notion of vertical travel. Indeed, several of these moments involve *literal* place depth as Heat-Moon descends on foot past layers of grass and rock that alert him to geologic time in a region formed by sedimentation under a vast Permian sea. On one such walk, he spies and excavates an ancient shark’s tooth from the nearby slope and uses it to radically re-orient himself and his readers:

> For two hundred million years it has lain locked in the shale, and now it moves again in my sweaty, salty shirt pocket as if it were once more a piece of a saw-

\(^{33}\) Heat-Moon occasionally ventures beyond the county’s borders (sometimes only a few miles) in order to access some larger truth about its ecospatial history. In order to tell the story of the Kansa tribe who once called Chase home (and were confined to a reservation there), he travels north a few miles to the ruins of the Indian Agency at Council Grove, then south into Oklahoma where the tribe’s land allotment was established after their forced removal helped turn Indian Territory into Kansas Territory. For a conservationist view of agriculture—a critical factor in Chase’s future—he travels two counties northwest to Wes Jackson’s Land Institute near Salina.
toothed maw gliding along in the time when these rocks could be swum. ... When it had its last meal, the Appalachians were rising, the Rockies were at sea level, and the continents lay sutured into Pangaea. Chase County is forty-six hundred miles from Paris, but then it was about three thousand miles closer. (114)

A new sense of place emerges here, one not at all confined to what exists here (near Texaco Hill, en route to the Verdigris River headwaters) and now. In his encounter with the shark’s tooth, Heat-Moon blends the insights of natural history, plate tectonics, continental drift, and modern geography to create a snapshot not just of Chase County but also of ecospatiality in general, of space produced by naturally occurring contingencies over time.

The broader context of this chapter, a reflection on the hydrology of Chase, further enhances the orienting effect. Heat-Moon goes on to re-define the county as “a leaky place, its stone sea shot through with fissures and fractures, concavities and crannies, holes and vugs, crazed layers of jointed limestone between strata of shale, all of it like a stack of sliced bread holding water until there’s too much, and then draining itself in hidden slopes” (115). After symbolically drinking from the headwaters (an idiosyncratic habit of his), he expands from a geological view of water to a biological one, in a complex portrait of element, space, and self:

I’m down a hollow where a river begins, I’m between ledges where a source drips steady as if being long and slowly wrung, I’m between layers of rock and shale, they between gone seas; the wind carries in the rain, the water flushes along organic acids that eat the permeable stone back into liquid and send it again toward the far father sea; the solids come in and head out, just pausing; all around me are absorptions and percolations, everything soluble, the grasses sucking the mutable rock and transpiring, everything between forms of liquidity, and all things forms of liquidity: the harrier a feathered bag of nutrient waters falling onto the furred sack of sapid juices, thirsty for hot rodent blood it can turn into flight; and what was I but a guzzling, sweating bag of certain saps waiting to give up its moisture: press me dry, powdery dry, and you’d have a lump of mineralized soil, about enough to pot a geranium. (116–117)
What begins as an orienting of self in space (“I’m down a hollow…,” “I’m between layers…”)—an act reminiscent of the bioregional “Where you at?” and home address exercises—merges into a reflection of biological materiality with water as the connective element, that which ultimately animates not only the rivers themselves but also the entire grassland biome and its animal occupants—hawk and human alike.

In addition to its overt structural concern with cartography, *PrairyErth* is filled with spatial insights that, in conjunction with ecological details, orient readers in the topography of Chase and in some basic premises of geography and spatiality. Foremost, perhaps, is the notion of the U.S.G.S. grid itself, “an expression of eighteenth-century rationalism if there ever was one” (282). In *PrairyErth*, Heat-Moon demonstrates a fundamental ambivalence toward Thomas Jefferson’s “great American grid” (282), at once revering and abhorring it, working with it (and within it) yet frequently struggling against it.

At one extreme, Heat-Moon seems to celebrate the grid, particularly its ethic of topistic connectivity. One moment in *PrairyErth* suggests a transcendental aspect of geography—not unlike Thoreau’s fascination with the train at Walden Pond—that resonates in the accounts of the author’s boyhood enthrallment with road atlases. On a night walk in an unassuming corner of the county, Heat-Moon writes of his effort to perceive this country road anew, “to see the lane in

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34 In *The Bioregional Imagination*, Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster discuss the “Where you at?” quiz and its urban supplement, “Wha’ Happenin’?,” which test individuals’ ability to define their localities by knowledge of things like native species, waste management, and soundscapes (8).

35 Sometime before his complaint about the “devilish Iron Horse” who “has muddied the Boiling Spring with his foot and … browsed off all the woods on Walden shore…” (154), Thoreau writes: “I am refreshed and expanded when the freight train rattles past me, and I smell the stores which go dispensing their odors all the way from Long Wharf to Lake Champlain, reminding me of foreign parts, of coral reefs, and Indian oceans, and tropical climes, and the extent of the globe. I feel more like a citizen of the world…” (95).
its fullness—not as a flat line of two dimensions but a thing running in three—or four—
dimensions, a cartographer’s mark encircling the planet…” (366). “This road,” he tells himself,
is not an isolated parallel but a piece of the conflux of the greater grid, a planetary
circumscription to read: far in front of me right now a Korean must be walking
toward his noon meal, and behind me in the dawn an Athenian coming from a
tryst, and along this line someone lies sleeping in Maryland. A road become a
long circumferential is less forlorn than a short dark strip a walker finds himself
on. (366)

Later in the same chapter he considers lines of longitude as well, a circle connecting Chase with
Corpus Christi and Mongolia, Fargo and Siberia. Just as young Bill Trogdon once used his atlas
to see “the face of America,” Heat-Moon the author finds imaginative companionship in the
bending lines he traverses. This expanded, global grid connects him in time and space to those
who share his parallel and meridian—in sites from Yosemite to the Parthenon, North Pole to
South—and the knowledge uplifts him on an otherwise uneventful stroll through a comparatively
boring corner of the county.

In a later chapter—a natural and cultural history of the Osage orange tree (*Maclura
pomifera*)—Heat-Moon describes how the initial introduction of the grid to the prairie was a
particularly ecospatial undertaking: Anglo-American settlers used the Osage orange as
hedgerows, establishing natural borders where perpendicular lines did not exist. “Once Jefferson
read the reports of the Lewis and Clark expedition,” Heat-Moon explains, “he knew his system
would require in the plains something like *Maclura*, a living embodiment of the gridwork of the
new civilization; it would be what a constitution is to a government, what a police patrol is to a
neighborhood: a thing defining, delimiting, enforcing” (282). In this chapter, Heat-Moon
recognizes the unique way that nature was adapted in the production of a new kind of space in
the American West. To some extent, he suggests, white settlers welcomed the change, believing
“that a good fence was not just an earmark of civilization but a precursor of it” (280). Osage orange enabled them not only to fence in their fields but also, eventually, to create a system of roads respective of property rights, a system that abides to this day. Heat-Moon concludes:

[A]s curbstones are to a suburb, so was Osage hedge to the prairies, as it came to mark out routes and channel citizens onto them, laying down a pattern that so shaped lives that people began to build their new houses in alignment with the now visible grid. They set out their furniture accordingly, dressers and bedsteads against walls running only in cardinal compass directions, so that, still today, Chase County sleeps north-south or east-west, the square rooms squared with the world, the decumbent folk like an accountant’s figures neatly between ruled lines, their slumber nicely compartmentalized in Tom’s grand grid. (287)

As important as the U.S.G.S. grid is to the form and content of _PrairyErth_, Heat-Moon undoubtedly likes the image of Chase’s people sleeping in its alignment. No matter his attentiveness to the grid’s (hegemonic) spatial-political implications, he can’t help but admire its audacity, its tidy compartmentalization of the prairie’s immense territory.

At the same time, however, Heat-Moon’s “understated environmentalism” (Bryzik 670) (not to mention his Native American heritage) prevents him from a wholesale adulation of the federal geographic schema. In Homestead, a section more delineated than others by the straight roads and fields for which Kansas is known, Heat-Moon confesses his “sadness at seeing the grid so heavily laid onto the land” (363). He admits that he doesn’t like Homestead, “lying as it does with all the mystery of a checked tablecloth, its section lines marked so clearly by square fields and roads cut into the high and flattish topography that they show up in satellite photographs” (363). He is bored by the “gridded acres” of farmland, this “forlorn place filled with evidence of mankind but mostly empty of men…” (363). But most of all he is frustrated by it:

For a fellow laying out his little travels around a grand grid, I was baffled with the imaginary become real, inked lines turned to cut-in roads, and I disliked that perfect scotching of the prairie which imprisoned the place and fenced me out…
In my time in [Homestead], I could never find a way to escape through the gaps into where the real place might lie, and I seemed equally incapable of turning the grid into a screen that might sift out artifacts. (364)

Homestead defeats Heat-Moon’s best attempts at deep travel and literary cartography, even after he tries the novel approach of walking it at night (what he calls “noctivating” [365]). Yet this is the same quadrangle (and chapter) in which he reflects upon the connectedness of global places along the lines of latitude and longitude. Thus Homestead, the most “gridded” of Chase’s twelve quadrangles, perfectly embodies Heat-Moon’s ambivalence about the entire geographic schema, a spatial structure as potentially oppressive as it is transcendent.

Heat-Moon’s strongest anti-Jeffersonian statement appears in the Elk section, another quadrangle defined by agriculture and, particularly, by absentee ownership. He decries the political and economic system that allows non-residents to own Chase land without investing in the county in more sustaining ways. Speaking of the nineteenth-century homesteaders there, Heat-Moon remarks, “Surely they would curse the great Jeffersonian grid—so cage-like when seen from above or on a county plat—that has helped bring about the effectual vassalage of several hundred of their descendants…” (427–8). Heat-Moon acknowledges how the same grid that once offered stability and comfort to the county’s residents also wields the power of containment. If Heat-Moon’s ire here seems misplaced—aimed at the geographical and not the economic system—then perhaps it is. Yet as a spatial construct borne of political mandate, a social formation inscribed, in many places, upon the land itself, the grid performs a convenient metonymy for American ecospatial policy—from the era of aboriginal removal and Anglo resettlement to the industrialized agriculture of the present. In Susan Naramore Maher’s words, “As Heat-Moon’s stories accrue, so, too, do the grid’s effects over history…” (47). Maher reads
Heat-Moon’s experiments in “dreamtime” rambling, his attempts to imaginatively “enter the land” (268), as a desire to escape and subvert the grid’s spatial (and narrative) structure. From this standpoint, Heat-Moon’s momentary rancor is consistent with the complicated story he tells of Chase County and his culturally informed ambivalence about modern geography. When it comes to his opinions of Jefferson’s grid, Heat-Moon is all over the map.

Nature

Beyond his commitment to consistent topistic references in *PrairyErth*, Heat-Moon frequently offers insights into the natural environment of the county, several of which emerge through experiments of literal place perception. Heat-Moon frequently follows Gretel Erlich’s suggestion in one of the book’s epigrams: “Why not look *into* the earth?” (139). In one chapter, he attempts this quite literally, seeking out an abandoned oil well in order to access (obliquely) a four-hundred-million-year-old subterranean mountain range known as the Nemahas. Heat-Moon details his plan to uncap the old pipe, look down it, smell the air from below, and drop a stone toward the buried range. “Although I’ll be looking at their crests,” he writes, “I’ll be peeping into a deep corner of the county basement, and I realize I’ll no more see the Nemahas than a man in total darkness his hand, but I want to see *at* them, three thousand feet down…” (156). Like his

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Maher writes that “Ultimately, Heat-Moon must abandon the grid in order ‘to both feel the life and meaning of a place and to inscribe its patterns on paper’…. In a land ‘where openness can sometimes begin to seem like blankness,’ the grid provides a toehold for understanding; but Heat-Moon’s forays off the map, into a complex gestalt both physical and imaginative, finally allow him to enter into place” (49). While Maher is right to point out Heat-Moon’s trajectory in *PrairyErth* toward indigenous epistemologies of place, I would contend that his model is more integrative, advocating *inclusion* of native perspectives alongside Western ones. Having done so much to locate himself, his text, and his reader in sites on the map, Heat-Moon strives not to eradicate or even to subvert but rather to complicate (playfully, self-consciously) the cartographic grid.
walks down natural drainages and into the local limestone quarry, this exercise represents another effort by the author to sense the literal depth of Chase County.

But the Nemahas’ situation as part of Chase’s “crystalline basement” (160) is also a metric of time, one that escapes most people’s sense of history and geography. As Heat-Moon explains, “The Nemahas rose, were partly eroded, subsided, and were buried, all of this happening in the Eastern Hemisphere; and then, slowly and passively like a casket, the range got carried into the Western world to come here—to what appears a permanent resting place…” (158). This illusion of stasis extends beyond continental drift to the prairie as well, “a landscape that seems to be at rest and in place and immutable but for the seasonal changes of its colorings” (159). Geology, Heat-Moon suggests, is a central component of Chase’s identity, even if most county residents fail to recognize it. The Nemahas gave way to the vast Permian seas that, along with the shells of prehistoric sea creatures, created the limestone formations from which Chase’s most iconic buildings were constructed. The limestone uplands, their soils too thin for cultivation, provide the grazing land from which county residents derive much food and employment; geological and ecological factors have combined to create and sustain a human way of life. This reflection on the cultural effects of geology amounts to an ecospatial orientation that goes beyond Heat-Moon’s attempt to “see at” the buried mountain range. Although the exercise fails—when he finally reaches the site, he finds the pipe cemented over—he has succeeded in modeling a novel perception of place.

In two other instances, Heat-Moon uses something called a Claude glass, “an eighteenth-century traveler’s device…that served to condense and focus a landscape and make it apprehensible in a way direct viewing cannot” (268). In typical eccentric fashion, Heat-Moon
carries such a device in his rucksack, and he pulls it out one afternoon in the Hymer quadrangle. After a previous failed attempt to recall the local history and “walk in the stories of this place,” he withdraws the Claude glass to consider its altered form of vision:

I pulled out the thing and walked on slowly, watching in it the hills compress and reshape themselves into something different, and what happened was strange and invigorating: in the glass the Chase prairie somehow took on the aspect of my first views of it, and I began to feel again the enchantment of those early encounters. By looking rearward, it was as if I were looking back in time, yet I was looking at a place where left was right, a two-dimensional landscape I could see but not enter: the prospect was both real and impossible, it was there and it wasn’t, and I entered it by walking away from it. … I was hiking north and traveling south. (268–9)

For Heat-Moon, the Claude glass provides a way to “enter the land” (268). This is a project of multiple dimensions, including not only obtaining a broadened view of landscape and adopting an atypical mode of mobility, but also, ultimately, overcoming solipsism and achieving a deeper sense of natural/cultural history. The device helps remind him “how the land, like a good library, lets a fellow extend himself, stretch time, rupture the constrictions of egocentrism, slip the animal bondage of the perpetual present to hear Lincoln’s mystic chords of memory” (269).

Simply put, Heat-Moon uses landscape to orient himself both ecospatially and historically. The Claude glass helps him achieve the same centrifugality that he hopes PrairyErth will enact, embracing outwardness over inwardness, ecocentrism over egocentrism (to borrow Buell’s formulation). Itself an item of history, seemingly brought up from the archives, Heat-Moon’s Claude glass is a truly literary device, serving as both mechanism and metaphor for ecospatial place perception. 37

37 These experiments in place perception provide a follow-up to Heat-Moon’s ideas in Blue Highways, wherein he discusses how “new ways of seeing can disclose new things” and wonders whether the inverse might also be true (17).
From a more narrowly “environmental” standpoint, *PrairyErth* (as the title suggests) is firmly grounded in Heat-Moon’s investigations into what David Abram calls “the more-than-human world”—in this case the prairie ecology of Chase County. This aspect of the book is strong enough to situate it in the tradition of American nature writing, in spite of what Jonathan Levin correctly identifies as its strong social orientation. “Indeed,” Levin writes, “one of the ironies of *PrairyErth* is that while Heat-Moon seems to have been drawn to Chase County at least in part on account of its undiminished tallgrass prairie, the prairie itself often seems secondary to the human life lived on and around it—something that makes *PrairyErth* occasionally seem more like a travel narrative than a work of literary naturism” (243). Of course, *PrairyErth* fits well into both genres (and possibly more), but I would like momentarily to highlight a few aspects of *PrairyErth* that qualify it as nature writing—the ecological aspect of its ecospatiality—before briefly assessing Heat-Moon’s environmentalism in the book.

In addition to documenting the perambulations of one person through a relatively remote (but not necessarily “wild”) region of the United States—one convention of nature writing—*PrairyErth* tells the story of the tallgrass prairie itself, from the diversity of grasses that comprise it and the soil from which it grows (the titular “prairyerths”) to the various natural forces—namely, fire, wind, and grazing—that maintain it. The geographical situation matters, Heat-Moon explains, for “the source of the prairie is its midcontinental position, far from tempering seas, where it lies under an eolian cleavage zone that mixes westerlies, wrung dry by the Rocky Mountains, with humid air from the Gulf…” (48). Heat-Moon walks among eight-foot grasses and rolls in an ancient buffalo wallow. He contemplates the birth of prairie along a retired stretch of U.S. Highway 50, “an extinct highway giving birth to grassland” (47). He even credits the
prairies as an impetus in human evolution: “It was tallgrass that made man stand up: to be on all fours, to crouch in a six-foot-high world of thick cellulose, is to be blind and vulnerable. People may prefer the obvious beauty of mountains and seacoasts, but we are bipedal because of savannah; we are human because of tallgrass” (28).

Beyond the grasses themselves, whole chapters are devoted to a few iconic species, such as the coyote, the prairie chicken, the hawk, the wood rat, and the cottonwood tree. In his account of each of these species, Heat-Moon argues presents something essential about the grassland as well as the human experience of it, in a tone ranging from the frank to the rhapsodic and Whitmanesque. Regarding the mating ritual of male prairie chickens he exclaims, “O birds, nothing more prairied than you” (382). In a chapter entitled *Ex Radice* (“from the root”), Heat-Moon details four native plants—compass plant, buffalo gourd, breadroot, and lead plant—associating each with a cardinal direction in a meditation on their properties and histories. These plants are offered to the reader as “totems of this land, more certain emblems of the long prairie than any other things but the tallgrasses themselves” (238). Heat-Moon presents these species for consideration one at a time, but the effect is composite: these plants comprise and symbolize the native prairie as well as the compendium of medicinal knowledge lost in the gap between Native and Anglo cultures. The chapter concludes with an indictment of the white environmental practices that, having eradicated the indigenous people, have so threatened these prairie plants that Heat-Moon upholds as icons.38

38 The final irony is that native species now thrive in overgrown Anglo cemeteries, and Heat-Moon writes: “[I]f you stay in a white man’s old burial ground long enough, this darkness must come to you: his way of life is the land’s death and his way of death is the land’s life” (243).
In chapters like these, *PrairyErth* documents the evolving human relationship with the natural world, with emphases on both Anglo and Native perspectives throughout history (with special attention given to the present and to the period of white settlement in the nineteenth century). It devotes considerable attention to the issue of landscape and identity, positing people’s relationship to the natural world as a defining element of human psychology. Indeed, in the framework of Heat-Moon’s “deep map,” the stories of residents past and present not only constitute Chase County as a place but also bear witness to the ways in which people relate to the earth. Interviews with modern residents (whom Heat-Moon calls “countians”) emphasize such things as living through floods, dust storms, and tornadoes. In Saffordville, a dying river town, Heat-Moon writes of residents who “recognize but don’t say how the river whets a find edge on their lives…. [T]hey are held here by recollections of what the river has given them: hours of a family bound tightly like shocks of wheat, of moments when all their senses were almost one with the land, of times when they earned the right to be tenants on the first terrace of the Cottonwood River” (39). But *PrairyErth* is less a celebration of bioregional dwelling than an elegy for it; Heat-Moon senses a loss of environmental awareness in a place whose small villages are disappearing and agriculture is increasingly mechanized.39

39 Peter Hulme writes that “*PrairyErth* has a restlessness within its stasis, and this is what ultimately makes it a piece of travel writing rather than a contribution to US bioregionalism” (142). Heat-Moon, Hulme points out, is an outsider to Chase County, “so he does not have the intimate connection with the place about which he writes on which true bioregionalism [as a literary genre] depends” (143). To the contrary, Shellie Banga positions *PrairyErth* as “a bioregional text that records the interactions of organisms and place in order to seek ways to celebrate bioregions and investigate the social processes by which we view them” (67). She further argues that the text goes beyond exemplifying bioregional literary practice to advancing a theoretical middle ground: “Heat-Moon’s *PrairyErth* is best understood as a bridge figure in bioregionalism’s movement from an interest in positivism and the documentation of natural detail (as seen in Kirkpatrick Sale and Aldo Leopold) to an emphasis on the negative, unknowable spaces in nature” (54).
Perhaps most pressingly, from a political standpoint, Heat-Moon documents the human-earth relationship through his balanced presentation of Chase County’s key environmental debate: how best to maintain the tallgrass prairie in a place populated, in the present epoch, primarily by cattle and their ranchers, people who refer to prairie as “pasture” (54). The county’s debate about a potential tallgrass prairie preserve recapitulates the historical conflict in the United States—dating back to the late 1800s—between preservationism and conservationism, wilderness and natural “resources,” Sierra Club and National Forest Service (tellingly, a branch of the Department of Agriculture). In the late 1970s, Chase residents shot down a proposal for a Tallgrass National Park, and less ambitious preservationist plans fell similarly flat in subsequent years.40 In Chase County, with an economy so reliant on cattle production, “environmentalism” is a dirty word, and any preservation or restoration of the tallgrass prairie ecosystem is perceived as a threat to local livelihood. For Heat-Moon, one resident’s comment sums up local opinion: “I don’t say that the prairie park was all that bad an idea—I just say I don’t want some government telling me what to do” (55). (Heat-Moon’s response: “Those words, better than any others I know, situate Chase County in the American West” [55]).

In the spirit of documentary journalism, Heat-Moon takes great pains to avoid taking sides in this debate. He interviews a traditional cowboy, an environmental activist, and many

40 In 1996, the federal government approved the creation of the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve at the Spring Hill Ranch (in Heat-Moon’s Fox Creek quadrangle), a collaboration of the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy. By drawing attention to the county and the bioregion, PrairyErth was arguably a contributing factor in the creation of the preserve. Heat-Moon discusses the preserve, along with other changes to the county since his travels there, in the documentary film Return to PrairyErth (2010).
people in between. However, he clearly believes in the power of prairie—as an ecosystem and as an idea. In a chapter devoted to the preservation question, he writes:

> Once there were our hundred thousand square miles of tall prairie (about the size of Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas combined) over the middle of America; but, of that, plows, cows, and towns, have left only three percent or less, much in fragments along right-of-ways and in neglected cemeteries, all pieces too small to convey the essence of prairie: horizon-to-horizon grasses and blossoms interrupted only by the rise and fall of the land itself. A hundred grazed acres do not constitute a prairie any more than a hundred pruned trees comprise a forest, and, in spite of what Emily Dickinson wrote about a single bee making a prairie, its essence of immensity does not lend itself to microcosm. (108)

Although he clearly favors prairie preservation, even declaring himself, early on, “a fellow of the grasslands” (28), Heat-Moon does not overtly advocate for it. *PrairyErth*, rather, is deeply environmental without being didactic, demonstrating ecospatial awareness without necessarily preaching it.41 Its environmentalism is tacit, engrained in Heat-Moon’s premises that *place*—that unique convergence of nature and culture—might somehow be knowable and that a literary work might convey such knowledge. Ultimately, through his self-conscious literary cartography and the very structure of the “deep map,” Heat-Moon encourages readers to grapple not only with the nature of place, but also, necessarily, with humanity’s place in nature.

41 Heat-Moon’s understated environmentalism is evident throughout *PrairyErth*, particularly in the Commonplace entries. One of the best narrative examples transpires in the form of a reflection from his childhood, on his reading of Aesop’s fables: “For people who like to dichotomize the world, here’s mine about woods folk: houndsmen or foxmen. The image of Reynard riding smartly away on a ram’s back left me long ago on the side of wildness over domestication in whatever forms.” This embrace of “wildness over domestication,” perhaps Heat-Moon’s strongest preservationist statement in the book, is extremely nuanced (not to mention literary), offering not only a personal opinion but also a psychological basis for it. Tellingly, the following chapter details a coyote hunt in which prey succumbs to predator (a countian’s trained dogs) and in which Heat-Moon spectates in spite of his apparent aversion to the practice. While he doesn’t speak out against the hunt, the scene resonates with his comment about Reynard a few pages prior, and his Ginsbergian paean to the coyote in the same chapter sets up the hunt as an unequivocal tragedy.
Heat-Moon once remarked to his friend Scott Chisholm that his follow-up to *Blue Highways*—the manuscript that would become *PrairyErth*—was to be an exercise in “‘writing about topography in four dimensions,’ one of which was ‘time’” (Chisholm 63). What should be evident by now is that stories are at least important as topography to the formation (and representation) of place. *PrairyErth* emphasizes this not only through Heat-Moon’s oral history of Chase County but also through his constant attention to literary form, to the process of place writing as representation. This is epitomized in Heat-Moon’s controlling metaphor of writing as deep mapping. In an article for *Great Plains Quarterly*, O. Alan Weltzien analyzes Heat-Moon’s multiple “parables of cartography” in *PrairyErth*, most of which occur in the “Crossings” section that functions as the book’s preface. As Weltzien points out, “*PrairyErth*’s ambitious claim to exhaustively know Chase County, Kansas, and Heat-Moon’s efforts to be equally extensive and intensive, make him seize and variously develop quite diverse metaphors of design. But cartography remains his primary formal focus…” (113). As a map of Chase County, *PrairyErth* is arguably as successful as any conventional map, which must exclude at least as much information as it entails. But in offering, perhaps, the most comprehensive English language narrative of any place, the text simultaneously undertakes and undermines its project, utilizing and foregrounding numerous representational strategies while calling attention to the ultimate futility of any toposic representational venture. As Weltzien argues, “Writing and mapping go hand in hand and yet they do not, because the outcome of writing, those ‘unexpected encounters,’ denies the analogy and exposes difference. *PrairyErth* has it both ways, urging the
reciprocity of cartography and narration while conceding the manifold distinctions between them” (117).

In the preface, Heat-Moon introduces the book’s premise as a narrative of place and describes his struggle to give it form: “I am standing on Roniger Hill to test the shape of what I’m going to write about this prairie place. For thirty months, maybe more, I’ve come and gone here and have found stories to tell, but, until last week, I had not discovered the way to tell them” (14). The phrase, “I am standing on Roniger Hill” occurs four times in this section, emphasizing the narrator’s emplacement within and (momentarily) atop the land he seeks to represent. He continues:

My searches and researches, like my days, grew more randomly than otherwise, and every form I tried contorted them, and each time I began to press things into cohesion, I edged not so much toward fiction as toward distortion, when what I wanted was accuracy; even when I got a detail down accurately, I couldn’t hook it to the next without concocting theories. It was connections that deviled me. I was hunting a fact or image and not a thesis to hold my details together, and so I arrived at this question: should I just gather up items like creek pebbles into a bag and then let them tumble in their own pattern? Did I really want the reality of randomness? Answer: only if it would yield a landscape with figures, one that would unroll like a Chinese scroll painting or a bison-skin drawing where both beginnings and ends of an event are at once present in the conflated time of the American Indian. The least I hoped for was a topographic map of words that would open inch by inch to show its long miles. (14–15)

Heat-Moon’s envisioning of *PrairyErth* as both a “landscape with figures” and “a topographic map of words” is telling. In the first place, it suggests the extent to which the author conceives of place as beginning with nature, a sentiment presaged in an earlier mission statement: “I’m in

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42 Heat-Moon himself is part Osage, and Native American history and imagery figure prominently in *PrairyErth* and throughout all his work. In Blue Highways, the two books he carries on his travels and quotes from liberally are Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and the biography *Black Elk Speaks*, providing the counterpointing and complementary epistemologies the author desires and which, I argue, are fundamental to place knowledge.
quest of the land and what informs it…” (10). Although his view of Chase County is
cartographical and anthropological, it seems to proceed as well from a bioregional orientation.
Chase County forms the heart of the Flint Hills, “the last remaining grand expanse of tallgrass
prairie in America” (12); this is the land Heat-Moon seeks to identify and comprehend through
his “topographic map of words.”

But beyond the origin of cartography as narrative structure, the above passage also
reveals the extent to which Heat-Moon’s project is a non-teleological one, invested more heavily
in description than causality. This is evident in his documentarian’s wish for accuracy “without
concocting theories,” for “a fact or image and not a thesis.” PrairyErth, then, is not only a
carefully constructed map of words, but also a “jumble” of pebbles, a collection of shards. Time
and again, Heat-Moon refers to items and shards as the material from which place is constructed.
On the one hand, this may be justification for an eccentric author’s including things of interest
only to the bookworm and the archivist—snippets from obscure narratives of travel, an inventory
of one pioneer family’s every possession (167–71), a record of every published spelling of the
Kansas’s namesake people (118–22). On the other hand, however, it underscores the nature of
place writing as a form of representation that is, in its best instantiations, non-teleological,
allowing for what Doreen Massey calls “the essential multiplicity of the spatial” (71). PrairyErth

43 I wouldn’t rule out John Steinbeck as a potentially direct influence here. Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts
articulated their theory of non-teleological thinking (or “is” thinking) in Log from the Sea of Cortez, an
idea evident in much of Steinbeck’s work, most notably East of Eden.

44 Not surprisingly, Heat-Moon’s friend Scott Chisholm asserts that the author has hoarding tendencies
(not unlike the Kansas packrats he studies in PrairyErth): “His attachment to things, like words,”
Chisholm writes, “is archival, not sentimental; Heat-Moon saves everything essential. He is still rankled
by the loss of a ballpoint pen he lent me: It was the ballpoint with which he had penned notes for Blue
Highways” (Chisholm 68).
rises to and meets this challenge, in part by including an array of perspectives and voices—human and nonhuman alike. Whereas critic Pamela Walker denigrates *PrairyErth*’s collage structure, arguing for the primacy of the linear *Blue Highways* from a narrative standpoint, I contend that the more centripetal nature of *PrairyErth*—including its carefully executed multifocalization—is crucial to its status and success as a preeminent narrative of place.45

Another metaphor Heat-Moon uses for his collage method is the artistic technique of pointillism, which becomes another metaphor for his literary cartography. His attempt to tell the story of a place called Osage Hill begins with a reflection on the fragmentedness of human cognizance: “While I may pass my life in continuity and completeness, I comprehend it only in discontinuous fragment; of the lives of people around me my understanding is utterly fractured and piecemeal: scraps, shavings, smithereens” (335). All these bits of information on any topic, spoken or written, congeal into “an illusion of completeness so that we comprehend only by orts” (335). To American Indians, he writes,

> stories are the communal snaggings of generations, the nets that keep people from free-falling toward pointlessness…, and they are also the knots of matter that help people into dreamtime, where the listener, the traveler, can imagine he sees links between smithereens; from that hallucination, everything that we value arises. I’m speaking about shards and grids and crossings, about that great reticulum, our past. (336)

In effect, all we have are stories, shards, daubs, smithereens, but their cumulative effect is strong, forming both an image of meaning and a safety net from meaninglessness. (Heat-Moon’s contrast of “pointlessness” to pointillism is a neat bit of wordplay.) The “illusion of

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45 Walker asserts that in *PrairyErth*, “Heat-Moon rejects narrative. He discounts it as a means toward resolving the relation between self and surroundings” (293). She ultimately concludes that “his nonnarrative style works against the engagement with place and people that he wants *PrairyErth* to enact” (293).
completeness” Heat-Moon speaks of represents his attempt to deal with his own authorial anxiety about the obsessive quest to know and to “map” Chase County exhaustively. The lesson is that any account of place (like identity) is necessarily fragmentary, pixellated; the best a literary cartographer can do to increase the image quality is to fill it in as well as possible, providing as many daubs (shards, stories) as he can.

To that end, one of the most important aspects of *PrairyErth* is its logic of multifocalization, which literary theorist Bertrand Westphal has argued is “the chief characteristic of geocriticism” (122). Although Westphal discusses multifocalization in a narrower sense—the necessity, in comprehending a given place, of considering multiple authors’ textual representations of it—this principle is crucial to Heat-Moon’s methodology: one cannot know a place well, *PrairyErth* suggests, without considering numerous oral and written perspectives on it. The most obvious and compelling multifocalizing strategy occurs in the book’s ten collections of epigrams, which introduce and foreshadow the different sections under the heading “From the Commonplace Book.” In a move comparable to and likely inspired by Herman Melville’s strategy at the outset of *Moby Dick*, Heat-Moon offers a compendium of

46 The allusions to Melville extend beyond the Commonplace entries. Heat-Moon frequently alludes to “loomings” (the title of *Moby Dick*’s first chapter) in *PrairyErth*, evidently in reference to his unease about the future—of the Flint Hills, of the United States, or indeed of the (natural) world at large. In the first chapter, Heat-Moon claims enigmatically that his presence in Chase County is due to “shadows in me, loomings about threats to America that are alive here too, but things I hope will show more clearly in the spareness of this county” (10–11). In the final chapter, his friend contributes an overtly environmental (and apocalyptic) spin on the term: “You use the word loomings, but the looming I see here is the power in the prairie itself…. It’s inexorable. For every human violation, here and everywhere, we know that somewhere the land is subtracting from our account, and when it falls low enough, the land will foreclose on us. It holds our mortgage. It owns us” (618–619, italics in original). Incidentally, *PrairyErth* has drawn comparisons to *Moby Dick* in its own right. In 1992, the now-famous environmental journalist Bill McKibben wrote in the *Hungry Mind Review*: “*PrairyErth* is the *Moby Dick* of American history. Chase County is a target as universal and worth as the white whale, and Least Heat-Moon is as inventive and obsessive as Melville in his pursuit. He never quite nails his prey, of course. Even a county of three
quotations from a vast array of historical and literary sources as a means of introducing the contents of each section, itself corresponding to one of the twelve geographic quadrangles. Whereas Melville’s “Extracts” proceed chronologically—presumably including anything and everything that had ever been written on the subject of whales—Heat-Moon’s quotations are arranged thematically. To take one representative example, the seven pages of Commonplace Book entries preceding the Thrall-Northwest section (93–99) introduce such subjects as dreams, preservation, conservation, naming, and women’s suffrage, all of which are covered in that narrative section. The sources here are diverse, ranging from Shakespeare, Thoreau, and Cather to a nineteenth-century newspaper editorial, a 1970s soil survey, and several works of contemporary (1980s) nature writing. In all, the fourteen Commonplace chapters contain nearly four hundred epigrams (393 by my count) from 278 different sources, spanning three millennia and occupying ninety-eight of *PrairyErth*’s 624 pages. They come from works of natural and social sciences, cultural history, philosophy, and imaginative literature, providing a vast theoretical web to undergird the narrative. In addition to the Commonplace chapters, “Toward a Kaw Hornbook” is a chapter comprised of written accounts—forty-five epigrams from twenty-nine authors—of the Kansa people from the time of first contact until that of forced removal (a

 thousand people is too big, has too much history. After 622 pages you still want more—you want him to cover all the topics (high school basketball, alcoholism, law enforcement) that he admits he hasn’t gotten to. But he’s gone farther than anyone before him. This is the deepest map any one ever made of an American place.”

The majority of epigrams date to the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries, with an average date between 1903 (not counting duplicate sources) and 1908 (counting duplicates). The oldest is from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah (circa eighth century B.C.E.), with the most recent coming from several publications contemporaneous with *PrairyErth* itself (1991). Carl Becker’s “Kansas” (1910) cited ten times, as is William Quayle’s *The Prairie and the Sea* (1905). The most frequently cited literary sources are Thoreau’s journals and Walt Whitman’s poetry, betraying Heat-Moon’s transcendental genealogy.
period of seventy years), while “According to the Leader” reproduces idiosyncratic excerpts from the local newspaper over the course of a whole century.48 All these voices prove as central to Heat-Moon’s deep map as those of the Chase County residents he interviews, even more important, arguably, than his own narrative voice; the archival history blends structurally (if not at all seamlessly) with the oral history and the narrator’s personal experiences in a complex rendering of place. This multifocalization, I argue, is a central tenet of Heat-Moon’s literary cartography. For Heat-Moon, stories are cultural shards, the archival/archeological material from which place is (re)constructed. In this sense, the book itself—what Heat-Moon calls his “topographic map of words”—becomes a kind of archive, a compendium not only of things said and done in Chase County but also of the constitutive components of any place—nature, space, and story. In the process of compiling his “deep map,” in other words, Heat-Moon actually calls attention to the depth of place. As Jonathan Levin writes, PrairyErth “represents a two-fold process of discovery, of place as an immediate, physical experience and of place as mediated, historical memory. Hence, place is always something one encounters face-to-face, in a box canyon or a stretch of tallgrass prairie, and at the same time something one shares socially, through traditions that are passed down both orally and archivally” (232). And this is where PrairyErth makes a definitive intervention into the field of place studies: through his quest to map, to know, and to enter the land, through his metaphors of

48 Unsurprisingly, some critics have failed to appreciate the myriad textual sources in PrairyErth. In World Literature Today, Gerald Vizenor complained, “the more than three hundred epigrams from a wide range of scholars, historians, and creative writers overwhelm the fourteen parts of the book…. One chapter has twenty-two consecutive pages of selected quotations. So many great thoughts are lost in the crush of significance” (386). Tom DeHaven of Entertainment Weekly also found himself lost in the crush: “Shortened by half, this would probably be a masterpiece. At six-hundred-plus pages, PrairyErth is like the prairie itself: gorgeous in its details, numbing in its immensity” (60).
grids and shards and vertical travel, Heat-Moon offers what amounts to a novel approach to place: place is an archive, comprised of the story-shards of nature and culture that often lie beneath the surface, waiting to be uncovered, documented, and reassembled.

**River-Horse**

In the same era when a young William Trogdon was experiencing a geographical awakening through summer road trips and nighttime atlas reading, he was also exploring the creek in his backyard. As he details in *River-Horse*, this process led him, at age ten, to a discovery parallel to his realization of highways as a connective network: rivers, too, knit places together. “… I suddenly realized,” he writes, “it wasn’t a dead end: that flow around my ankles actually went somewhere. Just like a road, it had a destination far beyond my sight. At home I dug into my father’s maps and discovered that the creek, no wider than I was tall, meandered into a succession of ever-larger ones, all leading to the Missouri River and on to the Mississippi, the Gulf, the open Atlantic. (*River-Horse* 32). This discovery had a transcendental effect, alerting him to the connectedness of places far beyond the borders of America:

... I was woozy with a child’s excitement as I realized that nameless creeklet was the first leg of a long voyage to Cathay, the Coral Sea, the Arctic. The waters of the world were one! Water linked the earth! The street in front of our house ran to the ends of two continents, but that creek led to the darkest jungles up the Congo, around the Cape of Good Hope, to the Ganges and bathing Hindus, even to the mountains of Tibet. Our creek was a threshold beyond which lay the realms of poesy. (32)

Thus the ecospatial insight of the global water network—a discovery made possible through the twin processes of walking and map-reading—leads to a sense of connectivity that is not only geographical but historical and literary as well, allowing the boy to imagine “put[ting] a note in a bottle and launch[ing] it nearly from my back porch on a voyage to Huck Finn’s river, to New
Orleans, perhaps the Mosquito Coast, or the mysterious Sargasso Sea, Casablanca, the very shores of the Sahara” (32). The water network, he came to understand, was the natural counterpart to the human-engineered web of roads, a circulatory system intertwined with, yet ultimately reaching beyond, America’s highway skeleton. For a person who would make his name as a writer of travels, these ecospatial, cartographical realizations were powerful and formative.

Heat-Moon’s early ability to imagine America’s watercourses seems to have led him naturally to the subject of his third book, *River-Horse: The Logbook of a Boat across America*. Like *Blue Highways*, *River-Horse* is both a personal journey and an alternative mapping of the continental United States, a supplement to Heat-Moon’s quintessential highway narrative that reimagines the U.S. by viewing it from water level. Covering 5,288 miles of rivers, lakes, and canals, Heat-Moon’s “arteriogram” (as the book jacket has it) combines the breadth of *Blue Highways* with the depth of *PrairyErth*, cutting a narrow corridor through the heart of the continent and demonstrating yet another way of encountering and representing the American landscape. *River-Horse* relies more on linear chronology and logistical detail than either *Blue Highways* or *PrairyErth*, in part because the pilot and crew of Heat-Moon’s flat-bottomed boat, *Nikawa*, must maintain a grueling schedule in order to complete the trip in a single season. Driven by what they call “The Rocky Mountain Snow Imperative” (70)—having to ascend the Continental Divide before the water level drops in summer—they also contend with bad weather, construction delays, and other pitfalls. For these reasons, *River-Horse* is the most conventional travel narrative of Heat-Moon’s first three books, a modern story of navigation and adventure

49 Heat-Moon coined the word *Nikawa* from the Osage words for river (ni) and horse (kawa) (xii).
that details the journey just as it unfolded. It is also Heat-Moon’s first narrative of extended companionship, the first in which he relies upon others for continued technical and emotional support. One friend, a driver/photographer, follows in a support vehicle with a trailer for emergencies and portages; a second companion serves as co-pilot—seven real-life people combined, for narrative unity, into a single character, called Pilotis.\(^{50}\)

Like Heat-Moon’s first two books, *River-Horse* grew out of the author/traveler’s obsessive map-reading and his thirst for unique travel experiences. As Heat-Moon puts it, “At first I was simply curious whether one could accomplish such a voyage without coming out of the water repeatedly and for many miles, but later I grew interested in the notion of what America would look like from the rivers, and I wanted to see those secret parts hidden from road travelers. Surely a journey like that would open new country and broader notions…” (*River-Horse* 5).\(^{51}\) Lacking both the subversiveness of his road trip book and the obsessiveness of his deep map, Heat-Moon’s *Logbook* nevertheless advances his ecospatial literary imagination in several important ways. First of all, *River-Horse* does indeed “open new country,” providing an important nautical supplement to his vision of the continent, a third way of seeing “the face of

\(^{50}\) The author considered the Pilotis character to be his most interesting innovation in this book, for by this device he solved the problem of having to distinguish among the people who traveled with him for different stretches and durations of the journey. Because one of his co-pilots was female, Heat-Moon judiciously avoids using third-person pronouns for Pilotis, which he counts as another literary accomplishment (Baker 56).

\(^{51}\) According to Heat-Moon’s friend and frequent travel companion Scott Chisholm, who appears in all three books (as himself in *Blue Highways*, as The Venerable Tashmoo in *PrairyErth* and other writings, and as part of the composite character, Pilotis, in *River-Horse*), Heat-Moon has publicly asserted that the travel conceits for his first three books were conceived at once, as early as 1974 (Chisholm 62). Chisholm, however, remembers this differently in his article, suggesting much later dates for Heat-Moon’s first mention of each idea, one after the other.
America”—first by car, then on foot, and now by boat. This involves both a reversal of perspective—approaching familiar cities from what now seems like a back way—and a lowering of perspective—viewing places from drainage level instead of from the more elevated highway position. This encounter with nautical space yields “broader notions,” as well, including an understanding of how space is produced and nature is managed, a power dynamic epitomized in the extended interaction of book and boat with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Heat-Moon’s river book also represents a high-water mark (to that date) in his environmentalism—implicit in Blue Highways, more strongly suggested in PrairyErth, and finally explicit here. Lastly, River-Horse emphasizes the storied aspect of America’s waterways; as equal parts substance and route, nature and culture, they emerge as ecospatial entities—equally geographical, ecological, and historical.52

Space

Not surprisingly, when Heat-Moon speaks of the inception of his river journey and book, he refers to the atlas. “I am a reader of maps,” he writes in River-Horse, “not usually nautical charts but road maps. I read them as others do holy writ, the same text again and again in quest of discoveries, and the books I’ve written each began with my gaze wandering over maps of American terrain” (4–5). Having traveled the roads of the U.S. so extensively, he “could visualize the impending end of new territory to light out for” (5) until he noticed the rivers, “the web of faint azure lines, a varicose scribing” of his atlas—a new kind of territory. Through

52 With only a few mentions in print, River-Horse has yet to be noticed by scholars. No articles on it have appeared, and even the Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing, which attends to Heat-Moon’s first two books, neglects to mention it. Only Bryzik gestures toward River-Horse, acknowledging how in it Heat-Moon “considers ecological change and resource management” (682)—a true statement, yet hardly a ringing endorsement.
intense cartographical study (and some later reconnaissance work, by auto) he went on to discover

inch by inch a theoretical route a small vessel might, at the proper time of the year, pursue westward from the Atlantic an interior course of some five thousand miles, equivalent to a fifth of the way around the world, ideally with no more than seventy-five miles of portage, to reach the Pacific in a single season. Travelers have boated across America before but never to my knowledge under those requirements. (4–5)

*River-Horse*, then, is indebted to and derived from the map in a way that neither *Blue Highways* nor even *PrairyErth* is, detailing a travel experience made possible only through the most careful map reading and route planning. The effect, as in Heat-Moon’s other books, is a strong geographical and textual awareness, an incessant linkage of narrative and map. Indeed, Heat-Moon’s purpose is to inscribe a route where none is evident. A fry-cook in Ripley, Ohio, when hearing that the crew of *Nikawa* has made it there from New York City, vocalizes one logical response to such a voyage, asking, “Can you do that?” (134).

*River-Horse* is Heat-Moon’s answer to that cartographical query. In presenting rivers as routes, waters as waterways, Heat-Moon effectively configures the natural as the (eco)spatial. Of course, this is more an embrace of history than a modern conceptualization. Watercourses were

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53 By interior, Heat-Moon means domestic (not international), and he rules out a course through the Great Lakes because several of them border Canada.

54 *Blue Highways*, with its more spontaneous route, makes use of the map somewhat retroactively; the route is interesting in retrospect but not essential to the travel experience or the book’s design. And although *PrairyErth* relies heavily on the map for insight and literary structure, Heat-Moon’s Chase County travels were arguably possible without it. In *River-Horse* this changes: the route, derived from the map, becomes a primary reason for the trip.

55 This response echoes that of Neddy Merrill’s neighbor, Mrs. Halloran, in Cheever’s “The Swimmer.” When Neddy tells her he is swimming across the county, she replies: “Why, I didn’t know one could” (733). In *River-Horse*, Heat-Moon acknowledges the cleverness of Cheever’s premise while declaiming it as a direct influence (344).
the earliest arteries of commerce and transit, a fact that Heat-Moon takes great care to emphasize. In a sense, rivers were the country’s original blue highways—and they surely have suffered a comparable decline in traffic and importance in the Interstate Era of U.S. transportation. *River-Horse* divides the continent into twelve sections, according to the following segments of navigation from Atlantic to Pacific: the Hudson River, the Erie Canal, the Lakes (Erie and Chautauqua), the Allegheny River, the Ohio River, the Mississippi River, the lower Missouri River, the Upper Missouri River, the mountain streams (approaching the Continental Divide), the Salmon River, the Snake River, and the Columbia River. (Like *PrairyErth*, the book itself is also divided into twelve sections corresponding to geography.) In an important sense, the route itself becomes the story, the answer to the geographical “Can you do that?” question.

An artistic map of the route, by Ed Richardson, adorns the book’s endpaper. Richardson’s map, titled “The Proposed Route: Nikawa,” portrays the Lower Forty-Eight as a gray landmass—slightly darker than Canada and Mexico—with the Great Lakes and some major rivers clearly drawn (though not labeled) and a few state lines faintly evident. The route is indicated by a thick white line through the upper-middle of the country, continuous but for the two major portages after Lake Erie in the East and over the Continental Divide in the West. This map indicates no cities and contains no words, giving precedence to the nation’s drainages and ultimate significance to the author’s journey through them. More painting than map, it gestures toward the romantic, adventurous aspects of the journey, eschewing details and logistics in favor of the bigger picture. This image also includes the book’s recurrent pictographic symbol, a small
labyrinth with openings at the middle-right and upper-left, suggestive of the route’s beginning and end points.\textsuperscript{56}

![River-Horse Route Map](image)

Figure 7. River-Horse Route Map

A more realistic set of in-text maps—one for every twenty-three pages or two hundred forty nautical miles, on average—accompanies the narration. These maps, credited to Ray Sterner and Stephen M. Archer, indicate the route at a greater level of detail (though nowhere in its entirety). State names and borders and prominent cities are indicated, along with names of major dams and reservoirs, all appearing superimposed upon a topographical representation that seems derived from satellite imagery. Accompanying captions identify waterways, the beginning and end points for each section, and the aquatic mileage covered; the first map, for example, is

\textsuperscript{56} Each of Heat-Moon’s first three books makes use of pictographic symbols. In \textit{Blue Highways} it is the Hopi symbol for emergence, an elaborate, circular labyrinth. In \textit{PrairyErth}, meanwhile, it is the twelve-section, open-sided grid.
labeled “The Hudson, New York Harbor to Troy, 143 river miles” (4). On this map, New
York City appears as the beginning point of the journey. Significantly, New York appears the
same size (in font and symbol) as Elizabeth, New Jersey, nearby, and Troy, New York, upriver,
continuing the leveling strategy of the Blue Highways route map: from the perspective of the
river traveler, presumably, these places are equal. These in-text maps have a straightforward yet
significant function in River-Horse, orienting the reader according to the literary cartography of
the text, enabling him or her to “follow along” with the journey. The political aspect of the map
draws upon reader familiarity with the shape of the United States while the satellite imagery
contributes a sense of topography often absent from the average road atlas. Lacking roads, these
maps of the country’s midsection emphasize terrain and drainage over highways and towns,
signifying not a vacant land but rather one characterized by the constant flow of water over its
variegated surface.

The maps contribute to one of River-Horse’s most important objectives: to enact a form
of ecospatial orientation by placing the reader in continental-nautical space, depicting “the face
of America” from water level. Heat-Moon insists that to approach America from its inland
waters is to come to understand it differently as a place, and it is to revise his view of the
continent that Heat-Moon takes the journey. He remarks at one point, “I’d come here in the
belief that I could never really know America until I saw it from the bends and reaches of its
flowing waters, from hidden spots open only to a small boat” (92). Thus Heat-Moon seeks out
nautical space as a supplement—for himself and his reader—to his previously narrated
experiences on backroads and grasslands. As he puts it, “…I wanted what I didn’t know, the riverine route across America” (271)

![Map of the Upper Missouri River Route](image)

**Figure 8. Upper Missouri River Route (River-Horse)**

More specifically, nautical space in *River-Horse* assumes two prominent characteristics: levelness and confinement. Whereas the topography of the continent varies dramatically from east to west (in *Nikawa*’s direction of travel), with hills and mountains thrusting up haphazardly, rivers cut a relatively level course across the terrain, creating a steadily sloping route uphill or downhill. For the boat traveler, the surroundings may rise and fall dramatically, but the river itself dictates a comparatively constant ascent or descent. To travel the natural course of these continental waterways (or upstream, against it), Heat-Moon suggests, is to experience this

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57 Nor is this supplement sufficient for Heat-Moon, who wants to see from every available angle. At one point he remarks, “As I had several times before, I wished we could make our crossing twice, once on the water and once along the surrounding shores and ridges that yield so different a perception of river country” (361).
relative leveling of landscape. As Heat-Moon explains, river travelers “never have their route perceptibly climb or descend as does a highway to the sweet and sour of the unexpected; people who think driving across southern Florida or central Kansas is an encounter with ultimate levelness should try a stretch on a river” (114).

The experience of nautical space in River-Horse is also, frequently, one of confinement. Heat-Moon writes that “…[a] river isn’t a place of wide or deep vistas; its valley and usual border of trees and its ceaseless bendings so confine the view that we never saw more than a couple of miles at a time. The prospect of an ocean, a lake, a mountain, those you can gorge on, but a river you take in piecemeal” (239). Such confinement is even more pronounced in such tight places as the basalt cliffs along the lower Hudson River (technically a fjord), the willowed tangles of the upper Missouri River, and especially the “narrow realm” of Hells Canyon on Idaho’s Salmon River (437). The effect is amplified and exacerbated whenever Nikawa passes through any of the scores of locks between Astoria, New York, and Astoria, Oregon. Inside the locks, where the walls literally close in, the travelers’ vision is further narrowed even as their transit is enabled through or around stretches of previously formidable aquatic topography. In the most vivid depiction of lock passage, a prose poem of a paragraph, Heat-Moon describes the otherworldly experience of ascending one section of the Erie Canal:

the big portals closing us into a near dark, thousands of pounds of flowing river pushing against the forward gates, … a sense of foreboding and being trapped in a place not meant for humankind, a waft of fish, …Nikawa bobbing atop the paused water, voices from unseen people above as if speaking from another realm, everywhere the fecund dampness of a boxed river waiting to sunder the concrete imposition, … our almost imperceptible rising atop the boil…, then we’re above ground, the forward gates shudder against the river insistence, … and we breast off from the wall, the engines turning over, and we’re again in the river… (53–4)
With thirty-seven locks on the Erie Canal, twenty more on the Ohio, and so on across the continent, this process recurs frequently, the confinement of the riverbanks giving way to that of swinging metal doors, a continuous locking in and locking out.

By contrast, however, the voluntary confinement of river travel also offers a form of freedom—that of release from traffic, city, people, and sprawl. This is particularly evident at the beginning of the journey, when Nikawa passes New York City. In this case, the city—not the river—appears bounded and confining, with streets “entombed in long shadows” and buildings that “seemed to leave little room for humanity” (10), as opposed to the cosmopolitan port of entry most people probably imagine. The river, meanwhile, offers a “satisfying narrowness” (10), an “intimacy” that is only enhanced when the city vanishes sooner than anticipated:

One of the surprises of the Hudson, partly because the river sits deeply in its narrow valley, is the way New York City quickly disappears to leave a boat traveler suddenly in a world almost sylvan with more leafage and rocks and river than anything from human hands. It was hard to believe we had so easily passed through the length of a city with six thousand miles of streets by sailing right through its watery heart. (12–13)

Such is the opportunity nautical space affords the traveler: the chance for voluntary boundedness, to see from a lowered and often limited perspective that is nevertheless meaningfully different from other vantages and ways of seeing.

In the process of presenting nautical space specifically, *River-Horse* also offers a sense of spatial production at large, particularly in its descriptions of the interactions between cities and rivers. Cities develop according to both natural and cultural factors—topography and rainfall, economics and politics—and the negotiation is especially evident along the mercurial backbone of a river. With his interests in both natural world and built infrastructure, Heat-Moon highlights this ongoing negotiation especially well in *River-Horse*. For example, while descending the
lower Ohio River, he describes how “The bottomlands became wide enough to give industry sprawl space, and the entering streams bore names like Lead Creek, Muddy Gut, Big Slough…” (157). In this case, river topography enables and/or dictates a certain kind of development. At such moments, River-Horse provides a glimpse into the when, where, and why of American settlement in relation to its nautical space, bearing witness to the ongoing process of spatial production between settlement and waterfront.

A dichotomy develops in the narrative, between cities that, in the author’s view, embrace the water and those that “have turned their backs” to it (34). Somewhere along the upper Missouri River, Heat-Moon writes: “On the river today between Hermann, Missouri, and Fort Benton [Montana], there are no longer any towns that really front the Big Muddy because those other places have moved to higher ground, or the river has moved, or up has gone a levee or a floodwall, or a spread of industry has come in. Except in books, the historical link between the river and its towns has nearly vanished” (372). But Fort Benton, he goes on to say, “still embraces the river, and one can walk out of a café or shop and take a few steps straight to the water” (372). Washington, Missouri, is another such place, “the lower town still possessed of much of its past, its streets coming down like creeks to the water; because of judicious location, it is without a blockading levee or floodwall” (199). Heat-Moon appreciates these towns not only for the accessibility they offer boaters but also for the sense of history and topography they exude.

At the other end of the spectrum lies a town like Portsmouth, Ohio, “a town with a first cause deriving from the Ohio [River] itself, born of it, but now making itself into something else, a leopard wanting to become a lion” (130). Portsmouth, Heat-Moon writes,
“seemed bent on forgetting, denying, and hiding the river, turning itself into a place where the land voyager cruises up in the family sport utility vehicle, ties to a parking slot, and rafts the aisles of the megamall. … [A] traveler on the Ohio doesn’t see the town but rather a high, long, and forbidding concrete floodwall like a medieval rampart…” (130). A larger city, Heat-Moon’s childhood hometown, evinces a similar posture on a grander scale. He writes that Kansas City, “born of the Missouri, has turned away from its great genetrix more than almost any other river city in America. If you want, for example, just to see the Missouri here, you have to cross a bridge at breakneck speed or take an elevator in a downtown skyscraper” (226). Such cities, owing their origins to rivers, now look upon them with indifference, leaving them neglected and underappreciated (making them comparable, as places, to the ones highlighted in Blue Highways and PrairyErth). Consequently, from the perspectives of river travel and history, the cities themselves appear forbidding and cut off.

Notably absent from Heat-Moon’s accounts of cities’ turning away from their aquatic “genetrices,” however, is the acknowledgement of rivers as the original commercial corridors around which social space was previously constructed. As strip malls now grow by interstate interchanges, so the pilings of industry and commerce once sprouted along American rivers. Yet the older form of spatial production is celebrated while suburban sprawl (as in Blue Highways) is execrated—all according to Heat-Moon’s hierarchy of topistic authenticity. While River-Horse provides an account of contemporary spatial production, that process is depicted as the outcome (usually negative) of modernity and not, more accurately, as a practice dating as far back as the earliest settlements along those ancient trade routes. (In this sense, a river town’s “historic
district” contains the seeds of its suburbs.) Heat-Moon surely understands the forces at work, but he uncharacteristically misses an opportunity to make the deeper historical connection.\(^{58}\)

Moreover, Heat-Moon occasionally misplaces his anger at contemporary spatial practices onto the citizens of a place rather than onto the economic and political structures that govern them. Thus, in Kansas City, he accuses residents of “forgetfulness” of the Missouri River, claiming there is “no spiritual link between them and it and only a distant awareness of its connection to their iced tea, potted geraniums, and baptized babies. Living in such a topographical Land of Nod, they are little different from most other Americans, who nevertheless seem to awaken when properly nudged” (226). Here Heat-Moon blames individuals for the way that city space has developed, rather than blaming the social structures for removing people from topography and thus enabling their ignorance.

For the most part, though, Heat-Moon distinguishes between the mentality of a city’s residents and the choices of its designers. He finds a stark contrast in a place like Evansville, Ohio, where a historic downtown has been paved over in the name of “urban renewal” while the areas closest to the river maintain an aura of authenticity:

Except for the old courthouse and post office, the town center was full of architecture memorable for its shoddy temporariness, a congelation of sameness, an obliteration of time-earned character, a grid to get away from, which indeed the people had done so they could go down to the fecund riverbank with the eccentric and vernacular cookers and ovens, down where traditions lived and histories clearly continued, where city engineers seem never to have walked. (160)

In places like this, embracing history means embracing the river, a fact the citizens seem to understand even if their leaders and planners do not. In his river journey (unlike in Chase

\(^{58}\) Heat-Moon would not be immune to charges of an acute, romantic, environmental nostalgia, of which his discussions of the city-river relationship provide only one example.
Heat-Moon has comparably few opportunities to interact with people and capture their sentiment toward place. Yet by documenting river cities’ relative posture toward the water—of embrace or denial—he provides an account of American spatial production at its various developmental stages, a story that becomes one of the more salient impressions of the nautical perspective in this narrative.

Nature

As with Heat-Moon’s other works, *River-Horse* conveys not only the spatiality of environments but their ecological aspects as well. As a follow-up to *Blue Highways* and *PrairyErth*, *River-Horse* offers another example of what Renee Bryzik calls Heat-Moon’s “ecocentric travel”; he motors and paddles his way across the continental waters as a new way of experiencing American places. Significantly, in his planning for the trip, Heat-Moon envisioned it as a kind of nature experience. In a 1999 interview with C-SPAN, he explains:

> …[W]e really wanted to feel that—that we were traveling in—in a more remote world than—than it—it often is possible to do today in America. We wanted…to have something of a wilderness experience and clearly, much of the time, we wanted to have a sense of—of these rivers in the nineteenth-century aspect when America really was—was still in touch with her rivers. … We wanted to remember when America loved and—and cherished her rivers. (“River-Horse”)

In this formulation, seeing the country from water level amounts to an ecospatial perspective involving not only the aforementioned change in spatial perception (lowered, confined), but also an encounter with history and nature, “a wilderness experience” not at all limited to designated wilderness areas.

While Heat-Moon’s travels in *River-Horse* do take him through numerous wild, scenic, and protected areas (notably in the Rocky Mountains, on either side of the Continental Divide), the journey as a whole upsets conventional divisions between nature and city, rural and urban. In
the following passage, taken from the Erie Canal section in upstate New York, Heat-Moon

opines on the benefits of river perspective as opposed to that of the highway:

Between Utica and Rome, only fourteen miles, industries came down to canalside, although a screen of scrub trees camouflaged most of them, effectively creating an appearance of ruralness so that we slipped past downtown Utica before realizing sixty thousand people were moving just beyond the woody scrim of narrow bottomland. In river travel today, perhaps nothing is finer than arrival in the center of a town without having to undergo those purgatorial miles of vile sprawl, hideous billboards, and reiterated franchises where we become fugitives of the ganged chains in an endless surround of no placeness, where the shabbiest of architectural detritus washes up against the center of a town. To come in by canal or river is to see a genuine demarcation between country and city and to fetch up in the historic heart of things the way travelers once did when towns had discernible limits, actual edges, and voyagers knew when they had entered or departed a place. To approach Boston or San Francisco by the bay or New Orleans or St. Paul by river is to arrive suddenly and merrily like Dorothy before Oz—out of the woods and into the light. (48)

On the one hand, water travel grants Heat-Moon’s wish of eliminating suburban-industrial sprawl, placing him directly in the “historic heart of things.” He pines for the old days and the old spaces with their more comprehensible borders, and river travel helps him accomplish this fantasy. It is, in part, an environmentalist’s fantasy, wishing away the sprawl, and Heat-Moon seems pleased by the mere “appearance of ruralness.” On the other hand, however, he understands it to be just an appearance, an illusion produced by the canal’s low elevation and dense vegetation, which combine to obscure the more unsightly elements from view. The so-called “genuine demarcation between country and city” exists only from this privileged perspective—for the reader/historian/naturalist to whom this fantasy appeals. Heat-Moon’s notion of genuineness (a synonym for authenticity) here can safely be read as the pre-industrial
absence of the interstitial “noplaceness,” where place signifies historical and natural fecundity; both nature and the city are genuine, it seems, but between them nothing is.⁵⁹

In another instance, Heat-Moon reflects upon the different aspect of a place called East Liverpool, Ohio, “a town I’d known before only from the road and thought it possessing a worn grime similar to that of its English counterpart. But from the river we saw old homes atop the high bank, slender steeples, and a graceful 1905 suspension bridge. It was for such changed views I had come” (112). The word views here does double duty for Heat-Moon, indicating both the improved scenery from the river perspective and the lasting image of the place that he will carry with him as part of the “face of America”: from this point on, for Heat-Moon (and his readers), East Liverpool will be steeples as well as grime, history as well as industry.

Heat-Moon also claims that “River travel commonly makes this country appear as it ought to be: a sensible number of people blending their homes, barns, and businesses with a natural landscape free of those intrusive abuses junked up alongside our highways” (92). Nikawa encounters plenty of rubbish on its coast-to-coast journey, but legislation and enforcement have combined, in Heat-Moon’s estimation, to make the waters noticeably cleaner than the roadsides. This cleaner landscape is part of “the way it ought to be,” but so, apparently, are sparseness of population and harmony between natural and built environments, and it’s safe to say that few places measure up to Heat-Moon’s ideals, even from privileged vantage of the river pilot.

These biases notwithstanding, River-Horse generally avoids romanticizing nature in the American landscape. On the contrary, by disclosing all the exigencies of contemporary nautical

⁵⁹ This is fundamental Heat-Moon, a line of thought traceable through the heart of Chase County in PrairieErth to the back roads of Blue Highways. For all his advocacy of underprivileged places such as these, a treatise on the suburbs—his epitome of place inauthenticity—is not forthcoming.
travel, *River-Horse* continually points to the highly managed (and frequently mismanaged) nature of America’s waterways. *River-Horse* is a narrative of travel, but it is also a narrative of infrastructure, an extended observation of the bridges, locks, canals, dams, railroads, and levees that function as underappreciated social and political connectors and mediators of place. While all of Heat-Moon’s works engage this issue to a certain extent—Chase County being of some interest due to its lack of infrastructure—in *River-Horse* we see it done most overtly and effectively. In revealing the extent to which our major waterways, once free-flowing and mighty, have been reduced to systems of locks and reservoirs, *River-Horse* documents the ways in which the spaces we usually consider natural are, in fact, highly constructed, monitored, and mediated.

This fact is evident at least as early as the Erie Canal section of the travel/narrative. Without this work of nineteenth-century engineering, passage from the Hudson River to Lake Erie would not have been possible. Heat-Moon ruled out the St. Lawrence Seaway-Great Lakes route because he wanted to travel no international waters, a rule he bent on the Lake Erie portion of his trip. The canal utilizes existing water bodies like the Mohawk River and Lake Oneida; alternating between a river and a ditch, it is both a natural and a built waterway that Heat-Moon finds quite scenic. The first lock system on the Erie, permitting passage around the steep Cohoes Falls, he describes as a “hydrological escalator” enabling an ascent—“like a gentle rise in a hot-air balloon” (39)—of 165 feet in under two hours. This engineering marvel sets the tone for the rest of the journey, which comes to be defined, in part, by similar structures, not all of them ecologically (or even commercially) beneficial.

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60 Heat-Moon ruled out the St. Lawrence Seaway-Great Lakes route because he wanted to travel no international waters, a rule he bent on the Lake Erie portion of his trip.

61 “…Pilotis preferred the river sections, while I liked the canal cuts but, even more, the change from one to the other” (39). In Heat-Moon’s preference for these interstitial zones we have a convenient symbol of his ecospatial imagination: he values nature and culture equally but seems especially interested in the spaces in between.
At the center of this aspect of the narrative is the United States government, in particular its Army Corps of Engineers, with whom Nikawa and its crew are forced to interact with great frequency. The Corps awaits at every manmade impediment along the Ohio, Missouri, Snake, and Columbia Rivers, not only operating the locks through which all boats must pass but also controlling, at times, the very flow of water past the reservoirs (particularly on the Missouri). Nikawa, therefore, is constantly subject to the various rules, schedules, patrols, personalities, and whims of government agents. Add to this the actual engineering and construction of these projects, and the Corps’ work is evident at almost all points of the journey. Heat-Moon rarely holds back his opinions of such influence, noting its detrimental effects on culture and ecology and ensuring that the (over-) engineering of these rivers is among their most salient characteristics.62

At what point, River-Horse seems to ask, does a river cease to be a river? The case of the Missouri, the lengthiest (and Heat-Moon’s personal favorite) body of water on the journey, is most interesting in this regard. The Corps has so altered this river—reducing its surface area by half—that it hardly resembles its original form. Heat-Moon writes that “Because of changes in this century, the Missouri is at least three different rivers: the navigable end, the giant reservoirs behind the giant dams in the Dakotas and eastern Montana, and the mostly free-flowing sections behind the giant dams in the Dakotas and eastern Montana, and the mostly free-flowing sections

62 The Corps appears as a sinister presence in Heat-Moon’s work as early as Blue Highways. On Roanoke Island, he comments sarcastically on their propensity for “redesigning and stabilizing nature” (57); in the Atchafalaya Basin he suggests that the Corps “altered not just the Atchafalaya and a great swamp but also one of the distinctive ethnic peoples in America” (119); and from the Stonehenge replica site on the Columbia River he makes an overt anti-dam statement. In PrairyErth, he mentions the role of the Corps in displacing yet another Native group, the Kansa (or Kaw), who, prior to the flooding of their Oklahoma land allotment, had to relocate not only their council house but also a cemetery uphill to avoid inundation from a dam project (585). By contrast, Heat-Moon also details his interaction with one ecologically-minded Corpsman, someone who understands nature’s balances and the way the Corps disrupts them (259).
of the Far West” (242)—not a river, then, but Rocky Mountain streams giving way to massive manmade lakes and, farther down, a large canal. Somewhere below Columbia, Missouri, he observes:

The Missouri we saw on that May afternoon was little like the one those hundred chroniclers recorded [between 1714 and 1861], for the Army engineers have changed it from a river of ten thousand channels, chutes, islands, towheads, meanders, marshes, backwaters, slackwaters, sloughs, sandbars, and wrenchingly tight bends into a mildly curving conduit. … Instead of [islands] there are rock wing-dikes, five to ten for every mile, that straitjacket the river and force its current to scour the bottom to self-maintain a barge-navigable waterway. There is, however, little commercial navigation on the Missouri, unless you call Corps service boats or private sand-dredges navigation. (211)

In Heat-Moon’s account, the Corps designs and maintains the river in the name of commerce but primarily to serve its own ends; meanwhile, Great Plains towns are left susceptible to massive flooding that the drained river valleys—wetlands turned farmlands—can no longer absorb.

Along the Snake and Columbia Rivers in the far West, Heat-Moon encounters less channelization but more dams. In the name of hydroelectricity, dams in the Northwest have obstructed salmon reproduction and eradicated native cultures in the process.63 The Snake, Heat-Moon writes, “suffers from” twenty impoundments: “Despite other pretexts, those dams exist largely to employ the Corps of Engineers and make big corporate money selling power to citizens as far away as California who simply must have their cans of beef stew opened electrically, their roofs outlined with Christmas lights, and their socks dried by turning a dial to

63 In one powerful statement, Heat-Moon underscores the impact one particular dam had on Native Americans along the Columbia: “In 1957, when the engineers closed the gates of The Dalles Dam for the first time, the river took only five hours to cover the rocks and the ancient way of life they fostered—an event analogous to the virtual eradication of the bison and the consequent cultural decline of the Plains Indians” (477–8). Thus what took the federal government several decades a century earlier—the destruction of species and cultures—was, in this instance, accomplished in a single day.
number seven” (455). By the same token, he finds the Columbia so altered that its few remaining islands give it “the aspect of a real river again instead of deep pools of human artifice controlled by keyboards and silicon chips” (475). This statement, above all, conveys the predominant sense of nature in *River-Horse*: seeing America from its intracontinental waters means calling into question what in nature is “real” and what is “artifice,” and the nation’s waterways emerge more as a highly managed natural-cultural network than a romantic environmentalist’s ecological given.

At the same time, *River-Horse* also contains a strong vein of naturalist’s observation. In places, Heat-Moon and his crew get the remote “wilderness experience” they desire, including rich habitat, picturesque scenery, and reduced human contact. He notes the group’s many encounters with bird, animal, and plant species along the way, several of them appearing unexpectedly because of their proximity to built environments (e.g., a cougar drinking from the Erie Canal, a beaver lodging at Cincinnati). While canoeing a stretch of the upper Missouri, Heat-Moon observes the teeming life in the long pools beneath, calling them “a wilderness of the inimical” (305). A bit later, he writes, in abbreviated logbook form, that “Almost without exception, since above Harlem River we meet no other boats or people, and America seems land empty of residents; here, our fellow citizens are magpies, geese, gulls, terns, pelicans…” (334). Even farther on, he applies his ornithological knowledge to identify the call of a lone bittern (350) and is pleased to observe both a Lewis woodpecker (432) and a Clark’s nutcracker (415), two namesakes from the Corps of Discovery. Such sightings not only disrupt the frequent monotony of boating, but they also, at times, leave the author optimistic about the country’s environmental future.
On the whole, Heat-Moon’s experiences on the water lead him to his boldest literary embrace of environmentalism (to that date), for in *River-Horse* he displays a willingness to speak out on behalf of vulnerable places and beings—namely, river habitats and inhabitants—and against the powers that threaten them. In this sense, *River-Horse* is Heat-Moon’s most politically candid work. “One of the things I want *River-Horse* to do,” he said in a 1999 interview, “is awaken people to the necessity of protecting our waters, and I think the first step is to have some kind of link with rivers — if nothing more than understanding a bit of their history, and their role in the community. That’s a giant first step” (“River-Horse”). Beyond pollution and over-engineering, *River-Horse* also contains statements on such subjects as overgrazing, flooding, mining, invasive species, and habitat loss. Moreover, the book concludes with an afterword entitled “If You Want to Help,” a detailed list of six major nonprofit groups, like the Nature Conservancy and American Rivers, that are “working to improve or correct certain environmental problems (including historic preservation)” (507). In perhaps the greatest diatribe in all of Heat-Moon’s work, he complains about the cattle grazing in the upper Missouri River Valley, where ranching is permitted even in ecologically “protected” areas:

Considered against declining species—birds, plants, animals—the need for more meat in this nation is ludicrous; considered against the soil erosion and siltation that cattle create, the consumption of more beef is stupid; considered against the fecal pollution of our waters, the sale of more franchise burgers is criminal. … In the arid West, streamsides support three quarters of the wildlife, but Americans

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Bryzik argues that *Blue Highways* contains an environmental epiphany for Heat-Moon after which his work becomes more overtly environmental: “These [later] texts exemplify the post-epiphany narrator whose dynamic presence in the texts more explicitly amplifies ecological processes and ecocritical work. After rehabilitating his own environmental imagination and viewing himself within the larger ecological community, Least Heat-Moon’s other work contributes in a more self-aware way to environmental history, criticism, and activism” (682).
still unwittingly accept profligate and outdated laws that primarily benefit the wealthy while permitting them to poison the rest of us downstream. (354) Such statements display Heat-Moon’s broad and nuanced grasp of environmental issues pertinent to the places he visits. Traveling the waters brings Heat-Moon into close contact with these environments and into greater understanding of the natural and cultural forces that govern them, and this ecospatial awareness seems to lead him, naturally, into a position of environmental advocacy.

Story

While engaging with the spatial and ecological aspects of place, *River-Horse*—like *Blue Highways* and *PrairyErth*—also builds upon the storied nature of American spaces. Due to the isolated quality of the boating experience (interaction with local residents is limited), Heat-Moon does less in this book to document oral history along the way; yet he nevertheless conveys a sense of rivers as places, and environments in *River-Horse* are buttressed at all points by Heat-Moon’s depictions of the natural world as site and source of human life and human story. “…I was there not simply to learn American rivers,” he writes at one point, “but to learn the *rivers in their histories*…” (327, emphasis in original). This means, once again, drawing upon the archive of literary representations to cultivate a multiperspectival, transhistorical sense of place.

As an ostensible literary form, the logbook (not wholly unlike the “deep map”) highlights the sense in which Heat-Moon’s river book attempts both to build upon and contribute to the

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65 This particular rant occurs in the Russell Wildlife Refuge, in Montana, and he faults its managers for considering cattle—“those Jaws that Ate the West”—wildlife (353). However, not all of Heat-Moon’s statements on government regulation are negative. On the Salmon River—where his rafting trip was subject to a federally assigned departure date—he observes how the government reduces human impact in the area by limiting permits and legislating leave-no-trace principles (438). In several other places he praises the anti-pollution measures that have led to reductions in solid and chemical waste in American waters.
ongoing history of American waters. *River-Horse* is comprised of eighty-one chapters, one for each day of the journey, and the author acknowledges that its formal basis is “a nineteenth-century logbook, a ship’s logbook” (*River-Horse*). Heat-Moon, a notable collector of American narratives of exploration and travel, no doubt perceives his own work as part of the same tradition. Whereas with *Blue Highways* Heat-Moon began with a logbook of his journey before converting it (after some eight drafts) into narrative form, with *River-Horse* he intended the finished product to resemble, formally, the rough draft, to the point that certain sections of the book are taken directly from his original notes. The logbook even assumes a physical presence in the narrative as Heat-Moon worries over its security while whitewater rafting down the upper Salmon River. In contrast to his first two books, then, *River-Horse* posits a stronger correlation between time and place, experience and narration.

Equally crucial to *River-Horse* is the sense of rivers as routes, as natural highways providing passage for people and goods since the beginning of human habitation in North America. Heat-Moon cultivates a sense of history across the continent and construes *Nikawa’s*

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66 Heat-Moon told Brian Lamb of C-SPAN, “The book is based upon a 19th century log book, a ship's log book, and it does turn out to be almost a chapter per day, although [there are] some chapters where I put several days together. But by chance, it played out that way” (“River Horse”).

67 Of his book collection, he said in 2000 that there are “more than twelve hundred. … Those books are about nothing other than traveling or exploring in—in the United States, the lower forty-eight states. And I think there are probably about another—another four hundred that I haven't been able to come up with yet, but I'm trying to—I'm trying, in kind of an encyclopedic way, to gather all of those books, and I've—I have put in my will that—that this collection will go to the University of Missouri, the Rare Book Room” (*Voyage*).

68 In logbook form, he writes: “I fear, above anything else on this river, losing my logbook; better I should go under than this most important object in my life. Entries in waterproof ink and journal bagged in plastic and boxed in aluminum where it stays while on river as I rely on pencil and pocket notebook; if I saw logbook go down I’d dive for it—stupid but necessary resolve” (435).
journey as a kind of recapitulation of historical travel patterns. River travel, he suggests, is
unique in the way it enables a peculiar overlapping of human stories along these natural sites:

More than any other kind of travel, floating a river means following a natural
corridor, for moving water must stay true to the cast of the land, and we liked
knowing our way was so primeval and, what’s more, that in every mile we were
recapitulating human routes of the previous eight thousand or more years. No
other form of travel can do that, for no trail, no road, is so old, so primordial, so
unchanged in its path. The river, alone in nature, makes its own destinations, and
we enjoyed feeling that the high-banked Ohio, its course as untransformed as any
long river east of the Rockies, was taking us there; not even the locks and dams
much altered the perception. In our search for the essence of American water
passage, this retrocognition was of the first order. (127–8)

Although Heat-Moon exaggerates in order to makes his point about nautical history—investing
rhetorically in the “unchanged” aspect of “every mile,” despite his careful account of the
engineered aspects of these rivers—his point is well taken. Even as the rivers have changed, their
function as transit corridors has not: except where humans have intervened, people and goods
still move along the waters in the same directions as before.

For Heat-Moon, “retrocognition” means comprehending how history uniquely overlaps
with geography and nature on the rivers. In this way, Heat-Moon engages with rivers not only as
routes but also as places in their own right. In contrast to a town or a county, a river’s literal
travel trajectories, downstream and upstream, bring the figurative trajectories (a la Massey) of
human narrative into convenient alignment. Thus, the river’s confinement is not only spatially
but also historically binding, powerfully drawing stories, as well as waters, to its peculiar gravity.
River-Horse attests to this possibility, offering a sense of nautical spaces as places where things
have happened, even pointing out specific areas that are especially deeply or thickly “historied” (306).

To represent this discursive aspect of place, Heat-Moon draws once again upon an archive of written accounts of travelers gone by, blending these narratives with his own in a multiperspectival rendering of aquatic places. Each chapter opens with an “iconogram,” a long quotation from another writer’s account of the area covered in the chapter. These twelve excerpts range in date from 1805 to 1995, in author from early explorers and travelers (e.g., Meriwether Lewis, Charles Dickens) to contemporary travel writers (William Dietrich), all of whom—it bears mentioning—are male. Older passages comment upon bygone scenery and ways of life while the contemporary ones convey the altered status of rivers in the modern era. Heat-Moon includes additional stories and excerpts within the chapters, too, providing some account of important sites or interesting lore.

The most prominent and persistent supplemental story in River-Horse is that of Heat-Moon’s namesakes, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. From the time Nikawa passes Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers combine to form the

69 He writes, for example: “I think no America river per mile is deeper in history, art, and perhaps literature than the Hudson…” (22). Likewise, he points out “the most deeply historied dozen miles of the upper Missouri,” a place in the Dakotas once host to Forts Mandan and Clark (306). In such instances he refers to recorded history, with the recognition that each river place has a deeper history to which we have no textual access.

70 The passage from Dietrich’s Northwest Passage provides a fitting preface to the Columbia River section, a prelude to Heat-Moon’s thoughts on the artificiality of modern rivers: “The Columbia is our twentieth-century river. Its dams represent the optimistic faith in technology of the century’s beginning, and the restless misgivings about large-scale engineering at the century’s end. It is the river of the turbine, dynamo, the reactor, and airplane. It is the river of Tom Swift, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Popular Mechanics, and Nagasaki. … It is a river so transformed as seemingly invented. If you want to see how America dreamed at the height of the American Century, come to the Columbia” (464).

71 Heat-Moon’s given name is William Lewis Trogdon.
Ohio, Heat-Moon’s team follows much of the course Lewis and Clark traveled nearly two centuries prior: down the Ohio, up the Mississippi to St. Louis (where the rest of the Corps of Discovery joined them), up the Missouri, and down the Snake and the Columbia to the Pacific Ocean. Heat-Moon claims that the similarity between Nikawa’s route and that of the Lewis and Clark is incidental, not fundamental, to his journey: “Below the mouth of the Clearwater at Lewiston [Idaho],” he writes, “we again picked up the wake of the Corps of Discovery, not because we sought it out but because it is the most complete water route to the Pacific” (455). While this may be true, Heat-Moon cites so frequently from the journals of Lewis and Clark as to make companions of them, and his reflections mingle with theirs to offer a transhistorical view of numerous sites that would hardly be remarkable otherwise.

Whether intentionally or not, Heat-Moon’s journey does consciously retrace that of America’s other influential Corps. On a now-flooded portion of the upper Missouri River, Heat-Moon remarks, with no small amount of reverence: “Because the stone walls so narrow the river, we knew for the first time we were moving precisely in the wake of Lewis and Clark, albeit a good many feet above the surface they saw; there are few other places on the Missouri where a voyager can say with such certainty, Exactly here they passed” (385, emphasis in original). Depending on one’s point of view, Heat-Moon’s Lewis and Clark fanaticism culminates either when he begins to have dreams about them (340) or else when he organizes a huge dinner in which he and his friends sample eleven kinds of wild game that the Corps of Discovery might have eaten—from bighorn meatloaf to boiled beavertail—in an act of “gustatory history” (424). In any case, River-Horse maintains a more intimate relationship with Lewis and Clark than with any other personage along the way, creating a strong sense of geographical, historical, and
textual alignment. On the relationship between the expeditions, Heat-Moon writes that “…unlike those first captains to come this way, we were after neither empire nor science; we were there simply to experience the empire, learn the science, and report it to those who might not ever make the journey. As Pilotis said on another occasion, perhaps presumptuously, ‘Our voyage is a kind of fulfillment of their voyage’” (457).

For readers, the Lewis and Clark material adds to the overall sense in River-Horse of waterways as places with both natural and cultural histories. In boating across the continent, Heat-Moon and his companions undertook a highly bounded journey, as narrow as the rivers themselves and the seasonal timeframe during which they are navigable. If the overall feeling of River-Horse is that of confinement, as I noted above, this is not to say that place itself emerges as bounded or confined; on the contrary, Nikawa’s course becomes one place among the many: new in the sense that no one had ever traveled the same route under the same conditions, old in the sense that all of those watery locales between the Hudson and the Columbia have histories and identities of their own, with which Heat-Moon engages along the way. For Heat-Moon, rivering is a way of “open[ing] new country and broader notions,” a way of adding (supplementally, archivally) to his and his readers’ understanding of America as a vast and complex ecospatial entity.

Terminus

By placing the first three major works of William Least Heat-Moon in the context of my theory of ecospatiality, I have imposed a framework upon his writing that isn’t explicitly there. Certainly his writing is grounded in place in a way that few authors can claim, yet rarely does he address the topics of space, nature, and story per se. Rather, these concepts are expertly united in
Heat-Moon’s writing, to the extent that one must really work to disarticulate them. To separate them, as I have done here, is to read against the grain somewhat, for the excellence of Heat-Moon’s place-based writing is the way he consistently attends to these three elements at once. Thus a “blue highway” is a line on a map, a wildlife crossing, and a forgotten conduit of culture. A nondescript Kansas county is, in fact, “a deep landscape in slow rotation at the center of a sphere and radiating infinite lines in an indefinite number of directions” (PrairyErth 246), an ancient seabed atop an extinct mountain range, and an archive brimming with stories past and present. And a river is a determinant of human settlement and spatial development, a “wilderness of the inimical,” and a palimpsest of human history.

In his biography of Heat-Moon for American Nature Writers, David Teague writes that “objective representations of the landscape provide the structure for [Blue Highways and PrairyErth], while [Heat-Moon’s] explorations of what people do as they live on the land provide the substance” (514). Teague well captures the spirit of Heat-Moon’s work as grounded in place and the human experience of it, and from a formal standpoint, Teague’s analysis also holds: Blue Highways, for example, could easily be characterized as a series of interviews framed and connected by descriptions of travel and environments. However, this kind of a statement also imposes (perhaps implicitly) a certain hierarchy of interest: substance over structure, action over environment, people over place. Any such hierarchy, I contend, would contradict the spirit of Heat-Moon’s writing, which consistently presents the human-environment dynamic as an ongoing negotiation within an ecospatial and historical framework.

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72 This is almost certainly not Teague’s intent, since his article highlights the environmental aspects of Blue Highways and PrairyErth and makes a case for Heat-Moon as a nature writer.
It would be much more accurate to say that, in *Blue Highways*, *PrairyErth*, and *River-Horse*, Heat-Moon uses unique travel experiences, derived from cartographical premises, to structure his literary investigations of place. To put it in Teague’s terms, Heat-Moon’s descriptions of places are just as *substantial* as the stories he gathers about them. Indeed, he presents stories as components of places—not vice versa. Heat-Moon’s work embodies theories of place as a host of *trajectories* (Massey) or a *matrix of energies* (Walter). To convey the meaning of place is Heat-Moon’s real objective, and to do so is to represent the entire matrix, offering a sense of history and topography, nature and culture. In the process of determining which places we as readers are looking at—from backroads to riverfronts, prairies to headwaters—these narratives also contain an argument for how we should see them: not as static sites but rather, simultaneously, as geospatial zones, ecological habitats, and *socio-historical* processes, with space, nature, and story emerging as the constitutive elements in the archive of place. His writing, in other words, amounts to an ecospatial literary topistics that offers us a map for comprehending and navigating places in the world and in the text.
CHAPTER THREE
ECOSPATIAL STEINBECK COUNTRY:
SURVEYING JOHN STEINBECK’S SALINAS VALLEY WATERSHED

In the fall of 1960, long after he had written his best novels, moved away from California, and generally tired of his well-deserved fame, John Steinbeck stood once again upon a three thousand-foot peak overlooking the Salinas Valley, the region he grew up in and brought to life in much of his fiction. Fremont’s Peak, as Steinbeck called it, stands at the northern end of the Gabilan mountain range a few miles northeast of Salinas. The highest point in the Gabilans, it offers visitors views of the Salinas River to the south, the Santa Lucia range to the southwest, the Pacific Ocean at Monterey Bay to the west, and the Santa Clara Valley to the north. Steinbeck’s drive to the summit with his poodle, Charley, in his camper-truck, Rocinante, was “a formal and sentimental thing,” a nostalgic return to the site that, as a boy, he had imagined would be his final resting place (183). “This solitary stone peak,” he writes in Travels with Charley (1962), “overlooks the whole of my childhood and youth, the great Salinas Valley stretching south for nearly a hundred miles, the town of Salinas where I was born now spreading

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1 The summit’s official name (according to the U.S. government) is the non-possessive “Fremont Peak,” and it was formerly known as Gabilan Peak, after the Spanish word for hawk (Gudde 114). The area became a state park in 1936 and is home to a popular night sky observatory. As Martha Heasley Cox first noted, the peak was visible from an upstairs window of Steinbeck’s boyhood home (47), and he portrays the peak’s illumination at both dawn and dusk in East of Eden (49).

2 Today, the Santa Clara Valley is better known by its technological nickname, Silicon Valley. It is home to both the Steinbeck Archives at San Jose State University and the nearly-completed Apple “spaceship.”
like crab grass toward the foothills” (183). He goes on to recount how, in a ritualistic way, he recited for the dog a condensed personal geography of the valley below:

You wouldn’t know, my Charley, that right down there, in that little valley, I fished for trout with your namesake, my Uncle Charley. And over there—see where I’m pointing—my mother shot a wildcat. Straight down there, forty miles away, our family ranch was—old starvation ranch. Can you see that darker place there? Well, that’s a tiny canyon with a clear and lovely stream bordered with wild azaleas and fringed with big oaks. (184)

Before turning to go, he pointed out the spot where his father once carved his and a sweetheart’s names into a tree, and he recalled the smell of lupines emanating from the valley to the summit. “I printed it once more on my eyes, south, west, and north, and then we hurried away from the permanent and changeless past where my mother is always shooting a wildcat and my father is always burning his name with his love” (184).

In this scene, Steinbeck reenacts (perhaps unwittingly) a trope familiar to readers of his fiction: the white male patriarch who has traveled from the northeastern United States (he was then living in Sag Harbor, New York) to gaze upon the beauty and promise of California and the Salinas Valley, in particular. The key difference, of course, is that while his characters—from Joseph Wayne in To a God Unknown (1933) to Adam Trask in East of Eden (1952)—survey the landscape with intent to settle, Steinbeck was saying his final farewell—not an Abraham claiming the territory as far as his eye could see, but rather a Moses standing on the cusp of a Promised Land he would never (again) call home. Indeed, he had just traveled through some of

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3 The trope originates with the short-story cycle Pastures of Heaven, when a tourist bus from a highly developed valley climbs the ridge to look down upon the beautiful, hidden valley on the other side. In addition to similar scenes in To a God Unknown and East of Eden, The Grapes of Wrath depicts its Oklahoma migrants at the Arizona border looking down into California, which has been depicted as a golden Promised Land.
his favorite spots in the Monterey area and received an unexpectedly cold shoulder, finding
the place changed almost beyond his recognition. Having been to his homeland, he concluded
(rather famously): “Tom Wolfe was right. You can’t go home again because home has ceased to
exist except in the mothballs of memory” (183).

I begin with the image of Steinbeck atop Fremont/Gabilan Peak because this chapter is
written in a similar spirit—not of loss or nostalgia but of historical and topographical overview.
Steinbeck stands out among those well-known authors who have written well and prolifically
about particular places in the world, often areas they have called home. Of such places, none,
perhaps, is more ingrained in the popular imagination than the Salinas Valley and Monterey Bay
region in Monterey County, California, now often referred to simply as “Steinbeck Country.”
Because of Steinbeck’s efforts to connect his stories to real places in the region, an astute reader
can consult a map of California and perform an exercise in literary geography akin to the
author’s mountaintop personal geography (“see where I’m pointing”), pinning the stories to an
imagined map of Steinbeck Country: “There is Soledad, where George and Lennie sit along the
Salinas River in Of Mice and Men; and there’s Monterey, where the paisanos make mischief in
Tortilla Flat and Doc collects his marine specimens in Cannery Row.” The continued popularity
of Steinbeck’s stories and their settings has even resulted in several guides to Steinbeck Country,
including at least two print books and a smart phone app, all complete with maps, photographs,
quotations, and biographical tidbits. University professors, high school teachers, and the broader
public learn about the importance of place in Steinbeck’s works through the International
Steinbeck Festival and the National Endowment for the Humanities’ Steinbeck Institute.
Meanwhile, business interests in the region (namely, agriculture and tourism) have also
capitalized upon the Steinbeck legacy even as they assist in preserving it—notably by maintaining Steinbeck’s boyhood home (now a tea house and gift shop) and the National Steinbeck Center (a full-fledged museum), both in the heart of historic Salinas. The result is something of a Steinbeck industrial complex operating in the very places that the author knew best but that had, to some extent, rejected him as an adult. As the Salinas Valley increasingly self-identifies as Steinbeck Country, it becomes more apparent that John Steinbeck, beyond portraying the place in at least ten published books, also helped to recreate it, quite unwittingly, in his own image.

Like William Least Heat-Moon after him, Steinbeck often wrote from an ecospatial perspective, with attention to biology, geography, landscape, and the relationship of human beings with the natural world. This is particularly true of his Salinas Valley works, which resonate with one another across their shared geography. Toponyms and geophysical descriptions set the stories in place, and the stories themselves frequently explore environmental questions. These qualities make Steinbeck’s work ripe for ecospatial inquiry, inviting us to read across place and for place. In this chapter, I explore the complex literary and cultural dynamics of Steinbeck Country with respect to my theory of ecospatiality, surveying the Steinbeck oeuvre chronologically and cartographically. Using maps, literary travel guides, and two of Steinbeck’s Salinas Valley novels—To a God Unknown (1933) and East of Eden (1952)—I show how an ecospatial understanding of Steinbeck’s Salinas Valley fiction offers us as a corrective to considerations of his works that are inhibited, at best, by incomplete theories of place or, at worst, by the political or hagiographical biases that prop up the Steinbeck industrial complex. Finally, following the example of the authors in The Bioregional Imagination, I propose to
rethink Steinbeck’s Salinas Valley as a unified watershed (as indeed it already is) in order to
explore some ways in which the author’s works encourage readers to think through the dynamics
of place as a geographical, ecological, and historical phenomenon.

From the standpoint of Steinbeck studies, the author’s singular blending of geography
and ecology—what I call the ecospatial orientation of his texts—has been often invoked but
never treated comprehensively.⁴ As Robert DeMott wrote in 1979, “Steinbeck’s positive
achievement as a descriptive writer, especially his handling of physical/geographical landscapes,
is the only feature which has prompted almost universal agreement [among critics]” (“Interior”
85–86). The consolidation of ecocriticism as a literary field over the last three decades has lent
new credence to earlier studies of Steinbeck and the landscape while furthering awareness of
Steinbeck’s environmental thinking. As early as 1958, Peter Lisca acknowledged Steinbeck’s
debt to ecology in The Wide World of John Steinbeck. In the 1970s, Richard Astro published his
seminal work on Steinbeck’s close relationship with the marine biologist Ed Ricketts—The
Shaping of a Novelist (1973)—while Lisca followed up with John Steinbeck: Nature and Myth
(1978). By the mid-1990s, studies related to Steinbeck and naturalism (Etheridge 1993), the
pastoral (Hearle 1993), and Darwinian evolution (Railsback 1995) had also emerged, along with
multiple book-length critical studies and biographies of Steinbeck. Then, just as ecocriticism was
coalescing around the landmark Ecocriticism Reader (1996), the equally seminal collection
Steinbeck and the Environment (1997) was published, with new and important considerations of

⁴ Many important studies are wholly or partially devoted to Steinbeck’s environmental themes, most
notably the 1997 collection Steinbeck and the Environment (Eds. Susan Beegel, et. al.) and Brian
Railsback’s Parallel Expeditions (1995), which discusses the influence of Charles Darwin on Steinbeck
and his depictions of human animality. Much closer in spirit to the ecospatial perspective is James
these texts below.
Steinbeck’s environmental orientation. That collection, along with Brian Railsback’s 2007 article “John Steinbeck, Ecocriticism, and the Way Ahead” has seemingly cleared a path for more focused environmental readings of Steinbeck’s works, precipitating a veritable gush of scholarship in the twenty-first century—including considerations of Steinbeck’s relationship to nature writing (Horn 2003), deep ecology (Rice 2011), ecofeminism (Bily 2011), and holistic ecology (Reis 2015)—that nicely mirrors the rise of ecocriticism since its overdue inception in the 1990s.

The history of Steinbeck studies is cyclical: his work may be largely ignored for a decade or so before a burst of new scholarship comes through, sometimes in correlation with broader cultural phenomena. With environmental issues accumulating around the spectacular crisis of climate change, now is an excellent time to be considering the environmental implications of Steinbeck’s works.

What the ecocritical community has failed to emphasize, however, is the way in which geography, in addition to ecology, was always a fundamental component of Steinbeck’s vision and an interpretive strategy for his readers. Indeed, Steinbeck’s literary cartography is fundamentally ecospatial, with stories characterized by their geographic situatedness, ecological descriptiveness, and portrayals of human characters for whom dwelling is an ongoing

5 Railsback goes so far as to nominate Steinbeck as the icon of ecocriticism: “In most issues that literature takes on, there are the hallmark authors: in psychology, for example, we look at Edgar Allan Poe; in Feminism, it might be Kate Chopin…. In ecocriticism, that hallmark author should be John Steinbeck” (“Ecocriticism” 272). Curiously, the seemingly natural fit of Steinbeck and the environment has not taken root within the pages of ISLE, the publication of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE). To date, only two extensive discussions of Steinbeck—Jan Goggans’s "California at the Point of Conflict: Fluvial and Social Systems in John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath and Joan Didion's Run River" (2010) and Jeffrey Wagner’s article “American Georgics and Globalization” (2013)—have appeared there. Meanwhile, Steinbeck Review has published a nice variety of environmental readings of Steinbeck—e.g. Rice, Reis, Searway, Browne—mostly devoted to various streams of ecological thought.
environmental negotiation, especially with respect to climatological conditions and natural resource management. Likewise, efforts to highlight the geographical aspects of Steinbeck Country, whether in map or guidebook form, have too often neglected the ecological aspects of the places Steinbeck wrote about, engendering a more egocentric representation while participating in the industry of Steinbeck tourism that the author would have certainly mocked and probably despised. With ecological studies of Steinbeck appearing in scholarly venues and geographical studies seemingly written for a more popular audience (the Steinbeck Country tourist), ecocritics and (proto-) geocritics have unwittingly reenacted the old critical divide over Steinbeck’s status as either a serious or popular author. What is called for, in my opinion, is a more holistic consideration of the ways in which Steinbeck’s Salinas-region texts interact with their settings, an approach that makes room for and begins to make sense of the various strategies readers have developed for understanding the relationship between text and world—from literary maps to ecocritical readings. In Steinbeck’s Salinas Watershed texts, particularly in *To a God Unknown* and *East of Eden*, his literary cartography offers an ecospatial view of place that weaves together nature, space, and story in a way that subverts narrow interpretations of Steinbeck as merely an environmental thinker, a literary cartographer, or an American icon.

One challenge for readers of Steinbeck and place is parsing the extent to which his literary landscapes can be considered realistic, displaying verisimilitude. While Steinbeck’s representations of the Salinas Valley are well known as such, it is also the case that his environments bear additional symbolic meaning, as places of American opportunism, mythical/religious promise, evolutionary survival, Aurthurian questing, or authorial nostalgia. *East of Eden*, whose working title was *The Salinas Valley*, is a strong case in point. Steinbeck’s
longest novel is at once a personal family history grounded in the real history of the valley (its opening pages are a meditation on this history, including settlement and land use) and a retelling of the biblical Genesis story of Adam and Eve, as the title implies. As the novel proceeds, the stories intertwine, the autobiographical and historical material blending with the mythical. If the novel’s final title suggests a privileging of the Genesis story (and thus the mythical landscape), the environmental history persists, reinforcing the story’s realistic setting: the Salinas Valley of the early twentieth century. In my view, place-based literary criticism must read the fictional landscape realistically, privileging the mimetic aspect of the representation while accounting for these additional symbolic valences. As Louis Owens writes, quoting a passage from *Travels with Charley*, “Steinbeck is able to hold both real place and metaphorical idea in mind simultaneously. For Steinbeck and reader, setting or landscape is always ‘not one thing but many’” (“Garden” 81). In Steinbeck Country, such personal, mythical, and political resonances simply come with the territory.

To some extent, taking such a place-based approach to Steinbeck, while seemingly natural, involves reading against the current. For one thing, Steinbeck resisted the notion that his books were representations of real-world places. At the end of the 1930s, he said:

> I have usually avoided using actual places to avoid hurting feelings for, although I rarely use a person or a story as it is—neighbors love only too well to attribute them to someone. Thus you will find that the Pastures of Heaven does not look very much like Corral de Tierra, you’ll find no pine forests in Jolon, and as for the valley in *In Dubious Battle*—it is a composite valley as it is a composite strike. If it has the characteristics of Pajaro nevertheless there was no strike there. If it is like the cotton strike, that wasn’t apples. Only in this new book [*Grapes*] have I turned to actual places—that and *Tortilla Flat*. For I still feel it useless and foolish to hurt individual feelings…the maps don’t work because I mixed up the topography on purpose. (qtd. in Moore 102)
Not only do these comments amount to a stubborn dismissal of the mimetic aspects of Steinbeck’s literary cartography, but they also characterize the difficulty of the geocritical project. I am especially intrigued by the author’s comment that “the maps don’t work,” which sets up this chapter (and the maps analyzed herein) as something of a challenge to Steinbeck’s authorial intent. (As we will see, the maps absolutely do “work,” but perhaps not in the ways we expect or to the extent we desire.)

Moreover, Steinbeck was sometimes adamant that his writing was far more social than environmental. One of his observations, from a 1938 journal entry, has been cited by critics as Steinbeck’s mantra: “In every bit of honest writing in the world, there is a base theme. Try to understand men, if you understand each other you will be kind to each other” (qtd. in Shillinglaw and Hearle 6). This framing of writing as the attempt to understand people, while admirable and genuine, is decidedly anthropocentric (not to mention andro-centric). Add to this the fact that Steinbeck resisted the implication that his “big novel” (Journal 20), East of Eden—which he considered his masterpiece—was essentially “about” the valley itself. Early in the drafting process, in the journal he kept alongside the manuscript, he wrote:

I am pleased now because the geography and weather are over and I can start with the people. It was my intention…to give rather an impression of the Valley than a detailed account—more a sense of it than anything else. I do hope I have succeeded but I won’t know that for a long time. But this book is not about

6 In contrast to the case of Richard Wright, no evidence exists that Steinbeck ever used maps as part of his writing process. Louis Owens once claimed that Steinbeck used contour maps of the Salinas Valley in drafting East of Eden “to ensure accuracy,” but the basis for that claim is unclear (Owens, “Garden” 81).

7 Steinbeck’s confidence in East of Eden as his magnum opus persisted all the way through his writing process: “One thing I must say—I have never enjoyed my own work as I have this book. I am as excited about it now as on the day I started it. There is no letdown in my energy. I still think it is The Book, as far as I am concerned. Always before I have held something back for later. Nothing is held back here. This is not practice for a future. This is what I have practiced for” (Journal 124).
Steinbeck’s insistence here on a dualistic relationship between people and place is, to my mind, unfortunate and not necessarily indicative of how his fiction operates. On the contrary, reading Steinbeck through the lens of place is not to give it “undue importance,” but rather overdue importance, to demonstrate the ways in which his writing actually undermines that same human/environment, nature/culture duality, always placing people in relationship with the ecospatial world in a way that truly invites this form of literary criticism.

A Watershed Orientation

In order to gain a fuller understanding of Steinbeck from an ecospatial perspective, we must first recognize that the Salinas Valley is the centerpiece of a larger coastal watershed. In the opening pages of East of Eden, Steinbeck describes the valley, simply, as “a long narrow swale between two ranges of mountains, and the Salinas River winds and twists up the center until it falls at last into Monterey Bay” (3). The description is apt if not necessarily complete. The Salinas actually gathers water from elevations of up to five thousand feet in three of California’s Southern Coast Ranges: the La Panza Range to the south, where its headwaters are; the Gabilan Mountains to the east; and the Santa Lucias (also called Sierra de Salinas) to the west. This one-hundred-eighty-mile watercourse flows, counterintuitively, north-northwest into the Pacific Ocean at Monterey Bay, at a point some forty miles due south of San José. Its major tributaries include (from south to north) Huerhuero Creek, the Estrella River, and San Lorenzo Creek on the east and the Nacimiento and San Antonio Rivers and Arroyo Seco on the west. Three major dams were built in the mid-twentieth century to stabilize the water supply to growing towns and
agricultural producers in the watershed. The oldest and smallest of these impoundments is the Salinas Dam, built in 1942 near the river’s source to create Lake Santa Margarita. Over the next twenty-five years, the neighboring San Antonio and Nacimiento Dams were completed on their namesake tributaries, both among the largest in California by volume, each with a capacity over a third of a million acre feet.\(^8\) Although these dams have drastically altered the hydrology of the

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\(^8\) This places them both in the top 25 by capacity of California’s over 1400 named dams, and their combined volume would place them 16th on the list. Lake Santa Margarita is less than one tenth the size of these dams, while the two largest dams in the state, Shasta and Oroville, are both over ten times larger.
watershed, the Salinas River is still known for the way it retreats underground during the dry season. In fact, an Army Corps of Engineers study states that “[s]easonality and annual climatic fluctuations leave the Salinas River and its tributaries with little or no water seventy percent of the year” (Tonsfeldt and Paine 6). Steinbeck called it a “part-time river,” because “The summer sun drove it underground. It was not a fine river at all, but it was the only one we had and so we boasted about it…” (East of Eden 4).

The rich soils, mild climate, and accessible waters of the Salinas Valley have long suited it for agricultural production—first livestock, and then a wide array of irrigated crops—an industry valued in the billions of dollars today. Much of the nation’s lettuce is grown there, along with many other fruits and vegetables—from grapes to broccoli—and it is sometimes called the Salad Bowl of the nation and even the world. The watershed encompasses approximately 4,600 square miles, an area slightly smaller than Connecticut; yet it is dwarfed by California’s massive Central Valley to the east, which is over five times larger. Precipitation in the watershed fluctuates a great deal, but the Salinas Valley proper receives only around twelve inches of rainfall per year—most of it between April and November—making groundwater irrigation absolutely crucial for the agricultural economy (Resource Conservation District of Monterey County).

Euro-American settlements along the Salinas River date back as far as the late 1700s, when the first Spanish missionaries made their way north from Mexico and began plotting

However, it should be noted that capacity is different than volume: Lake San Antonio was closed indefinitely to recreation based on low volumes (though the larger Lake Nacimiento remained open).
missions in the valley and colonizing the Native Ohlone peoples. On the first expedition, led by Junípero Serra (a Catholic saint, as of 2015), men reputedly sowed mustard seeds as bread crumbs: those making the return journey would follow a yellow blaze back up the river valley, the mustard flowers leading them back toward Mexico. Once the missions were established, the route between them, which mostly followed the river valley, became known as El Camino Real, the “royal road” designation that effectively claimed the entire California coast—from Baja to the San Francisco Bay—for the Spanish crown. Although the land subsequently changed hands more than once, from Mexico to the United States, the geography remained relatively unchanged. Today, the same route through the Salinas Valley connects San Luis Obispo to Monterey, though under the auspices of U.S. Highway 101.

The late Native American novelist and Steinbeck critic Louis Owens, who also grew up in the Salinas Valley, once described it as “one hundred and twenty miles of riparian habitat, mostly white sand, brush, and cottonwoods with a thin stream at the heart, flanked by alfalfa fields and beet fields, and towns rapidly becoming cities rapidly growing together” (“Two Fishes” 2). Steinbeck’s hometown of Salinas is the largest community in the watershed and the

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9 These are broad terms used to classify numerous peoples across the Central Coast region. While “Ohlone” usually refers to the ethnic group and “Costanoan” to the language group, the terms have often been used interchangeably or in combination.

10 During his first official visit to the United States, Pope Francis granted sainthood to Junípero Serra, generating controversy in Steinbeck Country and across the nation over the missions’ colonial and genocidal legacy (Holson). Serra also appears in Willa Cather’s Death Comes for the Archbishop, as Father Jean Latour reflects on a legend he has heard about his famous missionary predecessor in the American Southwest (276-280).

11 Mustard proliferated in the valley, was commercialized in the late 1800s (perhaps by a legendary Chinese immigrant known as Poison Jim, the Mustard King), and persists to this day as a wild plant and an agricultural cover crop and nutrient additive (Bellis). Steinbeck refers often to mustard in the valley, including East of Eden, where he writes: “When my grandfather came into the valley the mustard was so tall that a man on horseback showed only his head above the yellow flowers” (4).
closest to the river’s mouth. The modern seat of Monterey County, Salinas sits some twelve miles upstream from where the river enters the Pacific near the coastal center of Monterey Bay. Today, the largest municipalities to the south include Soledad, Greenfield, King City (near Steinbeck’s maternal grandparents’ home), Paso Robles, Templeton, and Atascadero. The small town of Santa Margarita sits where the river meets the highway, just over Cuesta Pass from San Luis Obispo. Finally, the ghost town of Pozo lies closest to the river’s headwaters, just below Garcia Peak, in the Garcia Wilderness Area of Los Padres National Forest.

Perhaps the most comprehensive perspective on the ecospatiality of Steinbeck Country is a 1997 article by James C. Kelley. In “The Geoecology of Steinbeck Country,” Kelley asserts that place knowledge is essential to comprehending Steinbeck’s works, and suggests that perhaps “east coast critics of Steinbeck’s work failed to understand his literature precisely because they did not understand the place” (1). While I detect a contradiction in this particular critical stance—how could Steinbeck be so admired for skillfully conveying a “sense of place,” yet somehow fail to get through to New Yorkers?—Kelley’s “geoecological” approach provides an important scientific perspective, addressing “[t]he ways in which the geology and the climate determine the flora of a region, the ways in which the meteorology and the oceanography of an ocean area determine the faunal diversity…” (1). Kelley notes how geological and meteorological conditions have conspired to make the area unique in terms of climate and biodiversity, with over twenty percent of indigenous species in Monterey County reaching the northernmost or southernmost limits of their range and thirty-seven plant species that are unique to the area. Kelley points to the role of plate tectonics in determining that favorable climate: “[H]ad it not been for the subduction of the spreading center and the transform fault which is
now expressed as the San Andreas Fault, Steinbeck Country would be where it was thirty
million years ago—in the San Fernando Valley [the location of Los Angeles]. It seems unlikely
that the inspiration of the writer would have been the same” (3).¹² Of course, much of the
biodiversity and high fog frequency Kelley cites are limited to the coastal areas and do not
characterize the Salinas Watershed, which lies on the eastern “rain shadow” side of the
mountains, but these factors still influence the valley itself, which benefits from its proximity to
the Santa Lucias and the Pacific.

![Figure 10. Geological Map of California (Kelley).](image)

**Mapping Steinbeck Country**

Readers familiar with the concept of Steinbeck Country might suspect that, like William
Faulkner, most or all of Steinbeck’s works are set in the same place. After all, early in his career

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¹² John McPhee has also written about the regional geology in *Assembling California.*
Steinbeck expressed a desire to represent the Salinas Valley in a comprehensive way. He wrote to his friend, George Albee, in 1933: “I think that I would like to write the story of this whole valley, of all the little towns and all the farms and the ranches in the wilder hills. I can see how I would like to do it so that it would be the valley of the world. But that will have to be sometime in the future. I would take so very long” (Letters 73). Yet Steinbeck never quite achieved this objective, either in a single volume or across multiple texts. Indeed, a geocritical analysis of Steinbeck’s œuvre suggests that his literary engagement with the region was memorable but surprisingly limited. Of his twenty-nine published works, eleven have primary settings in the Monterey Bay area, including eight of his first nine publications. Yet only four of these are set primarily in the Salinas Watershed: Pastures of Heaven (1932), To a God Unknown (1933), Of Mice and Men (1937), and East of Eden (1952). Not included here are several Steinbeck classics: The Grapes of Wrath (1939), for example, takes place primarily in Oklahoma, the Central Valley of California, and the road between; Tortilla Flat (1935) and Cannery Row (1945), being set in Monterey, are not Salinas Valley stories; In Dubious Battle

13 These numbers depend upon how one figures republications and addresses textual place-markers. The Red Pony was published on its own, in 1937, but also included, with an added (and now much-anthologized) “The Leader of the People” segment in The Long Valley the following year. It is set near Salinas but quite explicitly over the hill, most likely placing it in a watershed other than that of the Salinas River. Mapping each of the short stories individually expands the reach of Steinbeck’s literary cartography: all of the Pastures of Heaven stories take place at a site presumably within the Salinas Watershed, and most of The Long Valley stories do as well. In addition, three of Steinbeck’s uncollected stories take place in the Salinas Watershed: “How Edith Mcgillecuddy met R.L. Stevenson” (1941; Salinas, Monterey); “The Time the Wolves Ate the Vice-Principal” (1947, Salinas); and “The Summer Before” (1955, Salinas) (see Robert S. Hughes, Jr., “Steinbeck’s Uncollected Stories”). For a full list of Steinbeck texts and primary settings, see Appendix 1.

14 While it is tempting to include The Long Valley in this list, its title is a bit misleading: only four of the stories in that collection take place explicitly in the Salinas Watershed.
(1936), the second in Steinbeck’s farm worker trilogy, takes place (somewhat ambiguously\textsuperscript{15}) in the Monterey Bay area near Watsonville, north of the Salinas River’s mouth. What this master list reveals is that Steinbeck’s reputation as a writer of the Salinas Valley actually rests upon a surprisingly small number of works—two story collections, a novella, and two novels—four out of five of them written in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{16} In an important sense, Steinbeck’s best-known and most popular novel (\textit{Grapes}), which depicts a migration to California’s agricultural valleys, was, ironically, a point of departure for the author out of the Salinas Valley, to which he would return in fiction just one last time with \textit{East of Eden}. To equate the Salinas Valley with Steinbeck Country, then, is to exclude over half his oeuvre and to privilege the early works.

Certainly from a watershed perspective, many places are conspicuously absent. Steinbeck never wrote the story of Pozo or Atascadero and was silent on the subject of the river’s source at Garcia Peak. Technically, most of his Salinas Valley stories take place in the lower Salinas Watershed, the northern half that rests in Monterey County (the headwaters being in San Luis Obispo County). Nor is every “Steinbeck Country” story set within the Salinas Watershed proper. Most obviously, the town of Monterey—the setting for three novels and one of Steinbeck Country’s centers of gravity—lies directly on its namesake bay, its surface waters draining directly to the ocean some ten miles southwest of the Salinas River’s mouth. By that strict measure, even the town of Salinas is questionably placed, with only the city’s southernmost

\textsuperscript{15} As we have already seen, Steinbeck claimed it was a “composite” setting (qtd. in Moore 102).

\textsuperscript{16} Steinbeck considered \textit{Of Mice and Men} not a novella but a failed first attempt at a new form, the “play-novelette” (\textit{America and Americans} 155–156). In addition to demonstrating Steinbeck’s propensity for genre experimentation (he was never just a novelist), the list also suggests the extent to which he positioned himself as a national and international writer, especially later in his career.
reaches currently draining to the historical Salinas River while the rest flows to Monterey Bay via other subwatersheds (though I include Salinas texts in my geocritical analysis). While my intention is to situate Steinbeck Country bioregionally, Steinbeck’s stories, as a whole, do not neatly correlate to watershed boundaries.

To be clear, Steinbeck Country and the Salinas Watershed should be understood as distinct geographic constructs that overlap in compelling ways, reflecting distinct but related interpretive practices. If we think of Steinbeck’s entire oeuvre as constituting a particular literary geography (the extent of which is truly global), that geography demonstrates strong concentrations of stories and scenes in central California, particularly the Monterey Bay region and the lower Salinas River Watershed. “Steinbeck Country” is a textual phenomenon that developed gradually, as Steinbeck continued to publish fictional pieces set explicitly or implicitly in the Monterey-Salinas region, and as critics and readers acknowledged the centrality of place to his writing. Reading Steinbeck ecospatially means recognizing the extent to which his fiction invites both geographical and ecological interpretation, heretofore discrete critical practices that, when taken together, offer a more comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between these texts and the places with which they interact, as well as the ongoing critical response to that interaction.

Although the institutional history of geocriticism goes back less than a decade, a historical survey of Steinbeck Studies reveals a longstanding critical interest in placing Steinbeck’s work in geographical context. As early as 1939, Harry Thornton Moore had published the first map of “The Steinbeck Country”—likely the first printed occurrence of the term—and written that “Steinbeck is perhaps more interested than any writer since D. H.
Lawrence in what Lawrence called the Spirit of Place” (15). This map was published at a surprisingly early point in Steinbeck’s career, in 1939, just as The Grapes of Wrath was first hitting the shelves and creating a literary sensation in the United States. In his book-length critical study of Steinbeck’s novels, Moore describes Steinbeck Country as “bounded on the north by Salinas and Monterey, on the south by Jolon and King City, on the east by the Gabilan Mountains, and on the west by the related line of mountains, the Santa Lucia range, which cuts off this region from the sea. A large part of this ‘country’ is in the long Salinas Valley, and the Salinas River runs through most of it” (19). Because Moore’s Steinbeck Country map was developed in the late 1930s and was not updated for the second edition of his book, none of Steinbeck’s post-Grapes works appear there. The map is notable for its attention to topography (the prominent mountain ranges and rivers are accounted for), its inclusion of biographical information (places where Steinbeck lived, as well as several anecdotes), and its northward extension to San Francisco Bay (reflecting Steinbeck’s tenure at Stanford and his residence in Los Gatos). The map appears largely accurate both geographically and historically, and it also registers some good geocritical principles, noting that the sites of To a God Unknown and In Dubious Battle actually appear under other names in their respective texts.  

Moreover, while no artist is credited, the first edition of Moore’s text includes a “Note Concerning the Map” that discusses the spirit in which it was created. Moore states that the map “is intended to be only a guide, in a general sort of way, to readers of Steinbeck’s novels and to

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17 Moore’s The Novels of John Steinbeck: A First Critical Study was reissued in 1968, the year of Steinbeck’s death, with a new afterword assessing the author’s career in its entirety. (The “Note Concerning the Map” was inexplicably omitted.) Moore deemed Steinbeck to be less than a great author, in part because the prominent critics of the day did not esteem him. Interestingly, Moore believed In Dubious Battle to be Steinbeck’s best work, an opinion shared by few critics to this day.
those interested in tracing the relationship between his life and his work. There is no exact parallel between some of these places as they exist, and as they are imaginatively reflected in his stories” (102). Citing Steinbeck’s claim that “the maps don’t work because I mixed up the topography on purpose,” Moore simply states that “We have prepared the map in this spirit”: 

Figure 11. “The Steinbeck Country” (Moore)
it is merely meant to indicate where certain imaginatively conceived people lived, and even if the settings are in some cases ‘mixed,’ we tried to show the locale that is essentially suggested in each story. Most writers have scrambled their settings in this way. But there is usually a prevailing atmosphere, and it is this we have considered in each case where there might be confusion. (102)

This explanatory note offers a strong frame of reference for interpreting the map, not least because of its suggestion that some interpretation is required in the first place.

The second topographical representation of Steinbeck Country is a 1994 map by Raymond Puck, “Steinbeck Country: Places and Titles,” a simplified version of Moore’s map that incorporates the author’s later works. This black-and-white map presents a somewhat sparse geography: the two mountain ranges prominently flanking the Salinas River; the San Antonio, Carmel, and Pajaro Rivers nearby; and the Pacific Ocean and Monterey Bay at left. Named locations (not all of them mentioned in Steinbeck’s works) appear in capital letters, with each town and city accompanied by a grid symbol suggestive of its relative size. Finally, the titles of novels and stories appear at or near their corresponding locations. Notably, at the edges of the map (which only extends from Watsonville in the north to Paso Robles in the south and the Gabilans in the east), several other titles appear next to arrows, suggesting their importance while indicating that they occur at points off the map. In this way, texts like The Grapes of Wrath and The Sea of Cortez appear as somehow both constitutive of and separate from Steinbeck Country, perhaps to appease the skeptical reader (“Why isn’t The Grapes of Wrath on here?”). Such a map at once performs the important function of orienting (e.g., showing the proximity of King City to Salinas) or categorizing (e.g., grouping the four Monterey texts) while also markedly simplifying both geography and text.

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18 Moore’s map utilizes the same strategy vis-à-vis The Grapes of Wrath while going so far as to name the counties (Kern and Tulare) where the Okies are said to reside.
The Puck map is a simple one designed for a mass audience (I purchased a copy in the bookstore in the basement of Steinbeck’s boyhood home in Salinas), and it is accordingly—and perhaps necessarily—reductive. For one thing, it unflinchingly equates fictional places with real ones without acknowledging the act. Thus, for instance, *In Dubious Battle* appears at Watsonville and *To a God Unknown* appears below Jolon, when neither of these real towns is
named in its corresponding novel. This may be true to the spirit of the texts, but it negates the
geocritical work that readers must do to identify for themselves the nature of the correlation
between fictional and nonfictional sites\textsuperscript{19} (not to mention the work that Steinbeck sometimes did
to give some cover of anonymity to his chosen locales). In addition, the map neglects the
complexity of place reference in the texts, to the extent that a novel like \textit{East of Eden} is
geographically reduced to King City when much of it takes place in Salinas, rural San Lucas, the
state of Connecticut, and elsewhere. Meanwhile, \textit{The Red Pony} appears, inexplicably, at both
King City and Salinas when that story isn’t clearly set in either of those places\textsuperscript{20} and every other
text is listed only once. Despite these failings, the Puck map is useful and evocative, reflecting
Steinbeck’s efforts to situate his narratives in the places and spaces of the Monterey Bay region.

A final map, “The John Steinbeck Map of America,” avoids a number of those pitfalls
while making certain compromises of its own\textsuperscript{21} This fully illustrated 1986 map by Jim Wolnick
offers evocatively painted scenes from Steinbeck’s fiction, along with a portrait of the author
himself, all while representing a wide array of locations from Steinbeck’s writings and personal
travels (“in Search of America”). Wolnick demonstrates a much more rigorous textual approach,
listing fourteen different Steinbeck texts chronologically and identifying one hundred and fifty
locations mentioned therein. The system of plotting by number makes it possible to list locations

\textsuperscript{19} Each of these novels utilizes a form of what Westphal terms “heterotopic interference,” whereby the
fictional and realistic places do not correspond exactly. Each situates a fictional place within a real one, a
situation Westphal, following McHale, calls \textit{interpolation}.

\textsuperscript{20} While the ranch Steinbeck visited as a child (his grandparents’) was in the Gabilan foothills near King
City, Jody’s ranch is just over the hill from Salinas, a half-day’s ride away (204).

\textsuperscript{21} I am grateful to Robert DeMott for alerting me to this map’s existence.
more than once, and the detailed legend at the bottom allows room for explanation and even nuance, most notably by addressing the analogy between fictional and real sites (e.g., “Nuestra Señora: Jolon”). The map’s originality lies in its creative approach to scale: it is a kind of palimpsest, a grid of Monterey Bay and Salinas Valley locations surrounded by a crude outline of the United States, a map within a map. Thus, just as King City is down the road from Soledad, Lee Chong’s grocery is near the Presidio of Monterey, and U.S. cities like Denver, Omaha, and Minneapolis appear just outside the Salinas city limits. Salinas is at the center of the map and,
thus, at the heart of “Steinbeck’s America,” a fitting tribute to the valley’s integral role in the author’s life and career.

What these maps attempt, in different ways, is a kind of geocritical work that the texts themselves are already engaging in. First, they represent the places in the world to which the literary texts refer. Just as Steinbeck descriptively plotted an array of central California sites in his fiction, these maps re-present those places in cartographic form. Second, the Steinbeck Country maps plot textual settings in geographic relation to one another, effectively collating the author’s representations. They organize texts spatially, the cartographical representations (maps) of Steinbeck’s oeuvre supplementing the individual literary representations (stories). Yet at the same time that literature-inspired maps orient readers to places in the world, they also, to some extent, reconfigure real-world places as fictional sites, commenting on the ongoing negotiation between world and text, nature and culture.

But representations of Steinbeck Country are not confined to these kinds of maps. Indeed, countless newspaper and magazine articles, photography books, and travel guides claim to “follow Steinbeck’s footsteps” in Monterey County and the region, not to mention the numerous books and blogs purporting to draw inspiration from or even retrace Steinbeck’s journey in Travels with Charley (of which Heat-Moon’s Blue Highways is possibly the earliest example).22 Such secondary texts are all more or less scholarly or amateur, descriptive or prescriptive (telling

22 Andy Stiny’s article in The Californian is a recent example of a tour-de-Steinbeck written for a wide audience. Bill Steigerwald made headlines in 2013 with the publication of his exposé-style book, Dogging Steinbeck: How I Went Looking for John Steinbeck’s America, Found My Own America, and Exposed the Truth About Travels with Charley. Steigerwald went so far as to call for the reclassification of Travels as fiction. Less confrontational retracings of Steinbeck’s journey include Bill Barich’s Long Way Home (2010), Gregory Zeigler’s Travels with Max (2010), and the Dutch writer Geert Mak’s In America: Travels with John Steinbeck (2014).
readers where to go when they visit), artistic or fact-based. Moreover, they exhibit varying degrees of engagement with Steinbeck’s works. The best of these is, undoubtedly, Susan Shillinglaw’s *A Journey into Steinbeck’s California*. Shillinglaw, the director of the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, is a leading Steinbeck scholar, and her guidebook blends excellent literary and biographical research with the best kind of literary tourist content to present a thorough view into Steinbeck’s home region. The volume is organized by place, with chapters on Salinas, Monterey, Jolon, and so on.

Yet the effect of such a book (even a very good one), as a representation (or re-representation) of place, is that it effectively collapses (whether intentionally or not) the ecospatial, the historical-biographical, and the fictional. Thus the town of Salinas becomes, at once, the place where the riverbed approaches the salt flats near the ocean, the place where the author John Steinbeck was born and buried, and the place where, in *East of Eden*, Cathy Trask walks from the brothel to the bank to deposit her earnings. The assumption of verisimilitude—that Cathy somehow walks the same streets young Steinbeck did—is the least of interpretive concerns here; of more significance, from a place perspective, is the (necessary) privileging of a Steinbeckian version of the place over a more comprehensive and democratic one, with

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Martha Heasley Cox’s 1975 article, “In Search of John Steinbeck: His People and His Land,” is the first example of a guide to Steinbeck Country, and a good one. David Laws’s *Steinbeck Country: A Souvenir and Guide to Exploring the Settings for the Stories* (2005) is the least comprehensive but was recently released on an intriguing new platform: the smart phone app. One example of the blending of the fictional, biographical, and historical comes from Laws’ 2009 article for *The Steinbeck Review* (basically a retread of Cox’s article with photos added): Laws writes of Salinas that “…the former gambling parlors and houses of ill repute around Soledad Street that fascinated the young Steinbeck and was the haunt [sic] of Cal in *East of Eden* have been replaced by transient lodgings and kitchens serving meals to the homeless” (30). Anne-Marie Schmitz’s 1978 book, *In Search of Steinbeck*, focuses on the author’s various houses in the Monterey Bay region.
Steinbeck himself at the heart of the regional story, both scribe and protagonist. The effect is all the more noticeable in light of Steinbeck’s complex, ambivalent relationship with his home area. After growing up in Monterey County and raising it to literary prominence, Steinbeck left for good in the 1940s and eventually settled on Long Island, in New York. (His 1961 farewell to the region from Fremont/Gabilan Peak was his final one.) Yet the Steinbeck Country guidebooks re-insert Steinbeck in the Salinas Valley and Monterey Bay landscape as surely as the museum, murals, and monuments in the region do. The guidebooks present a place—Steinbeck Country—that lies between fiction and reality: Steinbeck himself seems to be everywhere, given a permanent citizenship he never enjoyed in life.  

By their very nature, then, the Steinbeck Country travel guidebooks double down on the kind of cultural erasure of which Steinbeck himself has sometimes (legitimately) been accused. While they are ostensibly aimed at enhancing the experience of a reader of Steinbeck’s works or a traveler to the Monterey Bay region, the guidebooks instead reiterate a similar kind of historical nostalgia to that which can be found in texts like *East of Eden*; only instead of celebrating the days when white Americans opened up the Salinas Valley to industrialized agriculture (while sometimes struggling against it), as Steinbeck’s novels do, the guidebooks posit a version of history in which that most ostensibly “American” of (white) America’s Nobel laureates assumes a prominent role in the region’s identity. The place becomes, for readers, a conglomeration of landscape, author, and fiction, all of them more or less idealized. As a representation of place, the very idea of “Steinbeck Country” is a starkly non-inclusive one: it is

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not just California, but, as Shillinglaw’s title attests, *John Steinbeck’s California*. The trouble with Steinbeck Country is too much Steinbeck.

Ironically, the more naturalistic pictorial books—Steve Crouch’s *Steinbeck Country* (1976) and the more recent *Steinbeck Country Revisited* (2000), from Ingrid Reti and The Independent Photographers—fare better on this score. Even as they emphasize, through photography, the physical beauty of the region, these books tend to focus on the nonhuman aspects of place, the physical elements that give it structure and the living things with which it teems. These accounts draw from natural history more than human history, effectively putting humans in their place and giving nature center stage. The rolling hills and rocky coastlines are the true subjects here, no longer relegated to the background. Thus the photography books convey a sense of deep time and not just a particular historical moment (except, of course, the moment captured by each image). In a way, they provide a visual touchstone that “fleshes out” the descriptive passages from Steinbeck’s novels, even as they rely on the author’s quoted words to certify the images’ veracity.

Complementing the textual production of Steinbeck Country in print is the eager participation of local businesses, historical interests, and other groups in memorializing the author, seemingly at every opportunity. His name is ubiquitous in Salinas today: in addition to the well-preserved Steinbeck House and the shining beacon that is the National Steinbeck Center, the Salinas Public Library on Lincoln Street has borne his name since 1969, with a statue dedicated in 1973; numerous Steinbeck murals grace exterior walls downtown; and a café across from the National Steinbeck Center invites visitors to “eat where John ate!” Organizations such as Steinbeck Realty and the Steinbeck Innovation Foundation—which is looking to capitalize on
the “unique technology, agriculture, aquaculture, research, labor, transportation and investment assets” of Steinbeck Country—have blatantly and successfully co-opted the author’s name.25 On the subtler side, a winery near Soledad has simply and cleverly chosen the name “Wrath,” and the quotations from *East of Eden* can be found throughout the City of Salinas stormwater management plan (City of Salinas). Like a good spring flood, Steinbeck and his literature have infiltrated the Salinas Valley with a popularity that may help to gloss over some of the harsher social realities depicted in his works.26 As visitors browse the exhibits at the National Steinbeck Center, they see the names of some of the region’s largest agricultural producers; the wealthiest growers are literally underwriting—and likely profiting from—the legacy of a writer who once challenged them the most.

25 In fact, the use of Steinbeck’s name for social causes goes back as far as 1938, when the so-called “Steinbeck Committee” was formed to fight for migrant workers’ rights in California. According to James R. Swensen, “Steinbeck lent his name to the committee in hopes of garnering support and publicity as well as raising money and collecting food and clothing for the displaced” (202); the well-known photographer Dorothea Lange documented the committee’s activities around a cotton strike in Bakersfield (35). The appropriation of Steinbeck’s name and legacy at Cannery Row for economic development purposes goes back as far as the 1950s, a story Connie Chiang relates well in her article “Novel Tourism: Nature, Industry, and Literature on Monterey’s Cannery Row” (2004). Chiang writes that, with the demise of the canneries at mid-century, while Montereyans “no longer had a lucrative natural resource-based economy to publicize, they enveloped the sardine industry’s history and physical remains in nostalgic depictions of a Steinbeck-inspired past and a celebratory narrative of industrial accomplishments” (311).

26 In a searing little book entitled *Steinbeck Country: In Dubious Homage* (1979), Mike Messner rants against the agribusiness industry and its appropriation of Steinbeck’s image in service to it: “It is clear that the basic power relations in the Salinas Valley are unchanged since the days when Steinbeck wrote his critical works. The Valley is still largely controlled by large growers (Bud Antle, Sun Harvest, Bruce Church, etc.) and banks. Workers are still poor…and what gains they have made in the past are being threatened and assaulted from all sides. It must be concluded that if John Steinbeck were alive today in the Salinas Valley, he would not like what he would see. Although he would not see the large-scale starvation of the 1930s, he would see poverty, exploitation, racism, and human degradation which is a result of the domination of the land by a few for their own private profit. Were he alive today, and were he to write of this Salinas Valley, it is certain that he would (as when he was alive) not be considered a cultural asset in Salinas” (23). Nearly four decades later, these words still ring true.
Altogether, these maps, travel guides, and photography books reveal a collective impulse of Steinbeck readers (both academic and non-academic) of comprehending Steinbeck’s works in geographical terms. One can’t understand Steinbeck’s fiction, they seem to suggest, without a better understanding of the interplay between text and world that is an important aspect of the author’s works. Yet in spite of the veracity of that claim, these texts also further the Salinas Valley’s self-imposed Steinbeck industrial complex, which enacts a kind of ecological and cultural erasure while straying from the spirit of Steinbeck’s more holistic vision of place. The more the Salinas Valley self-identifies as Steinbeck Country, with the aid of guidebooks, museums, statues, and murals, the more it elides the natural and cultural history that was one of Steinbeck’s favorite and most important subjects. Steinbeck readers’ emphasis on travel and geography, in other words, has not only changed the social and economic landscape of the Salinas Valley, but also contributed to an imbalanced sense of the place’s identity in the twenty-first century.

**Plotting the Watershed**

If the critical response to Steinbeck’s literary cartography tends to fall too far toward the geographical or the ecological, as I have been arguing, the stories themselves offer us a kind of corrective through Steinbeck’s more holistic representation of place. Nowhere is this clearer than in *To a God Unknown* and *East of Eden*, coincidentally the first and last of Steinbeck’s Salinas Valley texts.²⁷ In these two novels—more so than in the other “Steinbeck Country” fiction—

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²⁷ I have chosen to focus on *To a God Unknown* and *East of Eden* because they are the most ecospatial of Steinbeck’s Salinas Watershed texts, with strong portrayals of ecology, geography, and environmental history. Though *The Long Valley*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Pastures of Heaven* are also set primarily in the
Steinbeck’s representation of place relies upon the blending of geographical and ecological detail that I describe as ecospatial, and in both cases the issue of water access emerges as a crucial aspect of Anglo-American settlement and development in the Salinas Watershed. The protagonists, Joseph Wayne and Adam Trask, both come from the northeastern United States to make their homesteads there at the turn of the twentieth century. Both experience personal losses and ultimately fail at farming, Joseph falling victim, quite literally, to a severe drought cycle and Adam neglecting his land altogether. In each case, Steinbeck demonstrates a strong ecospatial orientation while foregrounding hydrological conditions as the primary determinant of agricultural and personal success or failure. He presents drought as a fact of life in California, one to which newcomers to the land must grow accustomed—or face dire physical, psychological, and social consequences. In the process, water proves both a symbol of environmental conquest and, through its absence, one of human susceptibility to environmental crisis—and thus the ultimate failure of such conquest. To read these novels—Steinbeck Country’s chronological bookends—from a watershed perspective is to recognize Steinbeck’s vision of place as geographically, ecologically, and historically connected, effectively countering the various cultural forces—from ecocritics to the Steinbeck industrial complex—that rely, to varying extents, on narrower perspectives than Steinbeck’s fiction demonstrates.

Readers who are familiar with Steinbeck will recognize that water imagery flows copiously through his oeuvre—from the ocean and coastal scenes of The Pearl and The Log from the Sea of Cortez to the sheltered riverbanks in Of Mice and Men and the rising floodwaters of The Grapes of Wrath. As David Cassuto notes, “This tendency to privilege water, either by

Salinas Watershed and contain environmental themes, they are ultimately, to different extents, more focused on social relations and less focused on the ecospatiality of the watershed.
scarcity or surfeit, appears frequently in the Steinbeck canon” (157). For Steinbeck, water is not only functionally important but also symbolically central. In a letter to Louis Paul in 1936, he wrote that “in this country the deep symbol of security is rain—water. And the symbol of evil is drought. There isn’t any twisting of symbols there [in To a God Unknown]. It’s a very real thing” (Letters 130). However, I am less interested in the symbolic aspect than the practical one. Steinbeck’s realistic portrayals of water systems as systems in his Salinas Watershed fiction suggest an ecospatial and bioregional vision that merges the ecological with the geographical. In Steinbeck’s holistic ecology (to follow Ashley Reis’s analysis), each individual piece of earth is connected to the whole, and water circulates everywhere, through everything. Rain is not merely a symbol of goodness and life, but also a life-giving circulatory system and a reason that homesteads and farmlands fail or succeed. As Jan Goggans has argued, Steinbeck’s work recognizes the interdependence of “fluvial and social systems,” with human beings equally reliant upon and accountable for the water that enlivens and surrounds them.

The first of Steinbeck’s California texts, To a God Unknown is a complex portrait of white settlement in the Salinas Watershed that, like Willa Cather’s Death Comes for the Archbishop, portrays water access as the primary contingency of human dwelling. The story of Joseph Wayne’s settlement in the valley of Nuestra Señora on the San Francisquito River is arguably Steinbeck’s deepest fictional exploration of people’s relationship with the natural world, and it develops in the context of a functioning watershed, demonstrating Steinbeck’s portrayal of geography intertwining with ecology. Joseph Wayne develops a preoccupation with water access on his homestead, and his interest in the natural spring that feeds his property becomes a strange obsession. Meanwhile, Joseph forms deep ties to the local landscape that
prove as physical and spiritual as they are political and economic. In Joseph Wayne, Steinbeck tells the story of a man whose attention to the natural world—what we might call his bioregional awareness—is surpassed only by his obsessive desire to control it. Ultimately, Steinbeck uses a severe drought as a means to explore the strengths and weaknesses of Joseph’s attitudes, celebrating his quest to understand the biological processes of the watershed while also challenging his assumed primacy over it.

In a 1932 letter, Steinbeck drew a connection between the hydrological conditions in the region and the novel he was working on, which would become To a God Unknown. He wrote to Mavis McIntosh:

Do you remember the drought in Jolon that came every thirty-five years? We have been going through one identical with the one of 1880. Gradually during the last ten years the country has been dying of lack of moisture. This dryness has peculiar effects. Diseases increase, people are subject to colds, to fevers, and to curious nervous disorders. Crimes of violence increase. The whole people are touchy and nervous. I am writing at such length to try to show you the thing that has just happened. This winter started as usual—no rain. Then in December the thing broke. There were two weeks of downpour. The rivers overflowed and took away houses and cattle and land. I’ve seen decorous people dancing in the mud. They have laughed with a kind of crazy joy when their land was washing away. The disease is gone and the first delirium has settled to a steady jubilance. (Life in Letters 53)

Here Steinbeck’s stated interest in the regional climate and its effects on human psychology demonstrates his environmental awareness and foreshadows some of the novel’s primary concerns. This letter suggests a historical basis for the drought and flooding events mentioned in the novel and connects them to a real location in the Salinas Watershed.

The Nuestra Señora Valley (translated as “the valley of Our Lady”) in To a God Unknown is an analogue of the actual San Antonio Valley, one drainage west of the Salinas. The modern history of the upper San Antonio Valley—also called The Valley of the Oaks—is
fascinating and complex. With the founding of the San Antonio Mission in 1771, the highland area became one of the first European settlements in California and a stop on the old Camino Real, which connected one Spanish mission to the next. Not coincidentally, workers in the colony (most of them Native Americans) constructed the first irrigation system in California (and possibly in all of the American West), a gravity system that diverted river water to a small reservoir and a series of canals for various domestic and agricultural uses. Enjoying fewer natural and economic resources than the larger Salinas Valley, the San Antonio area suffered in the nineteenth century— with the exception the Gold Rush boom and bust of the town of Jolon— and the mission itself fell into disrepair (Mission San Antonio de Padua).

Three major developments during Steinbeck’s lifetime—though mostly occurring after the publication of To a God Unknown—ensured that the Valley of the Oaks would become one of the more interesting land-use sites in the United States to this day. The first was the purchase of large tracts of the valley by the media mogul William Randolph Hearst in the early 1900s. Hearst bought the land to raise livestock but also hired the architect Julia Morgan to construct a hacienda overlooking the mission. The Milpitas Hacienda was completed in 1930 and would become a destination for American celebrities and dignitaries throughout the decade. In 1940, under financial duress, Hearst sold the property to the U.S. military, and it became the training base known as Fort Hunter Liggett (Engle). Finally, in the 1960s the San Antonio dam and reservoir were created several miles below the shared site of the Mission, Hacienda, and Fort,

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28 Burton L. Gordon asserts that irrigation in the Monterey Bay region “was virtually given up…when the missions were secularized in 1833” (142). The ruins of the water infrastructure at Mission San Antonio, including the small reservoir and several canals, are still visible at the site, attended by some explanatory signage. On a visit to the site in February 2016, I learned that preservation and restoration of the main mission structure have been in progress since the early 1900s, but its future remains somewhat in doubt.
drastically altering the ecology of the subwatershed. The reservoir was used for irrigation and recreation, but has recently been depleted by drought, to the point that it fully closed to recreation in 2015 and 2016 (Monterey County, CA). These drastic changes in land management over the nearly two hundred and fifty years of Euro-American management make the San Antonio Valley an intriguing site of historical inquiry and environmental study; it remains a valley of oaks, preserved through a combination of mild negligence and strict control.

Precisely how relevant this brief history is to an ecospatial reading of *To a God Unknown* depends on the extent to which one equates the fictional place with the real one(s). Like the San Antonio Valley, Steinbeck’s San Francisquito River and Nuestra Señora Valley lie between the Salinas Valley and the Pacific Ocean. As the novel states, “Two flanks of the coast range held the valley of Nuestra Señora close, on one side guarding it against the sea, and on the other against the blasting winds of the great Salinas Valley. At the far southern end a pass opened in
the hills to let out the river, and near this pass lay the church and the little town of Our Lady” (4). After marrying in Monterey, Joseph and Elizabeth Wayne take the train “down the long Salinas Valley,” and Steinbeck relies on mimetic descriptions and real toponyms to guide the reader, effectively mapping the route: “At the little stations, Chualar, Gonzales, and Greenfield, they saw the grain teams standing in the road…” (51). At King City, where the characters disembark, the actual and fictional places diverge, for the Waynes can see “the willow boundary of their own home stream where it strode out to meet the broad Salinas river” (51). While the location of Steinbeck’s Nuestra Señora Valley corresponds approximately to the position of the San Antonio Valley (in the coastal mountains, uphill from King City), the fictional river seems to flow in a direction opposite that of the actual river. Given that no major tributary enters the Salinas at King City and the San Antonio River meets the Salinas some thirty miles southeast of there, Steinbeck’s San Francisquito is a decidedly fictional river that is nevertheless imagined as part of the real Salinas Watershed.

As John Ditsky has argued, *To a God Unknown* employs “the densest concentration of Nature-imagery in all of Steinbeck’s fiction” (15). This includes a variety of wild and domesticated species, as well as a sense of the primary setting as a subwatershed. Descriptions of plant and animal activity presage the changing of weather and seasons, or convey the “mood” of the land on a particular night. These descriptions frequently transcend the primary locality of the Wayne farm to include the wider hills and valleys of the area. Thus, when the wind arrives one morning “out of the southwest and the ocean” (81–82), bringing the winter rains with it, the water is described as permeating the entire area: “The river rumbled out of the western hills and rose over its banks, combing the willows down into the water and growling among the boulders.
Every little canyon and crease in the hills sent out a freshet to join the river. The watercuts deepened and spread in all the gullies” (83). This description of the flooding process conveys an ecospatial vision of the watershed, from the weather patterns bringing precipitation from the Pacific to the way in which topography and gravity conspire to funnel water down into the steadily rising river.

As soon as Joseph Wayne arrives in California from Vermont, it becomes apparent that he will assume responsibility (real or imagined) not only for his plot of land but also for the ecosystem in which it is situated. When Joseph first arrives in Nuestra Señora, he goes to town to register a claim to the land. Upon returning to the site on horseback, he looks down upon it: “This is mine,” he said simply, and his eyes sparkled with tears and his brain was filled with wonder that this should be his. There was pity in him for the grass and the flowers; he felt that the trees were his children and the land his child. For a moment he seemed to float high in the air and to look down upon it. ‘It’s mine,’ he said again, ‘and I must take care of it’” (7). This scene of asserting possession, enhanced by the momentary cartographical perspective, culminates in a violent sexual encounter between Joseph and the land, in which he “[flings] himself face downward on the grass” and tears at it with his fingers, “his thighs beat[ing] heavily upon the earth” (8)—definitively laying his claim. In this scene, Steinbeck sets up Joseph’s relationship to the land—which exhibits “a curious femaleness” (5)—as simultaneously paternalistic and conjugal, possessive and primal. Joseph’s arousal in this context is difficult to classify: he seems turned on both by the sense of legal ownership signified by the surveyor’s ecospatial perspective, and by the valley’s intimate verdancy, the vividness of life that courses through the grasses. Both possibilities foreshadow Joseph’s overall attitude, a possessiveness that eventually manifests as
obsession with biological growth and productivity. Joseph grows only more single-minded after his brothers arrive to enlarge the family claim. A well is drilled, families begun, and the ranch begins to produce, with Joseph at the center of things: “All things about him, the soil, the cattle, and the people were fertile, and Joseph was the source, the root of their fertility; his was the motivating lust” (24).

The story of Joseph’s disturbing possessiveness with respect to the land is complicated by the more positive quality of what might be termed his bioregional awareness, the obsessive way in which he seeks to understand the environment he hopes to control. The novel is rife with descriptions of plants and animals, which often register as awareness in Joseph, due to his role as the novel’s primary focalizer. He converses with living things, particularly the old oak tree that embodies his father’s spirit. Like a good naturalist, Joseph traverses the land with a keen eye and a questioning mind, gathering information about the ecosystem: “He felt with his palms the dry earth, still warm from the day’s sun. And he walked to a copse of little live oaks and rested his hands on the bark and crushed and smelled a leaf of each. Everywhere he went, inquiring with his fingers after the earth’s health” (121). Most impressively, Joseph claims to know from the sound of a hawk catching a rabbit when the predator is off its mark: “‘He missed his stroke,’ Joseph said. ‘He should have broken its neck with the first blow, but he missed’” (131). Joseph may feel as though he owns the land, but he also knows it intimately.

Despite his strong desire for the farm to prosper and his general attentiveness to biological processes, Joseph proves ill equipped to cope with the realities of drought. As in *East of Eden*, drought is first presented early in this novel as a natural part of the local climate. Romas and Juanito, the local cattle drivers, tell Joseph matter-of-factly of “the dry years”: “Why, all the
land dried up and the wells went dry and the cattle died.... Half the people who lived here then had to move away” (13). Such a drought has occurred, according to the local indigenous people Juanito cites, “twice in the memory of old men” (14). Joseph’s brother, Thomas, later corroborates this with a report from some visiting cattle rangers: “They said the whole country dried up and the cattle died and the land turned to powder” (28). Yet Joseph, in his eagerness to settle and his spiritual attachment to the land, refuses to believe these accounts. “I heard about it,” he tells Thomas. “But it’s all over now. Something was wrong, I tell you. It won’t come again, ever. The hills are full of water” (28). Therefore, when the drought arrives in full force, Joseph is woefully unprepared to face it. He is so deeply disoriented by the lack of water and the consequent recession of plant and animal life that he ceases to think or act in practical ways. He is convinced that “the land is dying” (176), and he remains fiercely possessive, to the point of interpreting the drought as a personal failure. “The duty of keeping life in my land,” he says at last, “is beyond my power” (144). When the rest of the family departs with the starving cattle in search of lasting food and water, Joseph opts to stay, like a captain going down with his ship.

Indeed, he retreats to the source, the mystical glade with a moss-covered boulder to which he has always been drawn, where water bubbles out as if from the center of the earth. This natural spring among the pines above the Wayne ranch is inarguably one of the novel’s primary sites, invested with multiple layers of meaning. It is where Joseph and Juanito meet after Juanito has killed Joseph’s brother, Benjy; where Joseph’s wife, Elizabeth, slips and falls to her death;

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29 Steinbeck may have included the pines as a kind of geographical diversion. In declaiming the notion of mimesis, he once noted that “you’ll find no pine forests in Jolon” (qtd. in Moore 102), which sits in the Valley of the Oaks. Steinbeck’s claim that no pine forests existed at the latitude and elevation of Jolon was probably true. However, there are several species of pine in the Santa Lucia range, including the endemic Monterey Pine (Kelley 5) near Monterey and, at the highest elevations—such as Junipero Serra Peak—above Jolon, the sugar pine (Griffin 6).
and where Joseph lives out the final days of his own life. It is also a site of obvious spiritual and symbolic significance, with its altar-shaped boulder. When Joseph first discovers it, he seems to recognize it: “Somewhere, perhaps in an old dream, I have seen this place, or perhaps felt the feeling of this place…. This is ancient—and holy” (32). Moreover, the spring may even be the headwaters of the San Francisquito River, Joseph’s “home stream,” giving it an added ecospatial importance in a novel so concerned with water scarcity. For Joseph, the retreat to the spring represents an extreme form of denial—not unlike the present trend among political conservatives in the United States—a proto-climate-change denialism. “It’s as though the country were not dead while this stream is running,” he says. “This is like a vein still pumping” (131). When the spring inevitably does dry up, a panic comes over Joseph, replaced by a chilling calm. He climbs the rock and slits his wrists, saying, “I am the land, and I am the rain.” At the moment of his death, the rain returns to the valley.

With the conclusion of this provocative yet occasionally stilted novel, the reader has an interpretive decision to make. On the one hand, she can buy the framework that the novel—not to mention much critical reception of it—has set up, of Joseph as a godlike figure who so closely identifies with the land that his self-sacrifice is required for the restoration of natural order (that is, the return of the rain). For example, in his 1973 essay, “Toward a Redefinition of To a God Unknown,” Robert DeMott explores the Jungian archetypes in the novel, offering a straightforward reading that buys Steinbeck’s engagement with symbolism and psychology, including Joseph’s role as a hero whose sacrifice does indeed restore rain to the land. More recently, Rodney Rice has explored the novel’s connections to deep ecology, again relying on a symbolic reading of Joseph’s connections with the land. Rice (mis)reads the drought as a
consequence of Joseph’s brothers’ incomplete approaches to nature (45) while idealizing Joseph’s own identification with the land, adopting the traditional view of Joseph as hero while ignoring the extent of Joseph’s failure to cope with scientific reality and environmental history of drought. In such readings, Joseph’s suicide is accepted as a natural outcome, the culmination of the novel’s pagan metaphysics and symbolic logic: Joseph is a godlike figure whose self-sacrifice has meteorological and ecological consequences, bringing rain and restoring life to the land.

On the other hand, the reader might choose instead an interpretation grounded in an understanding of natural science and environmental history, privileging the novel’s referential landscape, the California mountain valleys where drought is a cyclical occurrence, over what DeMott calls the novel’s “symbolic landscape,” (“Redefinition” 35). In this reading, which I posit as the more ecocritical one, the protagonist is not a hero but a well-intentioned fool, whose deep knowledge of the biological world is wasted due to his insatiable desire for biological productivity and environmental control. (In a periodically parched landscape, green is not always good.) Despite his environmental awareness and inquisitiveness, Joseph’s response to drought is ultimately anthropocentric: in his assumption that he is responsible for the health of his local environment, he gives himself far too much credit. One human (or an entire species of them) cannot overcome a drought; he can only adapt to it. And this is precisely where Joseph’s failure originates. He is first reduced to weak symbolic action—pouring water on the boulder to keep the moss alive—and finally to resignation, spilling his own blood in a misguided attempt to imbue the earth with a few drops of moisture. Indeed, Joseph dies because he fails to accept the naturalness of drought and adapt to its consequences. His conviction that “the land is dying”
(176) is not scientifically correct, as evidenced by his short trip with Thomas over the coastal mountain range, where most of the wildlife seems to have retreated until the drought subsides.

And it is here that Steinbeck asserts his understanding of watershed ecospatiality. He uses the brothers’ foray over the pass to clarify that the Wayne ranch rests in a “rain shadow” region, the eastern slope where less rain falls than on the western, coastal side. Upon crossing the pass and looking down into the “new fresh world” of the neighboring watershed, Joseph recognizes how the precipitation patterns sustain more life along the coast. “I’ve seen the fog heads looking over into our valley. Every night the cool grey fog must lie in these creases in the mountains and leave some of its moisture. And in the daytime it goes back to the sea, and at night it comes again, so that this forest is never kept waiting, never. Our land is dry, and there’s no help for it. But here—I resent this place…” (146–147). Perhaps most significantly, this green coastal forest, with its redwood trees, berry vines, and sword ferns, has become a sanctuary for all the animal denizens of Nuestra Señora that were capable of migration. On the leeward side, “The hills stirred with life. Quail skittered and rabbits hopped away from the path. While the men looked, a little deer walked into an open place, caught their scent, and bounced away” (146). As Thomas matter-of-factly observes, “All the game from our side is here” (146). In effect, these animals succeed where Joseph ultimately fails, using migration as an adaptation strategy to survive the drought conditions. By contrast, Joseph’s response to the drought is hyper-local, limited to his farm and the spring it relies on (47).

In To a God Unknown, Steinbeck’s depiction of the interaction between the eastern and western watersheds of California’s coastal mountain range suggests a bioregional orientation in action. Reading this novel ecospatially, against the easier symbolic interpretation, proves not
only more scientifically correct but also much more interesting and fruitful, for the novel
emerges as a searing indictment of patriarchal, colonial, and ecological hubris, and perhaps even
a cautionary tale of the kind of local place-attachment that the ecocritic Ursula Heise cautions
against in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*.\(^{30}\) With his story of the Nuestra Señora
subwatershed—with its natural spring, cyclical droughts, and distinctive ecological boundary—
Steinbeck shows how human settlement is always a negotiation with the natural world, both of
which stand to benefit from increased ecological and geographical awareness.

Steinbeck’s ecospatial vision is both less pronounced and more rigorous in *East of Eden*—a more fully developed novel in many ways—which opens with an environmental history
of the Salinas Valley. In this novel—whose working titles included “The Salinas Valley” and the
more subjective “My Valley”—Steinbeck blends autobiography and myth, telling the story of the
Hamilton and Trask families, who become neighbors in the Salinas Valley around the turn of the
twentieth century. The Hamiltons are based on Steinbeck’s mother’s family, who moved to the
King City area from Ireland in the late 1800s, while the Trasks are what Steinbeck called his
“symbol people,” the fictional characters through which he explores his themes of good and evil
in his complex, multigenerational revision of Genesis. Biblical references abound, and Adam has
clearly come to California from Connecticut to stake a claim to a “Salinas Valley Eden” (177).
Interestingly, Steinbeck’s original vision for the novel would have involved an even more
deliberate watershed framework. Originally, the Trasks were to dwell in three places on the
river—King City, Salinas, and Moss Landing—moving farther downstream with each

\(^{30}\) Heise points out the ways in which the kind of hyper-local mentality of some traditional bioregionalists
has had negative outcomes for environmental thought, as it fails to account for environmental issues that
exist on a larger geographical scale. Instead, she proposes an “eco-cosmopolitanism” that strikes a
balance between local and global concerns.
generation. He wrote in the *Journal*: “Now as you well know, Adam and his family must move down river toward the mouth. They will stop in Salinas for this generation. The last part will be at Moss Landing where the river enters the sea. This was the plan from the beginning and it is going to be followed so that my physical design remains intact and clear” (134). For reasons unknown (though page limitation comes to mind), the Trasks never make it to Moss Landing; but Steinbeck’s original intention of moving them downstream is an interesting one, as though the flow of generations through the valley might naturally mimic the flow of the river’s waters.

Despite Steinbeck’s insistence that his novel was “not about geography,” he nevertheless went out of his way to imbue the novel with a strong sense of place and invite the reader into it. He wrote in his second entry in the *Journal*: “Next I want to describe the Salinas Valley in detail but in sparse detail so that there can be a real feeling of it. It should be sights and sounds, smells and colors but put down with simplicity as though the boys were able to read it. This is the physical background of the book” (7). Two months later he wrote: “My wish is that when my reader has finished with this book, he will have a sense of belonging in it. He will actually be a native of that Valley…. I want it to be a life experience. I would like the reader to forget where he read the little essays and even think he invented them himself. That’s not too much to ask, is it?” (61–62).

Accordingly, *East of Eden* opens with Steinbeck’s most sustained fictional account of the valley and its history. The novel’s first line is not about people but about place: “The Salinas Valley is in Northern California. It is a long narrow swale between two ranges of mountains, and the Salinas River winds and twists up the center until it falls at last into Monterey Bay” (3). From there, the narrator (an autobiographical persona) goes on, in the first two chapters, to relate a
history of this valley, his memories of it, and the tale of his grandfather’s settlement there some two generations prior. The account is at once personal, social, and ecospatial. Steinbeck begins the second and third paragraphs with the first-person construction, “I remember,” while capturing a sense of place: “I remember my childhood names for grasses and secret flowers. I remember where a toad may live and what time the birds awaken in the summer—and what trees and seasons smelled like—how people looked and walked and smelled even. The memory of odors is very rich” (3). The narrator continues with an account of the two mountain ranges and his impressions of them, the Gabilans to the east as “light gay mountains full of sun and loveliness” versus the Santa Lucias to the west (“dark and brooding—unfriendly and dangerous”) (3). Despite their subjective aspects, these passages contain excellent insights into the topography, ecology, geology, and hydrology of the region (the elements the author was glad to get out of the way).

Importantly, the initial descriptions of the river describe it not so much as an entity in itself but rather as focal point of the watershed as a whole: “From both sides of the valley little streams slipped out of the hill canyons and fell into the bed of the Salinas River” (3). Perhaps unlike most literary rivers, this one is characterized not by its immutability but by its capriciousness, borne of strong seasonal fluctuations that characterize the local climate. The narrator refers to it as “a part-time river” because of its subterranean status during the dry summer months. Meanwhile, “In the winter of wet years the streams ran full-freshet, and they swelled the river until sometimes it raged and boiled, bank full, and then it was a destroyer. The river tore the edges of the farm lands and washed whole acres down…” (3).
Moreover, the narrator describes the rainfall patterns in the valley as “a thirty-year cycle,” echoing the same regional knowledge Joseph ignores in *To a God Unknown*:

There would be five or six wet and wonderful years when there might be nineteen to twenty-five inches of rain, and the land would shout with grass. Then would come six or seven pretty good years of twelve to sixteen inches of rain. And then the dry years would come, and sometimes there would be only seven or eight inches of rain…. The land cracked and the springs dried up and the cattle listlessly nibbled dry twigs…. Some families would sell out for nearly nothing and move away. And it never failed that during the dry years the people forgot about the rich years, and during the wet years they lost all memory of the dry years. It was always that way. (6–7)

This straightforward account of the extremes of precipitation in the valley conveys as much about the attitudes of the people living there as about the local environment. The ostensible forgetfulness of the locals regarding the wet years and dry years is a strong statement about their environmental mindset. Steinbeck suggests that in order for human settlement and agriculture to persist in the Salinas Watershed, people must be prepared to deal with a precarious hydrological situation and ultimately address the crucial problem of water access.

In addition to conveying the seasonality of the watershed system, the opening chapter also conveys a sense of deep time through its depiction of Salinas Valley geology. The narrator points out that the valley floor “is level because this valley used to be the bottom of a hundred-mile inlet from the sea. The river mouth at Moss Landing was centuries ago the entrance to this long inland water” (4). He suggests, through an anecdote about his father drilling a well near Soledad, that the valley ground consists of rich topsoil, then gravel, then twenty feet of white sea sand containing pieces of shell and whalebone, “and then black earth again, and even a piece of redwood, that imperishable wood that does not rot. Before the inland sea there must have been a forest” (4). In this way, Steinbeck situates the valley not only in terms of the recent history he
will retell in the novel but also with regard to the ancient geological and ecological history that in many ways remains mysterious, as signified by the pieces of redwood and whalebone, and, later in the novel, the ostensible meteorite that breaks Samuel Hamilton’s drill bit at the bottom of Adam Trask’s new well (183–184).

The final piece of the novel’s ecospatial background that the first chapter introduces has to do with the history of human settlement in the valley, arguably the novel’s primary historical concern. This brief yet sweeping overview moves quickly from indigenous peoples through the Spanish and United States occupations (while omitting the brief period of Mexican political control), relying on exaggeration and stereotype to convey the primary factors in the valley’s development: political, economic, and military power, as well as agricultural technology.

First there were Indians, an inferior breed without energy, inventiveness, or culture, a people that lived on grubs and grasshoppers and shellfish, too lazy to hunt or fish. They ate what they could pick up and planted nothing. They pounded bitter acorns for flour. Even their warfare was a weary pantomime.

Then the hard, dry Spaniards came exploring through, greedy and realistic, and their greed was for gold or God. They collected souls as they collected jewels. They gathered mountains and valleys, rivers and whole horizons, the way a man might now gain title to building lots….

Then the Americans came—more greedy because there were more of them. They took the lands, remade the laws to make their titles good. (6–7)

Setting aside for a moment what is likely the most blatantly offensive paragraph in all of Steinbeck’s works, I suggest that we understand this passage in its entirety and in light of this chapter’s subject of the Salinas Valley and its development. Although East of Eden as a whole is perhaps the fullest expression of Steinbeck’s non-teleological thinking, the logic of this version

31 Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts developed their theory of non-teleological thinking in The Sea of Cortez. This philosophy invokes the scientific method and insists upon resisting the impulse to attribute causality and recognizing “what is.” This mode of “is thinking” focuses not on “why” questions, but rather on
of Salinas history is certainly one of progress toward American settlement, and the narrator judges each group according to its relative ability to control the valley’s resources. Alongside the apparent praise of the pioneering spirit is, I would argue, a tongue-in-cheek rebuke of the inherently negative values that enable it. The Americans succeed primarily because they are the greediest and powerful enough to “re[make] the laws.” The Spaniards’ calculated, “realistic” form of greed is somehow more chilling, with their collection of jewels, souls, and “whole horizons.” With these things in mind, the supposed cultural and intellectual deficit of the Native Americans appears more as a failure to control the forces of colonialism (including environmental possessiveness) that were obviously stacked against them.32

Most pertinent for my purposes here is the way that Steinbeck, in this chapter’s account of the modern period, emphasizes the extent to which White settlement in the valley was largely a function of resource availability, particularly water for drinking and farming purposes. The narrator notes how water access dictated spatial development. The low-lying valley property, with good water access and rich soil, was settled first, followed by the rocky, arid foothills: “Wherever a trickle of water came out of the ground a house sprang up and a family began to grow and multiply” (7). Interestingly, it is Samuel Hamilton, the character based on Steinbeck’s grandfather, whom Adam enlists to dig wells on his property in hopes of ensuring its long-term

32 This is not to excuse what appears to be an outright dismissal of Native culture. Rather, I suggest that Steinbeck is employing a slightly mocking tone that applies to each group equally. This passage provides another example of how Steinbeck’s ambivalence on racial issues, as seen in his mixed portrayal of non-white groups, often verges on the offensive. For more on Steinbeck’s treatment of Native American issues, see Louis Owens’ article “‘Grampa Killed Indians, Pa Killed Snakes’: Steinbeck and the American Indian” (1988).
success. It becomes something of a local joke that Samuel, a blacksmith by trade, makes part of his living by helping his neighbors find water on their property when his own generous plot of highland ground is hopelessly dry. As Steinbeck puts it, Samuel “found quite soon that even if he had ten thousand acres of hill country he could not make a living on the bony soil without water. His clever hands built a well-boring rig, and he bored wells on the lands of luckier men” (10).

Adam Trask is one such man. After arriving in the valley, Adam surveys the area and finally buys a promising place midway between King City and San Lucas, “in a tiny opening in the foothills, a miniature valley fed by a precious ever-running spring of sweet water…. Huge live oaks shaded the valley, and the earth had a richness and a greenness foreign to this part of the country” (135). Although the novel is certainly invested in Adam’s status as a pioneering patriarch—“Here was a place in which to plant his dynasty” (154)—Steinbeck does not offer him an untouched plot of land, which, historically speaking, would have been unavailable in the late 1890s. Rather, he acknowledges the history of the Salinas Valley by mentioning the previous ownership of Adam’s ranch, which goes back all the way to the Spanish land grants of the late 1700s and early 1800s. Adam buys the property from Mr. and Mrs. Bordoni, a Swiss man and a Spanish-American woman who inherited it from Mrs. Bordoni’s ancestors, the Sanchez family. Nine hundred acres remained from the original ten-thousand-acre grant, which the narrator calls “the core of the original Sanchez grant, and the best of it too”:

They straddled the river and tucked into the foothills on both sides, for at this point the valley narrows and then opens out again. The original Sanchez house was still usable. Built of adobe, it stood in a tiny opening in the foothills, a miniature valley fed by a precious ever-running spring of sweet water. That of course was why the first Sanchez had built his seat there (133).
This brief history of what becomes the Trask ranch is a nod not only to the history of settlement in the Salinas Valley, but also to the ecospatial practices that drove it. Here, as in the opening chapter, Steinbeck points out the ways that settlement in the valley was determined by water access. Significantly, one of the artifacts Adam finds on the property from the Spanish era is a piece of water pipe built out of redwood (which is native to the coastal ranges west of the Salinas Valley) (158). To Adam, this relic of the previous century epitomizes the spirit of pioneer vision and creativity; but is also a subtle reminder to the reader that settlement is always contingent on natural resources, particularly water and the various materials used to access and appropriate it.

Like Joseph Wayne, Adam Trask recognizes the environmental and economic value of water access on his property. For Adam, like the Sanchezes before him, water access is a primary concern, even more so once he has taken ownership of the Sanchez/Bordoni place. Despite its ideal situation, Adam still frets over the dryness of his claim. During his first summer in the valley, he feels increasingly panicked about the startling aridity which locals like Samuel know to be an annual occurrence. “What I really want is water,” he tells Samuel one day. “This wind would pump all the water I could find. I thought if I could bring in a few wells and irrigate, the topsoil wouldn’t blow away” (165). Samuel brings his dowsing rod and conducts a thorough and meditative survey of the property, eventually finding indications of “a whole world of water.” He tells Adam, “You must have a great drain under your land from the mountains” (166). Together they hatch plans for a full irrigation system that will sustain Adam’s agricultural operations. They draw up plans for four or five wells, powered by several windmills of Samuel’s own design, and perhaps some storage tanks.
Exactly how much Steinbeck knew about the history of well drilling in the valley is unclear, but an entry in his journal suggests that he did some research:

I was wrong about the price per foot for digging a well. Samuel would have charged about fifty cents a foot. The price right now is $3.25 without casing and $4.25 with casing. Fifty cents would be about right for his time. When you consider that wages were ordinarily a dollar a day, then you can see that fifty cents a foot would be good pay. A well rig man today gets fifteen to 18 dollars a day and uses machinery. So the price is less per man hour than it was then and probably one could buy for 50 cents in 1898 just about what he can for $3.25 now. (78)  

Here, Steinbeck places Samuel in 1898, while in the novel the survey of Adam’s property takes place just after the “great boundary that was called 1900” (127).

The ideal hydrological situation of the Trask ranch—midway down the Salinas Valley and nestled by the river—means that Adam is poised to capitalize on the new (literally, groundbreaking) advancements in irrigation technology in the region. By 1900, various entrepreneurs in the valley—most notably, Claus Spreckels, who started an enormous operation refining sugar from beets—were experimenting with the kinds of large-scale irrigation technology that would eventually transform the management of the entire Salinas Watershed into the “Salad Bowl of the World.” Wells with centrifugal pumps powered by wood-fired steam engines or gas-powered engines enabled drillers to plumb new depths, accessing the shallower of the two aquifers beneath the Salinas Valley, one hundred eighty feet down. Burton Anderson states that as early as 1875, a Salinas landowner had commissioned a well that was two hundred feet and dug by hand, and by 1878 he had a five-hundred-foot well drilled by a steam-powered rig (Anderson 70). Such methods, along with further advancements in pumps and electric power

33 Steinbeck may have miscalculated this figure slightly. Burton Anderson cites a project in 1898 near Spreckels for a 10-inch well at a depth of 155 feet that cost only thirty-six cents per foot (Anderson 70).
sources, facilitated the valley’s transition from cattle ranching to grain farming to row crops as the main form of agriculture in 1929.

However, Steinbeck’s descriptions of the type of technology Samuel proposes—namely, windmills—belie a more traditional approach better suited to a small-scale operation. According to Burton L. Gordon, windmill-powered pumps (presumably in conjunction with flumes or canals) predominated as an irrigation technique in the valley between 1874 and 1890 (142), just as the region was making the transition from ranching to grain farming. 34 Other accounts of Salinas Valley history indicate that windmill-powered wells in the late nineteenth century were mostly used domestically—supplying people and livestock with water where surface water was unavailable—and not for large-scale irrigation projects (Anderson 28). This was due to the fact that windmills were only used in conjunction with shallow wells that drew from water sources at or near the surface (e.g., creeks and springs), sources were unreliable during dry seasons and multi-year droughts—less than desirable in the valley of a “part-time river.” The more primitive gravity-fed irrigation systems, first introduced in Alta California by the Spanish at San Antonio Mission, suffered from the same flaw, but with the added problem posed by the seasonal flooding that routinely washed away the canals and flumes they relied upon. 35 Samuel’s bid to

34 An 1890 census report stated that sixty shallow wells (relying on the seasonal river water) were operating near the mouth of the Salinas, with numerous windmill-operated wells in use at Salinas and several more “rumored” far upstream at Pleyto (Tonsfeldt and Paine 25). According to Breschini, et. al, “In spite of the growing use of irrigation in Monterey County, by 1899 only 6,675 acres on 21 farms were under irrigation. This was up significantly from 1889, when only 891 acres were under irrigation, but the intensive use of irrigation did not begin in the Salinas Valley until after World War I” (62). For comparison, Breschini, et. al, point to the figures from 1998, which showed approximately 173,158 acres under irrigation in the valley.

35 It wasn’t until the dams were built by mid-century that the watershed management was truly stabilized for the industrial production of crops like lettuce and artichokes for which the region would become
install windmills to harness Adam’s water is thus reflective of his expertise with a technology that was not only more suited to the highland areas he is familiar with but also decreasingly relevant in the region. In a typical weather year, windmill-powered wells would have given Adam the ability to extend the growing season in some small fields on his property but not to implement the sweeping improvements he envisions.

Figure 15. Windmill at Hamilton Ranch, near King City (Benson).

However, only one of the proposed wells is ever completed. Work is delayed when Adam’s wife, Cathy, goes into labor, and it ceases altogether after Cathy shoots her husband in the shoulder and abandons him and their newborn twins, revealing her dark side and shattering Adam’s naïve worldview. Over a decade later, when Samuel visits the Trask place, the water known. By holding water in the highlands upstream, dams prevented much of the flooding that had doomed gravity irrigation systems (canals and flumes) in the past. They also could be used to control the release of water, making it available beyond the rainy season and using it to recharge the groundwater that supplied not only the irrigation wells but also the valley’s city populations.
project remains unfinished, and he deplores the fallowness of the land and what he calls the
fallowness of Adam himself; awash in self-pity, Adam has neglected to make anything of
himself or his property. “I had no reason to plant it,” he says (293).

Newly awakened by some straight talk from Samuel, Adam makes one final, half-hearted
effort to revive his original dream:

Adam swung out his hand and made an arc over the west. ‘That land out there—
would you help me to make the garden we talked of, the windmills and the wells
and the flats of alfalfa? We could raise flower-seeds. There’s money in that.
Think what it would be like, acres of sweet peas and gold squares of calendulas.
Maybe ten acres of roses for the gardens of the West. Think how they would
smell on the west wind (296).

It’s a beautiful vision, but ultimately an empty one, encapsulating perfectly the twin themes of
promise and disillusionment that are so prevalent in Steinbeck’s depictions of the pioneering
spirit in the American West.36 Samuel is aging and has come to say goodbye, and Adam knows
that such a plan would never come to be. Soon after this last encounter, Samuel dies, and Adam
leases out the ranch and moves his family to a house in Salinas.

By drawing on his grandfather’s occupation and making well drilling a central sub-plot of
East of Eden, Steinbeck emphasizes water access as a prerequisite to successful settlement in the
Salinas Valley. In so doing, he also taps into the history of watershed management there. Just
before the well drilling scene, the narrator of East of Eden captures the sentiment of Salinas
Valley settlers who, like Adam, dreamed of harnessing the hydrological resources of the
watershed:

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36 Classic examples include George and Lennie’s pastoral vision of a shared homestead in Of Mice and
Men, as well as the migrants’ myopic view of California as Promised Land in The Grapes of Wrath.
These themes and their relationship to Steinbeck’s use of biblical imagery have been well documented.
Most recently, Mimi Gladstein has connected Steinbeck’s environmental views to his ambivalent use of
Eden imagery.
There were [people] who prophesied, with rays shining on their foreheads, about the sometime ditches that would carry water all over the valley—who knows? Maybe in our lifetime—or deep wells with steam engines to pump the water up out of the guts of the world. Can you imagine? Just think what this land would raise with plenty of water! Why, it will be a frigging garden! (156).

Writing in 1952, Steinbeck knew that this prophecy had come true. The intended irony in this statement is that Adam’s version of this vision does not materialize. The unintended irony is that these types of industrial irrigation had already begun in the Salinas Valley by 1900, a fact that must have eluded Steinbeck’s memory or research.

With the death of Samuel Hamilton and the Trasks’ move to the city, East of Eden itself moves from the rural to the urban, and its ecospatial elements grow thinner accordingly. However, two related agricultural enterprises extend the connection between the productivity of the Salinas Valley and the success or failure of those who live there. The latter of these is the teenage Cal Trask’s investment in beans just as the market is poised to rise during World War I; with Will Hamilton’s help but without his father’s knowledge, he contracts with the tenant of the Trask property and other local farmers to plant beans, and he makes a hefty profit when the market spikes. Cal uses his wealth, privilege, and acumen to spur bean production in the Salinas Valley as a way to make a lot of money in a short time, an effort to atone for his father’s business failure and for his own perceived failings as a son and brother (a relationship dynamic that is central to the novel). When he attempts to give the entire $15,000 profit to his father, Adam rejects the gift (one of the novel’s most overt Genesis references), and Cal burns the money to ashes.

But the first and more pertinent enterprise is Adam’s scheme to export lettuce by rail to the rest of the United States, beginning with a pilot shipment to New York. On something of a
whim, Adam invests a significant part of his inheritance in the technology of refrigeration: a large plant for manufacturing ice and train cars customized to carry produce, on ice, out of the valley. The plan is destined to fail, not because of the idea itself—which took hold in the mid-twentieth century and largely powers the Salinas economy to this day—but because of bad luck and a lack of foresight: the train encounters multiple delays along the lengthy route and arrives in New York containing nothing but puddles of rotting lettuce, “six carloads of horrible slop” (435). Despite his forward thinking, Adam loses a lot of money in the venture, and the local businessmen congratulate themselves for refusing to invest in Adam’s plan. Steinbeck seems to enjoy the irony of Adam’s being both visionary and naïve, devising a scheme (exporting produce) that would be the driving force of the entire Salinas economy for decades yet failing utterly to capitalize on it. In an earlier passage about how people at the turn of the century tended to dream and prophesy about the future, he writes: “Another man, but he was crazy, said that someday there’d be a way, maybe ice, maybe some other way, to get a peach like this here I got in my hand clear to Philadelphia” (156). Even a few years later, Adam’s grand idea is, unfortunately, ahead of its time.

Now an entrepreneurial failure and a local laughingstock, Adam gives up on shipping produce but retains ownership of the ice plant, which he thinks can still be profitable. This decision is, from a resource standpoint, effectively an extension of his earlier vision of achieving productivity by accessing and storing the precious Salinas Valley waters. Only now, instead of creating an irrigation system to make his own property more verdant and productive, Adam will build on his privileged position of controlling the region’s key resource, storing water in solid form and selling it off to other users. Whether motivated by drought or opportunism, both Cal
and Adam understand that harnessing natural resources, especially water, is the key to success in the Salinas Valley.

Though very different in form and content, both *To a God Unknown* and *East of Eden* reveal Steinbeck’s commitment to a literary cartography that presents environmental issues like land use and drought in realistic ways. These Steinbeck Country novels capture aspects of human dwelling in different parts of the same watershed, showing how the relative availability of water not only sustains or challenges life, but also, on a systemic level, dictates patterns of spatial and economic development. Steinbeck seems to suggest that the failure of both Joseph Wayne and Adam Trask to adapt to life in the Salinas Watershed is due to their disregard for local knowledge; hailing from the northeastern United States and lacking personal experience in dry places, they are unable to comprehend a climate in which drought is a natural fact. On that score, Samuel Hamilton emerges as a more admirable figure than either of them. As landowners, Samuel and Adam are at opposite ends of the economic and hydrological scales, which in the Salinas Valley are closely related. Yet Samuel’s extensive knowledge and curiosity about the local environment is unmatched in the Salinas Valley—and perhaps in Steinbeck’s fiction (though Doc in *Cannery Row* may be a worthy rival). He understands local geology, hydrology, climate, and soil types, as well as local stories. Indeed, he embodies, as John Timmerman has argued, something approaching a Steinbeckian land ethic. Samuel loves the land deeply, in spite of the dryness of his own plot. “I love that dust heap,” he says. “I love every flint, the plow-breaking outcroppings, the thin and barren topsoil, the waterless heart of her. Somewhere in my dust heap there’s a richness” (295). In Steinbeck’s portrayal of his grandfather, he offers a model of historically informed place-knowledge and bioregional dwelling that includes an acceptance
of aridity, an attitude that stands in contrast to Adam’s apathy as well as Joseph’s mentality of possession, crisis, and self-sacrifice.

In the late 1970s, Richard Astro asserted that Steinbeck’s “sense of place reflects a thorough interpenetration of consciousness and environment” (23). Astro argued that Steinbeck’s works reflect a form of pastoralism that is rooted in community values, oneness with nature, and a rejection of big economics. Furthermore, he claimed that Steinbeck was increasingly relevant in that time of environmental crisis. With a nod to Astro, I submit that Steinbeck’s depictions of water access and aridity in the Salinas Watershed are increasingly relevant today, as California’s “dry years” persist, global climate change alerts us to the frightening realities of the “anthropocene,” and radical environmental and political changes necessarily take root. In fact, Steinbeck foresaw the possibility of a large-scale water crisis in California. In the 1954 novel *Sweet Thursday*, he compares the looming water crisis to the overfishing of Monterey Bay sardines during World War II: “The canneries themselves fought the war by getting the limit taken off fish and catching them all. It was done for patriotic reasons, but that didn’t bring the fish back…. It was the same noble impulse that stripped the forests of the West and right now is pumping water out of California’s earth faster than it can rain back in. When the desert comes, people will be sad…” (*Sweet Thursday* 3). Not only was Steinbeck’s assessment of the flagging sardine industry a fair one (as detailed in Kevin Bailey’s 2015 book on Steinbeck’s boat from *Sea of Cortez*), but he also understood that California’s reliance on widespread water extraction for use in industrial agriculture was fundamentally unsustainable. To this day, with a multiyear drought in California at last seemingly abating, the Salinas Valley continues to produce America’s vegetables by drawing down its aquifers, “pump[ing] the water up out of the guts of
the world.” Steinbeck’s prescience on the politics of water and its relationship to other forms of resource extraction aligns well with the ecospatial orientation of his Salinas Watershed fiction, the sense that each story is happening in a historical place that is geographically connected and vibrantly alive.

**Conclusion**

Perhaps one of the most provocative and perplexing passages in Steinbeck’s fiction involves a radical change in perspective akin to that which I am calling for in this dissertation. In *To a God Unknown*, Joseph has just returned home from the scene of his wife’s accidental death. As he relaxes into his chair, still dealing with the shock, he looks down at his hands and his body, and his awareness—along with the reader’s—suddenly shifts from his physical self to the geophysical world. With a simple cue—“Size changed”—the novel’s focalization switches from Joseph looking down at his own body to “the brain of the world,” “high up on a tremendous peak,” looking down “on the earth’s body” and the built structures of human civilization contained therein—little fields, houses, and towns tucked into narrow valleys on the edge of an abyss (137). Like Joseph, the “world-brain” is in a drowsy state, “And thus it stood a million years, unchanging and quiet” (137). The remainder of the passage is worth quoting at length:

The world-brain sorrowed a little, for it knew that some time it would have to move, and then the life would be shaken and destroyed and the long work of tillage would be gone, and the houses in the valleys would crumble. The brain was sorry, but it could change nothing. It thought, “I will endure even a little discomfort to preserve this order which has come to exist by accident. It will be a shame to destroy this order.” But the towering earth was tired of sitting in one position. It moved, suddenly, and the houses crumbled, the mountains heaved horribly, and all the work of a million years was lost.

And size changed, and time changed. (137)

With that, the narration returns to Joseph awakening in his chair.
This digression from the novel’s primary plot and focalization makes little narrative sense, yet I would suggest that it is actually emblematic of Steinbeck’s engagement with place in his Salinas Watershed fiction on several levels. First, it invokes an aerial perspective that can be understood as cartographical, with a change in geographic scale and a depiction of human civilization as an outgrowth of a coastal mountain topography like that of the Salinas Watershed. Either Joseph is sensing his own body as a kind of natural landscape, or looking down (as omniscient world-brain) on his land from above; or else the changed perspective involves a whole new focalization, one that moves entirely away from the egocentric protagonist to re-assert an ecocentric view of regional topography on a much grander geographical and chronological scale. (Whether this cartographical, world-brain perspective is attributable to Joseph’s consciousness ultimately matters far less than the perspective itself.) Second, the image of the human environment in tenuous coexistence with the natural environment—the body and brain of the world—is consistent with Steinbeck’s environmental vision, conveying a sense of environmental history that stretches far beyond the novel’s ostensible historical context. Indeed, Rodney Rice reads it as an “uncanny” moment of “identification with primal and natural forces” that also “raises questions relative to ontological schemes that would position human life at the apex of the natural realm” (34). Certainly it is an image of a deep landscape in deep time, a gesture toward a more inclusive geographical, ecological, and historical framework at the novel’s core. Finally, the world-brain scene should remind readers that place perception—like literature and cartography—always involves interpretation. Issues like scale, time, and inclusivity matter, and, as Joseph learns too late, merely adopting a more holistic perspective doesn’t eliminate every blind spot. The current evolutionary order, Steinbeck cautions, is merely accidental, and
adopting an orientation to place that recognizes a deeper environmental history may be a necessary step toward adaptation and survival.

In his final word on the Salinas-Monterey region he immortalized, Steinbeck admitted to a certain hesitancy, a challenge that inhibited his writing. “I find it difficult to write about my native place,” he wrote in *Travels with Charley*. “It should be easiest, because I knew that strip angled against the Pacific better than any place in the world. But I find it not one thing but many—one printed over another until the whole thing blurs” (173). The textual image he invokes here—the palimpsest—is an apt one for thinking about how place operates over time; places are dynamic, history is blurry, and even the most comprehensive representation of a given place—as *PrairyErth* reminds us—is destined to fall short. But Steinbeck’s statement also evokes the frustrations of a cartographer who may know a place more holistically but is nevertheless required to leave some details out. Reading Steinbeck’s Salinas Watershed texts with an ecospatial lens reveals not only the extent of his literary engagement with his “native place,” but also his insistence that we grapple with the intertwined geographical, ecological, and historical dimensions of place. Above all, reading all of the literary and cultural production of Steinbeck Country ecospatially reminds us to engage with a deeper map of “that strip angled against the Pacific,” understanding Steinbeck’s fiction and its settings not only in spatial, ecological, or historical terms, but in a way that recognizes just how effectively “the whole thing blurs.”
CHAPTER FOUR

PLOTTING AND RECKONING:

THE GEOGRAPHY OF INJUSTICE IN RICHARD WRIGHT’S *NATIVE SON*

In a photograph from the early 1940s, the African-American writer Richard Wright peers down at a partial map of Chicago’s South Side, laid out beneath him on a wooden floor. Beside him, his friend Horace Cayton, co-author of an influential sociological study of that place, points at the map in a gesture of explanation, as if to indicate some existing feature or a future plan for the area. Sharply dressed in three-pieced suits, the two black men loom assertively over the map, each with one hand and one knee perched upon it, each holding a cigarette in his left hand, like surveyors staking a claim. The caption of the photograph—which could easily have been staged—identifies Cayton as director of Parkway Community House, the important African-American cultural institution he led from 1942–1948. Wright, presumably, needed no introduction. His 1940 novel *Native Son*, which is set in South Side Chicago, had catapulted him to international celebrity following his childhood in the American South and young adulthood in Chicago, personal eras characterized largely by Wright’s experiences of poverty, hard work, racial segregation, and intellectual awakening. His writing in the 1930s for various Communist publications, for the Federal Writers’ Project, and eventually in *Native Son*, along with his affiliation with Cayton and other Chicago sociologists, had established him, by the time of this photo, as something of an expert on the geography, demography, and culture of Chicago’s “Black Metropolis,” years after his own residency there had ended. Indeed, when Cayton and St.
Clair Drake needed someone to pen an introduction to their study, it was Wright who rose to the task.¹

The photo of Cayton and Wright, two giants of Chicago’s African-American society at the time—one who wrote the definitive sociological study of the South Side, the other who wrote

¹ Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake’s *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* was published in 1945 and remains a definitive work on Chicago’s South Side. Wright also wrote a pamphlet for the Parkway Community House, touting it as “the first institution equipped with scientific knowledge of the urban situation among Negroes to attempt to control, probe, and disseminate facts to the processes, meanings, causes, and effects of urbanization” (qtd. in Hricko 121).
the best-known literary depiction of it—in command of the map of Chicago has a special resonance for the present chapter, which focuses on the role of geographic reference and spatial imagery within the larger cultural context of *Native Son.* Through the first two of the novel’s three sections, Wright employs toponymic cues with relative consistency, placing his protagonist, Bigger Thomas, within a cartographic and ecospatial framework—which is to say, putting him “on the map.” This technique culminates at the moment when Bigger, running from the police after committing two murders, consults maps of the search area on the front pages of the newspaper as he is systematically boxed in by a massive police manhunt and eventually captured. The image of the protagonist locating himself on the map, in conjunction with Wright’s persistent toponymic cues, lends the novel’s first two parts the air of a travel narrative, whereby the issue of Bigger’s mobility emerges as a pressing and fundamental one. Meanwhile, the novel’s broader thematic concerns reveal a preoccupation with the spatial aspects of Bigger’s experience—and of African-American experience more broadly—of dwelling in and navigating around sites of racial segregation and enforcement, concerns which are driven home by Bigger’s incarceration and his attorney’s (and Wright’s) subsequent indictment of Chicago’s racist housing policies. As a travel narrative, then, *Native Son* functions ironically at best, for the novel follows a logic not of world-opening or cosmopolitanism but of circumscription and enclosure: Bigger Thomas travels only to be boxed in, and the very environment of Chicago is complicit in his demise.

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2 The photo was likely taken in 1941. The original photo is housed in the Horace R. Cayton Papers at the Chicago Public Library (Chicago Public Library). This digital version is from briandolinar.com (briandolinar).
In an important sense, then, it is the background of *Native Son* that receives the focus in this chapter, which strives to understand Wright’s novel better by excavating the layers of its ecospatial references. My main contention is that readers might come to comprehend the novel and its politics more fully by learning more about the nature of the places with which it referentially interacts. Wright’s use of Chicago and its so-called “Black Belt” as his novel’s setting—as opposed to, say, Harlem or Memphis—has important consequences for the depth and legitimacy of its sociopolitical critique. Through a careful deployment of toponymic cues, Wright refers his readers to a particular, place-bound (local, environmental) history that proves as ecospatial as it is sociopolitical; the novel effectively maps physical geography onto a well-recognized cultural geography. As its literary setting, in other words, Chicago is not incidental but rather fundamental to *Native Son* in ways that have not been fully recognized. Reading *Native Son* through an ecospatial lens means confronting the novel’s engagement with issues of geographical orientation and mobility, sociohistorical context, the materiality of built environments, and even the weather, all of which emerge through the guise of this famously “sensationalist” “protest novel.” Indeed, as I will demonstrate, it is the particular ecospatiality of Chicago’s Black Belt that provides the grounds for such a protest.³

The starting point for my reading of *Native Son* is the presumption that place matters, that coming to terms with the novel’s setting—its relationship to the real world—is crucial to understanding its many layers of meaning. To that end, this chapter has two objects of study: the place itself (Chicago, in the 1930s) and the fictional representation of the place (*Native Son*). My primary motives are, first, to address a gap in the critical conversation about the novel and,

³ It was Wright’s protégée, James Baldwin, who famously dubbed *Native Son* “everybody’s protest novel,” in an essay of that title.
second, to model a kind of ecospatial literary methodology that is grounded in geocritical and ecocritical theory. I strive for Westphalian multifocalization in this chapter not by bringing in additional, equivalent representations (i.e., more South Side Chicago novels) but rather by reading a variety of secondary sources, including works of cartography, history, and sociology. And *Native Son*, it turns out, poses a number of questions pertinent to the study of place, space, and representation, while also rewarding further analysis of its historical referent (1930s Chicago). The novel’s meaning, in other words, does not derive primarily from the quality of its depiction of a given place (which, upon close inspection, is surprisingly lacking)—which is to say, from its success as a representation—but rather for its treatment of spatial themes within a potent historical and geographical context. This particular novel, it seems to me, is perhaps more powerful as an explication of place than as a representation of it; in its incisive critique of Black Belt ecospatiality, *Native Son* not only depicts a particular place, but also shows readers how place operates as a spatial, historical, and ecological matrix that structures human experience.

Indeed, my reading of *Native Son* demonstrates the extent to which place, rather than being incidental to human experience and fictional narratives, actually structures both in compelling ways. Such an approach represents a definite shift in the historical and ongoing critical conversation around this novel. Insofar as the critical history of *Native Son* revolves primarily around issues of race, gender, class, and genre, a narrowly geographical or ecological focus might seem to risk flattening some nuances of the ongoing critical conversation—or of the novel itself. However, as I will demonstrate, place-based criticism, rather than appearing a-cultural, can offer new ways of understanding cultural issues by considering them in spatial rather than just temporal terms. This is potentially a very capacious approach in that ecospatiality
accounts, in (my) theory, for all the workings of culture’s production with respect to the sites where that production occurs. In effect, I wish to build upon the work of scholars who have explored other critical issues in the novel while suggesting how place-based and social or cultural critiques can productively inform one another.

In addition to this point, I wish to make two important caveats. The first is that, as an environmental critic, I am more interested in space than psychology, in setting more than character. But I am very interested in one particular aspect of psychology, which is the relationship between characters and their environments. This includes all the ways in which characters may be said to experience and comprehend their surroundings, as well as the multitude of impacts that environments may be said to have upon psychology (character) and behavior (plot). In this chapter, I pay special attention to the issues of orientation and mobility as the epistemological nexuses between character and environment; upon close examination, Bigger Thomas’s level of geographic awareness (orientation) and his ability to navigate through physical space (mobility) prove crucial to the novel’s logic of enclosure.

A more psychological treatment of spatial issues in Native Son is available in Isabel Soto’s article “‘White People to either Side’: Native Son and the Poetics of Space.” For Soto, an exemplary moment in the text comes when Bigger is seated between Mary Dalton and Jan Erlone in the front seat of the Daltons’ car: “There were white people to either side of him; he was sitting between two vast white looming walls” (67–68). Soto shows how, in this scene and others, physical and social space become conflated: “Thresholds or boundaries figure at the literal level, setting off one space from another, but also, and sometimes simultaneously, at the metaphorical level” (77). Soto ultimately privileges the metaphorical aspect of the novel’s wall
imagery, “foregrounding the perceptual threshold that underpins self-perception or the perception of another” (72). In so doing, she effectively chooses psychology over ecospatiality as the basis of interpretation. This reading of the novel’s spatial-metaphorical register neglects, perhaps necessarily, the implications of the physical/literal. Returning to Bigger’s position in the middle seat, “between two vast white looming walls,” we see that Wright’s spatial imagery does indeed perform a double duty: not only does it refer to Bigger’s experience and perception of race and power, as Soto well describes, but it also points back to the actual walls that enclose Bigger and his people at all times, keeping them literally in place. In other words, while the novel’s geography and spatial imagery can certainly be understood as reflecting a particular psychological or social truth (about black male identity), they also evoke a certain physical aspect (an ecospatiality) that the novel regularly strives to maintain. Sometimes, perhaps, (to adapt an apocryphal Freud quote) a wall is just a wall.

This is not to say that the physical references of a text have an empirical meaning that is wholly detached from other factors (I’m not so sure it matters whether there was really a streetcar stop at Drexel Avenue and Forty-seventh Street, as the novel indicates [116]); on the contrary, my contention is that neglecting to interpret the physicality of setting means missing the ways in which the ecospatial actually underscores the social. Spatial images have geographical as well as psychological import; they refer back to the map as much as they refer to

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4 Robert Lee makes a similar move toward the psychological, stating that the landscape of the novel “certainly proposes a real Chicago but also and in matching degree a Chicago of the mind and senses, the bleak outward urban landscape of Native Son as the correlative of Bigger’s psyche…. Native Son thus should be read as exploring psychology and human personality in a manner as close to, say, Kafka, as to Dreiser or Steinbeck, the Chicaco [sic] of the novel as much the expression of the displaced city pent up inside Bigger as the Windy City of actuality” (122).
Bigger’s state of mind—which is often reflective of his position on the map and in the city. Wright needs Chicago’s Black Belt to tell Bigger’s story, for on one level Bigger’s story is that of the Black Belt itself. If depictions of physical confinement in the novel evoke a certain psychological and social condition, as Soto argues, then depictions of psychological and social confinement (or other aspects of spatiality) likewise evoke the physical and geographical situation and experience; spatial allusions cut both ways.

A second caveat is that, in the context of this chapter, ecospatiality appears more spatial than ecological. Yet this is more a function of the novel’s orientation than my own, or even the author’s. Perhaps because of its urban setting, the novel dramatizes human relationships to space to a much greater extent than to nature, making it more open to the spatial aspect of a broadly environmental critique. Still, I will highlight a number of ways that the natural world factors into Wright’s depiction, including, most significantly, the materiality of built environments and the role of the blizzard in Bigger’s capture, both of which figure prominently in the novel’s overall environmentality.

In addition, my argument in this chapter is more about geophysical space than social space, though the two are obviously intertwined. I am interested in the ways in which *Native Son* maps a literary and cultural geography onto the physical geography of Chicago’s South Side. As Cayton and Drake’s *Black Metropolis* and Wright’s *Twelve Million Black Voices* do in different ways, *Native Son* suggests the extent to which racism is manifested in physical environments—segregation as spatial practice, the literal separation of people into different areas. In this chapter,

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5 Wright’s autobiography (*Black Boy/American Hunger*) and early novellas (*Uncle Tom’s Children*) both contain strong elements of nature imagery. *Native Son* (along with *Laud Today*, written before *Native Son* but published posthumously) constitutes a focal shift for Wright from the rural Southern landscape to the urban North.
I focus on Wright’s use of geophysical markers (toponyms) to establish an environmental context for the novel in which Bigger’s tightly circumscribed life makes a kind of historical sense. *Native Son*’s spatial critique works in conjunction with its geographical specificity; its relationship to historical Chicago makes it a more powerful indictment of the racial/spatial politics evident both on the ground and on the map.

**Bigger, on the Map**

Toward the end of the second section of *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, a young black man, is fleeing for his life on a bright winter Monday morning in Chicago.⁶ Some thirty hours prior, he inadvertently smothered Mary Dalton, a young white woman, to death, and, in an effort to conceal the homicide, burned her body in the furnace of her parents’ house. When her remains were discovered the next evening, Bigger was implicated, and he disappeared on foot. Now a huge force of five thousand police and three thousand volunteers are conducting a thorough sweep of the predominantly African-American neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side—known colloquially as the “Black Belt”—searching every home for the accused murderer in a massive show of police force. (That Bigger also raped and bludgeoned his lover, Bessie, before dropping her body down an abandoned air shaft, is yet unknown—and, because of Bessie’s blackness, ultimately irrelevant—to the authorities.)

As sole object of this hunt, Bigger knows his plight is dire, yet he hopes to elude capture by hiding in an empty apartment or a derelict building. A record snowfall has blocked the roads and interrupted public transit service, cutting off all his exits from the city. Meanwhile, Bigger

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⁶ All *Native Son* references are to the Library of America Edition, by Arnold Rampersad (1991), which restored several provocative scenes (most notably the scene of masturbation in the Regal Theatre) that were censored by the Book-of-the-Month Club prior to the novel’s publication. This presents “the last version of the text that Wright prepared without external intervention” (485).
must rely on newspapers for clues as to the extent of the police hunt. A stolen Chicago

*Tribune* reveals the precise coordinates of the search area:

> He looked at the paper and saw a black-and-white map of the South Side, around the borders of which was a shaded portion an inch deep. Under the map ran a line of small print:
> “Shaded portion shows area already covered by police and vigilantes in search for Negro rapist and murderer. White portion shows area yet to be searched.”

(246)

Bigger has a thorough knowledge of the local geography, having recently boasted, “I know the South Side from A to Z” (149). Recognizing that the newspaper was printed the previous night, he astutely uses the given street names to estimate the new boundaries of the shrinking search area. He then walks north, moving closer toward its middle.

Several hours later, Bigger spends his final cents on another newspaper—the afternoon *Times*—hoping for additional information. Again, he encounters it in cartographic form, and it increases his awareness of his own spatial positioning:

There was another map of the South Side. This time the shaded area had deepened from both the north and the south, leaving a small square of white in the middle of the oblong Black Belt. He stood looking at that tiny square of white as though gazing down into the barrel of a gun. He was there on that map, in that white spot, standing in a room waiting for them to come. He examined the map again; the police had come from the north as far south as Fortieth Street; and they had come from the south as far north as Fiftieth Street. That meant that he was somewhere in between, and they were minutes away. (255–256)

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7 That Bigger can consult two newspapers in the same day and learn updated information is owing to the large number of papers then in operation on separate distribution cycles, morning, afternoon, and evening. The *Daily Illustrated Times* was an independent afternoon tabloid newspaper that, as Wright was writing *Native Son*, claimed to have the largest readership of any of Chicago’s three afternoon papers. The *Times* ran from 1929 until 1947 and merged with the *Sun* in 1948 to form the *Sun-Times* morning tabloid, which continues to this day. For more on the *Daily Times*, see Mary Ann Weston, “The *Daily Illustrated Times*: Chicago’s Tabloid Newspaper.”
The manhunt concludes dramatically if somewhat predictably, with Bigger’s capture and arrest, and the novel’s third and final section details Bigger’s experiences with incarceration, trial, and sentencing to death—a bleak yet inexorable progression that comes as no surprise given Bigger’s early sense of his own doomed prospects.8

The image of Bigger seeing himself within the map of Chicago serves as a productive starting point for a geocritical approach to the novel. On the most basic story level, the map scenes contribute to the dramatic tension of the chase. The police are closing in! Bigger is surrounded! Yet as a competent map-reader, he makes for a more compelling fugitive. (Might he elude capture after all?) The newspaper maps, while not depicted visually in the novel,9 readily signify the process of geographical enclosure to which Bigger is subject, a systematic boxing-in that calls attention to his ongoing spatial situatedness and literalizes the spatial and racial oppressiveness inherent to his environment. In this way, the newspaper maps in *Native Son* form another link in a chain of signification that originates in the place the novel seeks to depict (Chicago’s Black Belt), the police hunt for Bigger that serves as the novel’s primary metaphor for black enclosure, and the newspaper maps that refigure that enclosure as a spatial (and social) inevitability.

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8 He says, for example: “…I feel like something awful’s going to happen to me” (20); and “It’s…. It’s like I was going to do something I can’t help….” (22).

9 Wright’s choice not to include map visuals is, to my mind, unfortunate, given his propensity to present other textual forms in his novels. *Native Son* offers not visual maps, but mere descriptions of them, yet it relies upon huge segments of news articles about Bigger’s trial. Similarly, *Lawl Today*—set in the 1930s on Abraham Lincoln’s birthday—incorporates snippets of a radio lecture on Lincoln, the Civil War, and emancipation. Other communications media referenced in *Native Son* include political and celebrity posters, detective magazines, and even skywriting. John A. Williams catalogues the media references in Wright’s fiction in a 1986 article—“The Use of Communications Media in Four Novels by Richard Wright”—connecting them to Wright’s early journalistic experience and later nonfiction writings.
At the same time, these scenes represent the culmination of Wright’s literary cartography, his commitment to detailing Bigger’s geographic whereabouts throughout the novel’s first two books. Bigger’s confinement by the manhunt reveals retrospectively the extent to which his mobility has been taken for granted—by himself and by the reader. The map scenes dramatize what the reader already knows to be true: that this character’s experience and positioning within the physical and human geography of Chicago’s South Side are fundamentally at issue in the novel. Bigger’s moment of cartographical (self-) recognition posits geography and orientation as interpretive issues and the novel’s environs as potential sites of meaning, thereby confirming *Native Son* as a narrative of travel and of place.

The map scenes also underscore the extent to which the novel inscribes its geography via Bigger’s environmental awareness. This extends beyond the kind of map-awareness required for orientation and navigation to Bigger’s dim yet growing understanding of the ways that his environment affects his circumstances—an issue that gains credence in the novel’s third and final section even as Bigger’s own sphere of existence has diminished to that of a jail cell. By the end of the novel, Bigger’s life and choices have been so thoroughly examined in the context of his environment—primarily through the rhetoric of Bigger’s lawyer, Boris Max—that the boundaries between individual autonomy and environmental influence are thoroughly blurred.

In the following pages, I wish to tease out further some of the implications of Bigger’s cartographic moment—of Wright’s placing Bigger on the map. Drawing in part from Wright’s experiences of Chicago, I discuss the city as a basis for *Native Son* before examining the novel’s literary geography, as well as the multiple ecospatial issues it raises. These include Bigger’s orientation and mobility, Chicago’s segregationist spatial production, and the role of urban
ecology in understanding the Depression-era South Side as a place. While Chicago is also the setting of Wright’s *Lawd Today* and *The Outsider*, these novels fall outside the scope of this chapter. However, some of Wright’s nonfiction proves quite pertinent, including his writing on Chicago for the Federal Writers’ Project; his famous essay on *Native Son*, “How Bigger Was Born”; his searing, polemical photo-essay on African-Americans and the Great Migration, *Twelve Million Black Voices*; his introduction to Cayton and Drake’s *Black Metropolis*; and his autobiography, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*; all of which supply some context on Wright’s sense of Chicago as a crucial site of African-American experience and literary meaning.

**South Side Geography**

An urban center as vast and diverse as Chicago poses challenges for a cogent discussion of place. A city is certainly a place, yet it contains so many sub-places—neighborhoods, parks, alleyways, restaurants—with so many stories, that it seems less comprehensible than a “most spare landscape” like Heat-Moon’s Chase County (*PrairyErth* 14). Yet there remains this place called “Chicago,” and the complex mythology that surrounds it, of which literary depictions form an important part. *Native Son* fits obviously if somewhat uneasily into the broad category of “Chicago literature.” Yet, by Wright’s design, this novel depicts a different aspect of the city than the works of writers like Frank Norris, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, Saul Bellow, and even Nella Larsen do, in large part because of different emphases that prove as geographical as they are cultural. In contrast to a novel like Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*, which

10 In their assessment of *Lawd Today*, Robert Bone and Richard Courage seem to applaud Wright’s realistic literary cartography in the novel, asserting that his “use of real place names and descriptively accurate details in the perambulations of antihero Jake Jackson creates a virtual Baedeker of Bronzeville, from the policy station where he plays the numbers, to the movie theater, barbershop, hall Branch Library, and Walgreen’s lunch counter” (189).
engages many different parts of the city through a kind of spotty coverage (the main
close character rarely sits still and winds up occupying many parts of the city), *Native Son* is more
properly understood as a novel of Chicago’s African-American neighborhood on the South Side
than of the city as a whole. Indeed, it is the first novelistic portrayal of Chicago’s “Black Belt,”
establishing that piece of geography as a worthwhile subject of literature and, paradoxically, the
contemptible object of its scrutiny. Some preliminary geographical and lexical definition is thus
required in order to establish the spatial and cultural parameters within which the novel (and,
hence, this chapter) may be said to operate. These parameters are at once highly specific—
confined to a certain urban neighborhood at a precise historical moment—and incredibly
broad—referring to the long and complex history of the place.

“Chicago” is the first and foremost of the toponyms in question. A major urban center
toward the middle of North America, Chicago emerged where, after the most recent Ice Age, a
small river system emptied into an inland freshwater sea, upon a terrain of grassland, swamp, and
forest. The modern place name derives from its original inhabitants, the Miami and Illinois
peoples. “Chicago” is a French rendering of their word for a “striped skunk,” a species of wild
leek (*Allium tricoccum*), and the local waterway where it could be found (Keating). Thus, a
literal translation of “Chicago” might be “leek city.” For Native Americans and early Anglo
explorers, the Chicago area provided a critical link in an inland transportation system: a few
miles southwest of the settlement area on the mouth of the Chicago River at Lake Michigan, a
short portage offered passage between two massive watersheds, the Mississippi Valley to the

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11 William Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1992) remains the definitive
work of Chicago’s environmental history, though it focuses primarily on the nineteenth century.
south and the Great Lakes Basin to the north. Chicago exists, in other words, because of its close proximity to a continental divide.\footnote{A small portion of the Chicago Portage is now recognized as a National Historic Site. The need for a portage was eliminated with the construction of the Illinois & Michigan Canal in 1848, solidifying Chicago’s position and ensuring its future as a major transportation center. By permanently reversing the flow of the Chicago River in 1900 to redirect sewage away from its source of drinking water, the city also effectively engineered itself into a new watershed, thereby complicating its bioregional identity.} Such facts are crucial to a historicized understanding of the city’s ecospatiality.
Chicago’s history as an urban place dates back less than two centuries, to its incorporation in 1837. The United States took control of the site from a Native American coalition in 1795 as part of the Treaty of Greenville (which ended the Northwest Wars), paving the way for the establishment of a military fort (Dearborn in 1803), the Town of Chicago (1833), and the City of Chicago, which was incorporated in 1837 as part of Cook County (1831) and the state of Illinois (1817). After the forced removal of the Potawatomi people in the 1830s, the city’s official population ballooned, growing from 100 in 1830 to over 1 million in 1890, making it the second-largest city in the U.S. (a position it would hold for the next ninety years) and the fastest-growing city in history to that date. The population reached its peak in the 1950s (3.6 million according to the 1950 census). Today there are nearly three million people in the city, and nearly ten million in the “Chicagoland” metropolitan area. The modern city’s cultural identity remains loosely tied to its physical geography, with Lake Michigan forming a mostly static barrier to the east and the two branches of the Chicago River extending northwest and southwest. Outside the “Loop”—the downtown area just southwest of the river’s (original, ostensible) mouth and defined by the circuit of elevated trains—the city is comprised of three “Sides”—South, West, and North—that loosely correlate to these natural boundaries.

The literary geography of *Native Son* is primarily invested in the South Side. Like the North and West Sides, the South Side has been defined in different ways, by different groups, over the years. In the broadest sense, it is “a state of mind: the South Side is that part of the city that houses people who consider themselves South Siders” (Pacyga). Geographically, it is the territory comprised of those parts of the city that are considered neither the West Side nor the North Side, a semi-triangular area lying roughly south of the downtown Loop district between
Lake Michigan to the east, the South Branch of the Chicago River to the west, and the city limits to the south. More narrowly, it is also not the Southwest Side, the portion of that territory not directly south of downtown; nor does it include, by most definitions, Hyde Park, home of the University of Chicago, with its history of excluding blacks (on which, more below). In a more cultural understanding, “South Side” is sometimes code for that part of Chicago where African-Americans have historically resided. Even so, the South Side has a history of racial, ethnic, and economic diversity, especially in contrast to its wealthier North Side counterpart.

Beyond these broad definitions of the South Side, the area can be defined in a number of other ways, according to political maps. United States census tracts, of which there are dozens, offer one possibility, while Chicago’s system of governmental wards offers another. Chicago’s fifty wards, however, are reshaped after each census, with an eye toward even distribution of population and, more recently, fair representation of minorities, making them unstable geographic markers. Meanwhile, an overlapping system of “community areas”—originally seventy-five, now seventy-seven—which emerged out of the Chicago University School of Sociology’s work in the late 1920s, provides a more stable basis for tracking various ethnographic data. The South Side, we might say, consists of certain sets of tracts, wards, community areas, and neighborhoods, yet their boundaries are often slippery and even debatable, with some of these geographic units appearing more definitively “South Side” than others.

The term “Black Belt” poses similar problems of definition even as it encompasses a smaller geographical area. The Black Belt can be understood in historical terms, as an area on the South Side within which the greatest concentration of African-Americans resided during the early- to mid-twentieth century. According to one estimate, by the 1930s the Black Belt was
barely over seven miles long by less than one mile wide and housed eighty percent of Chicago’s black population (Dolinar, *Negro* 160). *The Encyclopedia of Chicago* suggests that the term “Black Belt” was in use from the turn of the century “until after World War II” and defines the area as “[o]riginally a narrow corridor extending from 22nd to 31st Streets along State Street” that “expanded over the century until it stretched from 39th to 95th streets, the Dan Ryan Expressway to Lake Michigan” (Best). While this portion of the South Side is still home to the majority of Chicago’s African-Americans, it is no longer referred to as the “Black Belt,” the “Black Ghetto,” or “Darkie Town,” as it was in the past (Travis). In response to such derogatory monikers and negative public opinion, a few black leaders in the 1930s proposed to rebrand the area as “Bronzeville,” a term intended to conjure the positive aspects of the South Side’s African-American culture and once-thriving economy, rather than its post-1920s slum-like characteristics. As Robert Bone and Richard A. Courage note, “If the term ‘South Side’ was a neutral geographic description and if the designation ‘Black Belt’ conjured images of southern segregation moved north, then ‘Bronzeville’ was the name most closely associated with racial achievement on various fronts and with community pride and self-definition” (I). While the Black Belt no longer exists as such, Bronzeville endures on Chicago neighborhood maps, a nod to the area’s complex racial past.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{13}\) Drake and Cayton also intentionally deployed the term “Bronzeville,” on the grounds that “it seems to express the feeling that the people have about their own community. They live in the Black Belt and to them it is more than the ‘ghetto’ revealed by statistical analysis” (385); they further claim that “The expression ‘Bronze’ when counterposed to ‘Black’ reveals a tendency on the part of Negroes to avoid referring to themselves as ‘black.’ And, of course, as a descriptive term, the former is even more accurate than the latter, for most Negroes are brown” (385, emphasis in original).
Richard Wright’s Chicago

The nineteen-year-old Richard Wright moved to Chicago from Memphis with his aunt Maggie in December 1927. Like so many other African-Americans in those years, Wright had seen advertisements in Southern newspapers proclaiming the opportunities in Northern cities, particularly in Chicago, where the African-American newspaper the Defender did its part to perpetuate such a mythos. Wright’s move to Chicago, at age 19, was a major turning point in his life, and the event forms the boundary between the two separately published parts of his well-known memoir(s), Black Boy (American Hunger). As he describes it in the first paragraph of American Hunger, his initial impression of Chicago was unflattering at best, dream-shattering at worst:

My first glimpse of the flat black stretches of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all my fantasies. Chicago seemed an unreal city whose mythical houses were built of slabs of black coal wreathed in palls of gray smoke, houses whose foundations were sinking slowly into the dank prairie. Flashes of steam showed intermittently on the wide horizon, gleaming translucently in the winter sun. The din of the city entered my consciousness, entered to remain for years to come. (Later Works 249)

Wright’s first impression is that of a boy who has suffered through poverty, starvation, and racial discrimination in the segregated South and looked to Chicago as the city that would save him. Yet he finds the city not so attractive in appearance and—thanks to the harshness of northern winters and the Great Depression that would soon envelope the country—decidedly hostile to his prospects. Having been built up as a kind of Promised Land for so long, what else could Chicago be but an “unreal city”?

In his autobiography, Wright claims only “modest” expectations for his new life as a young man in Chicago: “I wanted only a job” (Later Works 249). American Hunger details the
many forms of employment he would take, from a promising position in the large United States post office downtown\textsuperscript{14} to menial labor as a street sweeper and a ditch digger (welfare jobs he resorted to at the height of the Depression) and, finally, to his assignments with the Federal Writers’ Project in the late 1930s. Over his decade of life in Chicago (he left for New York in 1937), Wright became intimately acquainted with the “unreal city” on Lake Michigan, its bleakest environments, and the diverse and mostly futile political means by which African-Americans endeavored to improve their prospects. There, Wright encountered the Communist politics with which he would form a longstanding, ambivalent relationship—concluding with his well-publicized final breach with the party, an essay in \textit{The Atlantic Monthly}, titled “I Tried to Be a Communist” (1944)—as well as discovering a kind of intellectual identity among the writers and thinkers of Chicago’s Communist and African-American communities. Certainly this was Wright’s most formative period as a thinker and a writer, and scholars have deemed him the progenitor of what Robert Bone first identified as “The Chicago Renaissance.”\textsuperscript{15} These aspects of Wright’s life have been well documented, not only in his autobiography but also in numerous biographies and scholarly articles concerned with framing intellectual movements (a la Robert Bone or Robert Washington) or literary origins (Thadious Davis).\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} Wright enjoyed the most job security with the post office, and one of his comments on it plays on the spatiality of the Black Belt: “When a Negro in Chicago gets a job in the post-office, that’s about as high as he can get. So he tells his friends he’s at Sixty-third and Stoney Island—the southern boundary of the Black Belt, the hurdle into the white man’s world” (Kinnamon and Fabre 36).


\textsuperscript{16} Melvin Dixon provides additional historical and spatial context in \textit{Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature}. Dixon discusses Wright’s biography and literary career in conjunction with his literary images of the "underground"—where confinement and segregation contrast
My own interest lies not so much in Wright’s participation in these intellectual or political communities as in the kinds of place-based experiences and site-specific knowledge by and through which *Native Son* would become possible. In an important sense, I view *Native Son* as Richard Wright’s attempt to reconcile the deeply personal and political problems of space and place so well exemplified in the “unreal city.” Wright’s personal forays and intellectual investigations into Chicago’s Depression-Era Black Belt form the basis of *Native Son*’s literary geography, offering both a street-level and a map-level credibility to his literary representation of Chicago: the author as traveler and cartographer.

Wright lived in Chicago for ten years, almost all of which he spent living in the Black Belt. Although he worked numerous jobs all around Chicago, during the Depression, it was his short stint as an insurance claims adjustor that gave him unprecedented access and unique insight into the black community and the built environment on the South Side. Never wealthy himself, Wright was struck nevertheless by the living conditions he encountered through this work, which took him door-to-door. He writes of the experience in *Black Boy*: “Each day now I saw how the Negro in Chicago lived, for I visited hundreds of dingy flats filled with rickety furniture and ill-clad children” (*Later Works* 273). Wright goes on to claim an almost comprehensive knowledge with emergence and freedom—drawing connections with Wright’s own migrations from South to North and from the U.S. to France (56–69).

17 Wright’s family moved several times to different homes, each move corresponding to a positive or negative change in income. Their addresses included 4831 S. Vincennes (1929–32), an unidentified “slum apartment” (1932–34), 4804 S. Saint Lawrence (the only West Side address, 1934–35), 2636 S. Grove (1935), and 3743 S. Indiana (1935–?) (“Chronology” 467–469). The Indiana Avenue house was a “rundown mansion” known as “La Veta,” where Wright had his own room for the first time (Holden 109). When Wright chose an address for the Thomas apartment in *Native Son*, he selected a number on the very same block—3721 Indiana Ave.
of the place and its residents, writing, “I think I know them… I’ve been inside of three-fourths of the Negroes’ homes on the South Side…” (Later Works 340).

He would go on to survey the territory for the Federal Writers’ Project in Illinois from 1935 to 1937, resulting in what were, perhaps, his first efforts at place writing. As Brian Dolinar, who brought the Federal Writers’ Project essays collectively to light in 2009, asserts, “…the Writers’ Project allowed Wright to systematically study Chicago’s South Side, become an efficient writer, and ultimately get paid for working on his fiction” (Dolinar, “Illinois” 88). Several of these essays—most notably “A Survey of the Amusement Facilities of District #35” and “Amusements in Districts 38 and 40”—offer an insider’s street view of the Black Belt for the potential visitor and take on the tone of a travel narrative, with directions to and characterizations of places from the finest eateries to the dingiest pool halls. Together, these essays offer a compelling representation of the Black Belt, albeit an overtly commercial one that contrasts with that of Native Son in interesting ways.18

Along with his personal experience and his work on the Federal Writers’ Project in Chicago, Wright’s study of “Chicago School” sociology forms another important touchstone for understanding the role of place in his works. While on relief during the Depression, Wright met professor Louis Wirth of the University of Chicago, whose wife was the Wrights’ relief worker.  

18 Most notably, the essays highlight many local African-American cultural assets that receive no mention in the novel. One potential explanation is that Bigger Thomas, owing to his socioeconomic status, does not frequent the classier establishments in the black business districts just a few blocks south of where he lives. Although Bigger does catch a movie at the Regal Cinema, the novel makes no mention of Bronzeville (the positive re-branding of the Black Belt that still exists on today’s maps) or The Stroll, a black cultural and economic hub that, at its height, rivaled Harlem and other black urban centers across the U.S. As Catherine Jurca insightfully points out, reflecting on the tendency of Harlem Renaissance writings to ignore the plight of the African-American poor, Wright “reversed the excision performed by his predecessors, making the Chicago Black Belt all slum and evacuating the middle class” (106).
Wirth gave Wright a list of undergraduate readings in sociology and was impressed with the young man’s ready grasp of sociological concepts. Wright’s interest in the sociology of the Black Belt is an important basis for *Native Son*, not only in terms of his depiction of the cultural conditions that could produce a Bigger Thomas but also in his willingness to understand the place in new ways—including spatially. Upon seeing, for the first time, Cayton’s maps of the South Side, Wright marveled, “You’ve got all of your facts pointed, pinned to the wall like a collector would pin butterflies” (Washington 157). Wright would build on his understanding of the work of Wirth, Cayton, and their colleagues in a few other fragments written for the Federal Writers’ Project, in *Twelve Million Black Voices*, and in his introduction to Cayton and Drake’s *Black Metropolis*, which he posited as evidence for the situations depicted in *Native Son*.

Aside from the political implications of *Native Son*’s treatment of the segregationist housing problem or the sociology of the urban black experience, scholars have infrequently grappled with the ecospatial implications of the novel. In particular, they have ignored the importance of geographical orientation to Bigger’s character and to the novel’s overall premise.

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19 “Ethnographical Aspects of Chicago’s Black Belt” (1935); “On the Ethnography of the Negro [Additional]” (1936); “Bibliography on the Negro in Chicago” (n.d.).

20 In the introduction to *Black Metropolis*, Wright writes: “If, in reading my novel, *Native Son*, you doubted the reality of Bigger Thomas, then examine the delinquency rates cited in this book; if, in reading my autobiography, *Black Boy*, you doubted the picture of family life shown there, then study the figures on family disorganization given here. *Black Metropolis* describes the processes that mold Negro life as we know it today…. After studying the social processes in this book, you cannot expect Negro life to be other than what it is. To expect the contrary would be like expecting to see Rolls-Royces coming off the assembly lines at Ford’s River Rouge plant! The imposed conditions under which Negroses live detail the structure of their lives like an engineer outlining the blue-prints for the production of machines” (xx). According to Keneth Kinnamon, several journalists and sociologists in the early 1940s even cited *Native Son* in discussions of poor housing in Chicago and around the country (227).

21 Catherine Jurca’s chapter on *Native Son* in *White Diaspora*, Rashad Shabazz’s chapter on *Spatializing Blackness*, and Joshua Scott Stone’s 2010 dissertation for the University of Miami are the most notable exceptions.
This is a significant gap in criticism on the novel because the novel’s geographical cues orient the novel to geophysical space (that is, to the historical Chicago) in the same way a navigator must orient a map to her compass readings in order to find her way. The author’s personal experiences on the streets of South Side Chicago, coinciding with his development as an intellectual and an author, are an important basis of *Native Son*, and his choice to calibrate his novel to the map of Chicago puts it in conversation with other historical texts (including maps) and, ultimately, makes it much more powerful as a work of realist social commentary. Moreover, Wright reinforces the novel’s orientation in place through his portrayal of Bigger Thomas’s own attunement to location and navigation.

*Native Son* is famous for its depiction of a grisly crime and for its implication of the social environment in that crime. In “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright’s 1940 lecture on *Native Son* that is now published frequently as an introduction or epilogue to the novel, the author describes the development of *Native Son* as a process of first identifying a compelling human personality type that he would develop into the character Bigger Thomas, and, second, realizing the kinds of environmental conditions complicit in producing this personality or character. Here Wright describes a series of acquaintances that he began to understand, retrospectively, as “a distinct type” (439), generally angry, confrontational, rebellious, and violent, prone to flout social conventions and, therefore, to meet with violent or otherwise oppressive ends. Among these was a man whom white folks called a “bad nigger,” suggesting not only a behavioral basis for the character but also a linguistic origin for his name: “Bigger” as a portmanteau. Having

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22 “The Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a brief sweet spell. Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken” (437).
identified the character type and expanded it to include whites as well as blacks, Wright goes on to explain the environmental conditions giving rise to these young men’s behavior.

Wright suggests that Chicago was fundamental to his recognition of the Bigger Thomas type, for multiple reasons. Perhaps most importantly, there was the change in Wright’s own living situation—his relocation from the South and subsequent intellectual awakening. But beyond these personal developments in Wright’s life, he also witnessed differences in social behavior. “It was not that Chicago segregated Negroes more than the South,” he writes, “but that Chicago had more to offer, that Chicago’s physical aspect—noisy, crowded, filled with the sense of power and fulfillment—did so much more to dazzle the mind with a taunting sense of possible achievement that the segregation it did impose brought forth from [the Bigger type] a reaction more obstreperous than in the South” (442). As Wright explains, he began to comprehend the general attitudes and behaviors of people he met, as well as broader social developments, as reactions to environmental conditions:

I don’t mean to say that environment makes consciousness (I suppose God makes that, if there is a God), but I do say that I felt and still feel that the environment supplies the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself, and if that environment is warped or tranquil, the mode and manner of behavior will be affected toward deadlocking tensions or orderly fulfillment and satisfaction. (442, my emphasis)

Wright goes on to describe the development of his literary techniques, which were grounded in his reading of contemporary American novels by white writers, as an intellectual response to that critical insight. In these novels, he writes,

for the first time, I found ways of gauging meaningfully the effects of American civilization upon the personalities of people. I took these techniques, these ways of seeing and feeling, and twisted them, bent them, adapted them, until they became my ways of apprehending the locked-in life of the Black Belt areas. This association with white writers was the life preserver of my hope to depict Negro
Here Wright not only defines his role as a writer in racial terms, but he also figures the act of writing as an expression of the negotiation between people and their environment, between the social and the (eco)spatial. Most importantly for my purposes in this chapter, Wright figures *Native Son* as his attempt to depict both “Negro life in fiction” and, more particularly, “the locked-in life of the Black Belt areas”: Negro life as the experience of being locked-in. The novel, in other words, is Wright’s depiction not only of a particular character type but also of the socio-spatial dynamics of the Black Belt to and within which such a character would consciously and unconsciously respond.

While Wright’s mention of “Black Belt areas” gestures toward the spatial segregation evident in many northern U.S. cities in the 1930s, he would ultimately rely on Chicago alone to epitomize the “locked-in life” he saw as defining the African-American urban experience. This choice is significant for two reasons. First, Wright did not elect to set his story in the better-known “Black Belt” of New York City, despite the cultural and literary reputation of Harlem, Wright’s own relocation to New York as he began work on the novel, and his having researched Harlem recently for the Federal Writers’ Project’s *New York Panorama*. Nor did he eschew

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23 I make this point with some caution given the slippage in Wright’s use of the term “environment,” which refers at different points in the essay to the more ecospatial (“Chicago’s physical aspect”) and the broadly social (“American civilization”). Yet, to my mind, this slippage also helpfully reflects E.V. Walter’s distinction between physique and morale as the components of place, neither of which is strictly physical or strictly social; as a critical term, “environment” also contains both these connotations, and Wright’s varied usage in the essay reflects this fact.

24 Chicago was not the only city Wright experienced as starkly segregated. Writing about New York in a 1945 journal entry, he fumed: “Why should I live in a black belt area and be cheated like all other
geographic references in favor of a generalized Black Belt, as he would do so effectively in

*Twelve Million Black Voices.*\(^{25}\) Instead, he chose Chicago, either because of his greater

familiarity with the place or, possibly, the extent to which the kind of racial/spatial dynamics he

wished to convey in the novel were exemplified, or even magnified, by Chicago’s unique history

and setting.

In a powerful passage from “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright reflects on the identity of

Chicago itself and the way its many facets influenced the story and character he had in mind to

write:

Then there was the fabulous city in which Bigger lived, an indescribable city, huge, roaring, dirty, noisy, raw, stark, brutal; a city of extremes: torrid summers and sub-zero winters, white people and black people, the English language and strange tongues, foreign born and native born, scabby poverty and gaudy luxury, high idealism and hard cynicism! A city so young that, in thinking of its short history, one’s mind, as it travels backward in time, is stopped abruptly by the barren stretches of wind-swept prairie! But a city old enough to have caught within the homes of its long, straight streets the symbols and images of man’s age-old destiny, of truths as old as the mountains and seas, of dramas as abiding as the soul of man itself! A city which has become the pivot of the Eastern, Western, Northern, and Southern poles of the nation. But a city whose black smoke clouds shut out the sunshine for seven months of the year; a city in which, on a fine balmy May morning, one can sniff the stench of the stockyards; a city where people have grown so used to gangs and murders and graft that they have honestly forgotten that government can have a pretense of decency! (453)

Much could be said of what this passage may or may not reveal about Wright’s views of

Chicago—its ecospatial origins on the “wind-swept prairie,” its problems with industrial

Negroes are cheated? Why can I not live where there are good schools for Julia [his daughter], and stores

that carry good food at reasonable prices; why should I live in a black belt and pay a premium for being born black? I’ll be damned if I do it!” (Rowley 297).

\(^{25}\) In many ways, *Native Son* and *Twelve Million Black Voices* can be understood as companion pieces, with *Native Son*, the story of an individual in a particular city, acting as a local case study and *Twelve Million* articulating a nation-wide phenomenon and a generalized American geography.
pollution, its perceived extremes. But most intriguing from a literary place perspective is the city’s ostensible *indescribability*, especially when posited at the beginning of Wright’s most stirring description of it. In a sense, this is the ecospatial context Wright never fully offers in the novel: the sights and sounds and smells, so apparent to the outsider, that may escape the awareness of the typical resident, as well as the sociopolitical dynamics requiring years of study to understand.

For Wright, Bigger Thomas is a product of this “indescribable” city, and he took great pains to flesh out *Native Son* with geographic references to anchor it in his chosen place. Wright drafted *Native Son* while living in Brooklyn in 1938. Having completed a full draft in October of that year, he headed to Chicago in November to gather additional information. This would include further research on a prominent court case happening in Chicago (that of Robert Nixon, a young black man accused of rape) of which Wright’s friend and fellow author, Margaret Walker, had been apprising him by mailing frequent newspaper clippings. But it would also involve some dedicated site research. Indeed, a printed agenda for the trip from the Wright archives reveals the author’s intentions to survey the South Side in order to select actual locations he would use as references in the novel. The agenda is remarkable enough to warrant replication here in full:26

1. Get detail map of the South Side. Street Car grades & maps
2. Pick out site for Dalton’s home.
3. Get a good street layout for Dalton’s home.
4. Select empty house for Bigger’s murder of Bessie.
5. Trace with ample notes the legal route which was taken in trying Nixon.
6. Go through Cook County Jail; get some dope from the project about it.
7. Get picture, if possible, and go through court where trial took place.
8. Select site for Blum’s delicatessen.
9. Select area of Bigger’s capture.

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26 In reproducing this list, I have chosen to replicate Wright’s typographical errors and idiosyncrasies.
10. See, visit, death house at Stateville and talk to Nixon if possible.
11. Give Bessie’s home a definite address.
12. (Detail execution, if possible (SEE).
13. Talk to ILD heads about pleas, court procedure. (Ira Silber)
15. Get location of Loeb and Leopold and Franks old home
16. Get other books from library pertaining to trial
17. Investigate House of Correction for Boys.
18. Get complete dope on inquest.
19. Get a copy of inquest return verdict.
20. Get copy of indictments.
21. Get form in which judges sentence is rendered.
22. From what station would one go to Milwaukee on train?
24. Select site for Bigger’s home (3700 block on Indiana). Investigate Indiana from 43 to 39 for scene of Bigger’s capture. (qtd. in Kinnamon 228–229)

From this list, two general research principles emerge. Having completed a draft of the novel, Wright wished to buttress his story with real facts and personal experiences related to local geography and criminal proceedings. Ten items on the list are directly related to geographical facts, while all the rest, except one, pertain to legal processes. Several, such as visiting the

27 The Amazing Crime and Trial of Leopold and Loeb, by Maureen McKernan (1924). The murder of fourteen-year-old Bobby Franks by the affluent University of Chicago students Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold caused a national sensation and was dubbed “the crime of the century” (Rowley 153). Wright refers to it at several points in the novel and, to some extent, patterns Bigger’s crime after Loeb and Leopold’s, notably in Bigger’s ransom scheme. For more, see Robert Butler, “The Loeb and Leopold Case: A Neglected Source for Richard Wright's Native Son.”

28 In the novel, Bessie refers to the Daltons’ home as in “that section not far from where the Loeb folks lived” (136). According to The Chicago Crime Scenes Project blog, the Leopolds’ mansion was at 4754 S. Greenwood Ave., just four blocks from where Wright placed the Daltons’ home (Kendall). Loeb lived at 5017 S. Ellis Ave., near the north entrance of Washington Park (Currey 624). Bobby Franks, the victim, was Loeb’s close neighbor at 5052 S. Ellis (Kendall).

29 No references to Milwaukee appear in the novel, as Wright settled on Detroit as Mary Dalton’s intended destination. In the 1930s there was train service from Chicago to Detroit via the New York Central Railroad. Trains such as the Wolverine, the Chicago Mercury, the Michigan, the Motor City Special, and the Twilight Limited left for Detroit from La Salle Street Station, in the South Loop (American-Rails.com). Bigger goes there twice, to drop off and then retrieve Mary’s trunk (120, 153).
Stateville “death house,” the Cook County Jail, and the House of Corrections for Boys, would seem to combine these interests through the lens of personal experience: these were not only sources of pertinent information, but also places to be visited, experienced, and, ultimately, in some cases, represented in writing.30

Wright’s itinerary for the 1938 Chicago visit demonstrates the importance of geographical orientation to his conception of the novel. Significantly, procuring maps of South Side locations and transportation options was the author’s top priority. These would be useful in understanding distances between the novel’s primary locations—Bigger’s neighborhood in the northern Black Belt and the Daltons’ home in nearby Kenwood—and thereby constructing realistic timelines for Bigger’s activities in the book’s first two sections, which transpire over a three-day period. The itinerary suggests that Wright sought to supplement his extensive knowledge of these South Side locations with updated cartographic information and on-the-ground site verification. Wright’s intention to “select sites” and “get locations” for various fictional settings, as well as his desire to “investigate” a four-block stretch of Indiana Avenue, just south of his own former apartment (and Bigger’s) suggest his commitment to geographical verisimilitude. While some sites in the novel, such as Blum’s deli and Bessie’s apartment, are never given definite locations, others, such as Bigger’s apartment and the Dalton home, have precise street addresses that are mentioned multiple times, notably in the newspaper accounts of the murder case and at Bigger’s inquest (243, 313).

30 Only the jail appears in Native Son. While Wright eventually opted not to depict Bigger’s execution in the novel’s ending, the Cook County Jail site is appropriate, as it was one of three locations where capital punishments by electrocution were carried out in Illinois at the time, and the only county-owned facility (Maghan).
Wright made the trip in November 1938, and Walker assisted him with research help and some site visits, enabling him to check a number of items off the list. In her biography of Wright, Walker details how the two of them walked down Drexel Avenue in search of a vacant lot he could use for the Dalton address. They later went to the library together to check out two books on the case of Loeb & Leopold and Clarence Darrow, the famous lawyer who represented them. Walker also went with Wright to interview Nixon’s former attorney and to visit Cook County Jail, where together they viewed the electric chair where Chicago’s convicted murderers were put to death, an unsettling experience for Walker. Most interestingly, Walker describes Wright’s reaction to seeing again with his own eyes the setting he had chosen for a recently-drafted scene, Bigger’s capture on the rooftops of the Black Belt: “On the elevated train we looked out over Southside rooftops and Wright explained that he had his character running across those rooftops” (124). There at the El stop, she reports, Wright delightedly told her about the novel’s dramatic police chase: “He said, ‘Yes, I think it will shock people, and I love to shock people.’ He grinned gleefully and rubbed his hands together in anticipation, and I couldn’t stop laughing” (124).

31 Quotes in this paragraph are from Walker’s biography, Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius. Walker’s first account of this visit suggests that, while Wright accompanied her to other South Side locations, he went alone to Drexel Avenue that Sunday (“Richard Wright” 59–61). Her biography, published years later, repeats the content of the account but changes a “he” to a “we,” suggesting either a typographical error in the earlier essay or a change in Walker’s recollection. (Given Walker’s enthusiasm for his visit, the typo explanation seems more likely.)

32 Wright would return to Chicago only a few times in his life, most notably in 1949 to film exterior shots for the film of Native Son. His reflections on that trip were published in Ebony magazine as “The Shame of Chicago.” By that time, the dynamics had changed, the Black Belt expanded and filled in, and Wright had no nostalgia for the place. He wrote, “The South Side was still a Black Belt, but it had swollen and burst its banks!” (“Shame” 28). In the end, the only word he had for Chicago was ugliness (“Shame” 26).
Navigating *Native Son*

Wright’s research trip paid off. A thorough survey of the novel’s geographic references reveals how the novel’s literary cartography buttresses its socio-spatial critique (and only a handful of apparent geographical errors). Such references ensure that, at every point, the novel is oriented to Wright’s chosen setting, South Side Chicago in the 1930s. With this line of thought, I mean to build on Isabel Soto’s suggestion that “space, understood broadly and not explicitly distinguished from place, functions as a major structural and organizing principle” of *Native Son*, “driving the novel at the levels of plot (Bigger’s movement from space to space is one of the ways in which the story gets told), theme, and rhetoric” (72).

Interestingly, Chicago’s status as the novel’s geographical referent is not made immediately clear. While the novel refers to Chicago-specific places such as Cottage Grove Avenue (21) and the Regal Cinema at Forty-seventh and South Parkway (29) relatively early, the

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33 In July 1940, Wright notified his editor of three geographical errors, which were not corrected until late 1941 or early 1942: “Adams Street” became “Seventh Street” (64); “northward” became “westward” (173); and “HALSTEAD” became “HALSTED” (255). The following errors seem to have escaped his notice:

1. After leaving the Daltons’ and buying paper at a drug store to write the ransom note, Bigger supposedly gets on a streetcar heading east. Yet it is much more likely he goes north, for going east from the Daltons’ neighborhood would take him in the opposite direction of his destination at Thirty-sixth Place and Michigan Ave. Since he descends the streetcar and walks past Langley Ave. and “westward to Wabash Avenue” before reaching that destination, he most likely has traveled north and gotten off near Thirty-seventh and Cottage Grove (173).

2. When Bigger is planning his getaway from the Dalton house, he observes the location of his bedroom window: “The window overlooked an alley, to the right of which was Forty-fifth Street” (194). With the Dalton house being located on the east side of Drexel Blvd. just south of Forty-sixth, it is more than a block away from Forty-fifth, which, at any rate, would be perpendicular to (and not to the right of) the north-south-running alley. Hence, the description doesn’t fit.

3. As the police are driving Bigger to jail, they go north on State Street before turning west on Twenty-sixth. While Cook County Jail was (and still is) indeed located at Twenty-sixth and California, Twenty-sixth did not provide a direct route over the river/canal, making this an implausible navigational choice.
reader who is unfamiliar with these toponyms remains uncertain for a while. 34 And this issue resolves differently depending on the version one is reading. In the uncensored (or restored) version of the text (to which this essay generally refers), the word “Chicago” finally occurs on page 32, when Mary Dalton appears on the silver screen in some sort of commercial before the screening of Trader Horn that Bigger watches with his friend, Jack. She is introduced as “daughter of Chicago’s Henry Dalton, 4605 Drexel Boulevard” (32). Once Bigger astutely recognizes the address as that of his prospective employer, he is placed definitively in Chicago. In the censored version, this fact would have been delayed until much later, after allusions to the South Side (34, 70), the Loop (64), and the university “out there on the Midway” (62). Finally, after Bigger has been hired by Henry Dalton and is driving around his daughter, Mary, and her friend, Jan, Jan asks Bigger, “How long have you been in Chicago?” (74). (Bigger responds that he has lived there “about five years,” that he lives with his mother, sister, and brother, and that his father was killed in a riot in the South [74].)

This delay in information is not necessarily critical and may even have a strategic purpose behind it, for the text reveals much about the general setting from the opening scene in the Thomas family apartment, which conveys the confinement and disturbing intimacy of their living situation, to when Bigger begins to walk the streets of his neighborhood. On the first page, when Bigger is wakened by the alarm clock, he is introduced as “a black boy standing in a narrow space” (3). As Bigger goes outside to join his friends, Wright begins to set up a dichotomy between the world of his African-American characters and the “vast white world that

34 The Regal Theater was built at 4710 South Parkway (now Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard) in 1928 at the heart of the Black Belt, and stood until 1973 (Martinez and Krefft). For more on Native Son and cinema, see Jacqueline Stewart, “Negroes Laughing at Themselves?: Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity” (2003).
sprawled and towered in the sun before them” (18). A plane flying overhead reminds Bigger of his lack of opportunity as a poor, young, black man, and he connects this to the domination the white world exerts over him and his friends. “Every time I think about it,” Bigger exclaims, “I feel like somebody’s poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain’t. They do things and we can’t. It’s just like living in jail” (20). Along with the suggestion that Bigger himself might wind up in jail, this speech foregrounds the possibility that the novel will explore not only the meaning of black and white, but also of here and there—the inherent spatiality of segregation.

The novel’s first definitive (and perhaps most important) geographical reference occurs later in this same scene, as Bigger asks his friend Gus a seemingly obvious question:

“Do you know where the white folks live?”
“Yeah,” Gus said, pointing eastward. “Over across the ‘line’; over there on Cottage Grove Avenue.”
“Naw; they don’t,” Bigger said.
“What do you mean?” Gus asked, puzzled. “Then, where do they live?”
Bigger doubled his fist and struck his solar plexus.
“Right down here in my stomach,” he said. (21)

In this way, Wright not only creates a sense of Bigger’s antagonistic relationship with society, but he also begins to weave together a general social geography of segregated America—black folks living in a white world—with the specific, physical geography of his Chicago setting. *Native Son*, to a large extent, is a story of the “line,” the unmarked boundary between black and white neighborhoods whose physical manifestation at that time, in Chicago, was Cottage Grove Avenue, a busy thoroughfare running north and south with regular streetcar service. Eastward, in the direction Gus points, lie Kenwood and Hyde Park, the neighborhoods adjacent to, yet starkly
and deliberately divided from, the characters’ Black Belt neighborhood. Bigger has internalized the Line, to the extent that he can feel it in his stomach and in his fists.

*Native Son* contains just five overt mentions of Cottage Grove Avenue, yet it represents the very idea of segregation—and of transgression. After Bigger takes the job with the Dalton family as their live-in chauffeur, he must continually cross and re-cross this geographical and symbolic border. The Dalton house is at 4605 Drexel Avenue, roughly ten blocks south and ten blocks east of the Thomases’ apartment at 3721 South Indiana Avenue (a distance of 1.9 miles, according to Google Maps); it is also one block east of Cottage Grove, on the “white” side of the “line.” The first time Bigger travels to the Dalton house, he does so on foot, and Wright makes the stakes exceedingly clear:

> He was going among white people, so he would take his knife and his gun; it would make him feel that he was the equal of them, give him a sense of completeness. Then he thought of a good reason why he should take it; in order to get to the Dalton place, he had to go through a white neighborhood. He had not heard of any Negroes being molested recently, but he felt that it was always possible. (43)

As he prepares to cross the “line,” Bigger recognizes the real, physical implications of this social construct; violence, in conjunction with racial restrictive covenants, was one way that racial segregation was enforced. Indeed, the very meaning of his weapons will transform, from tools of potential aggression toward white society (in the planned robbery of Blum’s deli) to a means of self-defense against it. His anxiety grows as he approaches the Dalton house: “Suppose a police saw him wandering in a white neighborhood like this? It would be thought that he was trying to

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35 Lake Michigan is another focal point of race and class orientation in Chicago. Hyde Park and Kenwood developed as lake-front suburbs, and Chicago’s most famous race riot occurred after the murder by drowning of an African-American swimmer who had crossed another invisible, perceived racial line, this one in the water (Essig). For more on how racial dynamics played out in parks and beaches, see Bachin.
rob or rape somebody” (44). In this way, Wright foreshadows Bigger’s fate while making clear that black mobility on the South Side is strictly limited and policed. Not only are there distinct cultural differences between black and white neighborhoods, but the stakes of African-American mobility are incredibly high, attended by risk of vigilante violence and/or police action. Thus, as a real-and-imagined boundary line, Cottage Grove Avenue symbolizes the inherent spatiality of segregation. Every time that street is mentioned or implied—as it is whenever Bigger travels between the Daltons’ and his family home, or between their home and his girlfriend Bessie’s—it does double duty as a geographical and sociopolitical marker. As a symbol of segregation, the Line marks the novel’s plot as surely as segregation marks the people who dare to cross it.36

As Bigger continues to traverse the neighborhoods of the South Side, sometimes by car or streetcar but mostly on foot, the geographic references continue to accrue. The result is a persistent emphasis on Bigger’s positioning relative to an implied map. For example, on Saturday morning, after he has killed Mary Dalton, Bigger wakes up in his family’s apartment on Indiana Avenue and walks to see his friends at the nearby soda fountain (111). He then rides the streetcar south to Forty-seventh Street (presumably down Indiana), transfers to an eastbound car, dismounts at Forty-seventh and Drexel, and walks one block north to the Daltons’ (113). He drives to La Salle Street Station (a train depot in the Loop) and back (120), then takes the Forty-

36 In one of his essay guides to the South Side for the Federal Writers’ Project, Wright takes care to mention the Line’s existence for his readers: “And it is well to remember that [Cottage Grove Avenue] is the so-called ‘dividing line’ between the white and black neighborhoods. Naturally, some of the places are understood to be for white and others for Negro” (“Richard Wright on Relief” 11-12). Here, as Rosemary Hathaway notes, “Wright underscores the paradoxically fluid and utterly rigid boundaries of emerging ethnic neighborhoods in Chicago; only a street-savvy native son of the South Side would know, on a day-to-day basis, where the dividing lines lay (93).
seventh Street trolley toward Bessie’s apartment (129), and so on. On one level, Wright’s
cataloguing of Bigger’s whereabouts has a straightforward, technical function: it helps to drive
the plot. Indeed, from the standpoint of literary cartography, Native Son is Wright’s double act of
“plotting”: unraveling a thrilling story while simultaneously pinning geographic markers to an
imagined map. (And Bigger’s schemes to elude capture constitute plotting in a third sense of the
word.) This aspect of the novel stands out against Wright’s choices to include far fewer reference
points in his other stories, including those set in wholly or partly in Chicago (Lawn Today and
The Outsider).

The novel’s persistent orientation to the map of Chicago is heightened when Bigger
begins his work as the Daltons’ driver. At this point, it becomes clear that Bigger not only
possesses the skills required of a mechanic but also those of a navigator, having a thorough
knowledge of South Side routes derived from a previous stint as a grocery truck driver (61).
Which is to say that he possesses his own strong sense of geographical orientation. Bigger’s first
task, escorting Mary Dalton to a university lecture, becomes complicated when Mary commands
him to drive her in the opposite direction, to a Communist headquarters, at 16 Lake Street in the
downtown Loop. If his initial uncertainty as to the location of the nearby university (“out there
on the Midway…?” [62]) is somewhat surprising, he more than makes up for it with his efficient
navigation and his command of the vehicle.37 He follows Mary’s orders and finds a quick route
to downtown: “He pulled the car off the Outer Drive at Seventh Street, drove north on Michigan
Boulevard to Lake Street, then headed west for two blocks, looking for number 16” (65). At

37 Midway Plaisance is a divided boulevard in the Hyde Park neighborhood between Sixtieth and Fifty-ninth Streets at the University of Chicago campus, between Washington and Jackson Parks.
moments like this one, Wright’s literary cartography effectively produces a sense of synchronized orientation among character, novel, map, and world.

As will be the case during the police chase, when he reads the newspaper and sees himself “there on that map,” Bigger seems to feel a sense of power in conjunction with his geographical orientation, a power that is also bound up with his geographical mobility. Wright’s depiction of Bigger’s driving connotes a prowess that almost seems beyond him, and Mary acknowledges it:

> He handled the car expertly, picking up speed at the beginning of each block and slowing slightly as he approached each street intersection.
> “You drive well,” she said.
> “Yessum,” he said proudly. (62)

This is the first time Bigger, a juvenile delinquent, has done something well. For these few brief moments, he revels in his own capability: “He had a keen sense of power when driving; the feel of a car added something to him. He loved to press his foot against a pedal and sail along, watching others stand still, seeing the asphalt road unwind under him” (63). Here, perhaps, is the novel’s one truly carefree moment.

Yet just as quickly as Bigger realizes his newfound power—in what is perhaps a twenty-minute drive from Hyde Park to the Loop—Wright introduces a white man to snatch it away from him. When they arrive downtown and Mary introduces Jan to Bigger, Jan takes Bigger’s hand and holds it in an apparent attempt to convey his (Communist) solidarity with Bigger (and all African-Americans). Jan stares at Bigger, insists they call each other by their first names, and refuses to let go of Bigger’s hand. Bigger, still in the driver’s seat, fumes inwardly:

> His entire mind and body were painfully concentrated into a single sharp point of attention. He was trying desperately to understand. He felt foolish sitting behind the steering wheel like this and letting a white man hold his hand. What would
people passing along the street think?... He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man’s Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate. (67)

This expression of Bigger’s conflict with the white world—one of the novel’s most poignant—is deeply connected to his position as a driver in ways that have not been recognized by critics.

Bigger arrives downtown having driven “expertly” and navigated well, with a power he has rarely felt.\(^{38}\) Indeed, his first expression of the futility of black experience has come in response to seeing an airplane in the sky and wishing he weren’t prevented, because of racial oppression, from ever attempting to fly one (16–17). Thus, when Jan insists on driving, Bigger’s humiliation becomes complete. On command, he reluctantly slides over to the middle seat.

While Bigger retains his geographical awareness, successfully navigating Jan and Mary to a black-owned restaurant down the street from his apartment (Ernie’s Kitchen Shack, at Forty-seventh and Indiana), his diminished power is apparent, his abrupt physical intimacy with white people profoundly unnerving. Wright’s deployment of spatial imagery to convey Bigger’s predicament is particularly effective given Bigger’s recent sensation, while driving, of enhanced control and mobility. Not only does he find himself suddenly in “a shadowy region, a No Man’s Land,” but sitting wedged between Jan and Mary makes matters worse:

> There were white people to either side of him; he was sitting between two vast white looming walls. Never in his life had he been so close to a white woman…. His arms and legs were aching from being cramped into so small a space, but he dared not move. He knew that they would not have cared if he had made himself

\(^{38}\) The film version of *Native Son* accentuates this by showing Bigger (played by Wright himself!) parading through his old neighborhood with the shiny car and his chauffeur’s outfit.
more comfortable, but his moving would have called attention to himself and his black body. And he did not want that. (67–68)

Bigger’s experience in the middle seat, of being “between two vast white looming walls,” is a powerful metaphor not only for his perception of race relations, as Isabel Soto argues, but also for the spatiality of the Black Belt, the area surrounded and enforced by the literal and figurative structures of white power.

In general, Bigger’s strong sense of orientation lends an air of competence to his mobility. He expresses this not only through his driving and his other daily travels but also through an assertion he makes to Bessie as they prepare to hide from the police. Bessie expresses concern based on their limited mobility as African-Americans—“You know, we’s black. We can’t go just anywhere” (148). But Bigger uses his knowledge of the area to reassure her: “I know the South Side from A to Z” (149). As readers observe Bigger’s awareness of and navigation through physical space, they experience the literary geography of South Side Chicago in an immediate way, and this has important implications for a geocritical and ecospatial understanding of the novel. In *Native Son*, the protagonist’s orientation—epitomized in his self-recognition on the map—functions as an interpretive nexus between character and environment.

Thus far I have tried to reiterate a conceptual difference between Bigger’s orientation (the awareness he exhibits of where in the world he is) and the novel’s orientation (Wright’s literary cartography, the regular tracking or indexing of his whereabouts through geospatial markers); but this difference is not always explicit in the novel. Indeed, the two senses of orientation are neatly intertwined most of the time. This arises, in part, from Wright’s use of free indirect discourse for the novel’s narration, whereby Bigger’s thoughts are not always distinct from those
of an implied narrator. For instance, on his first trip to the Dalton house, Bigger elects to walk there from his apartment. The novel simply states: “He went out and walked south to Forty-sixth Street, then eastward” (43). Such a statement not only provides an indirect identification of Bigger’s location and route, but also implies that he knows where he is going and how to get there. The novel, in other words, often inscribes its geography vis-à-vis the protagonist’s own (usually implied) sense of orientation. This effectively culminates in Bigger’s cartographic moment, when he consults the newspaper maps to orient himself within the search area. This remarkable moment is, in effect, a dramatization of the literary cartographical project. By placing his protagonist “there on that map,” Wright locates Bigger within a realist geography that the novel has been perpetuating all along, even as Bigger engages in the empowering act of orienting himself within that same geography.

Given Bigger’s strong local awareness and geographical competence, his occasional moments of disorientation seem all the more significant. Two such moments occur, understandably, when he is drunk or having sex. After Mary and Jan compel Bigger to eat and drink with them at Ernie’s Kitchen Shack, they have him drive them around Washington Park while they fool around in the back seat. Back in the driver’s seat and slightly inebriated, Bigger loses focus on his surroundings: “His sense of the city and park fell away…” (78). He also

39 In her excellent article on *Native Son*, Laura Tanner examines the narrator’s problematic role in the novel, arguing, for example, that “The elaborate linguistic fabric” constructed by the narrator “disguises and transforms Bigger’s consciousness in the very act of representing it” (132). The narrator’s voice can be distinguished from Bigger’s own voice in that it frequently provides a commentary on the protagonist’s actions that could not originate with Bigger. In addition, Michael Szalay argues that the free-indirect discourse adds to what he calls the “topographical doubleness” in Bigger’s seeing himself on the map: “As the frames of reference collapse (Thomas is simultaneously on the map and in the room with the map), it becomes impossible to tell how mediated Thomas’s experience finally is. For the ‘he’ in the sentence represents Thomas objectifying his own image on the map as well as Wright objectifying Thomas in the room looking at himself on the map” (254–255).
relinquishes his spatial awareness while he is having sex with Bessie. In this evocative, if not explicit, scene, Bigger senses the world being blotted out and envisions himself at the bottom of a dark pit; yet he also imagines some intensely natural scenes (rather infrequent in this novel), with visions of a fallow field, a warm sea, and a cloudy sky waiting for rain. Interestingly, the sexual act permits Bigger “to reforge…a new sense of time and space” (135). Bigger also loses his sense of orientation when he unexpectedly runs into Jan, whom he has tried to frame for Mary’s murder, and when he is forced by police and reporters to return to the scene of the crime. In this latter instance, Bigger is jammed into the back seat, handcuffed to police, and surrounded by an angry mob, yet he gradually regains his bearings: “The cars swerved onto State Street. At Thirty-fifth Street the neighborhood became familiar. At Thirty-seventh Street he knew that two blocks to the left was his home” (334).

Just as Bigger occasionally loses his geographical orientation, the narrative itself sometimes neglects to account for his exact whereabouts; Wright’s literary cartography is somewhat selective. Most notably, precise locations are never given for Bessie’s apartment, the house where Bigger kills Bessie, or the site of Bigger’s capture. This is surprising given the

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40 Bigger is startled by Jan’s presence on the street and so threatens him with a gun. After Jan walks away, Bigger is disoriented: “Bigger stood still, the gun in hand. He had utterly forgotten where he was; his eyes were still riveted on that point in space where he had last seen Jan’s retreating form” (171).

41 At various times, Bigger disembarks the streetcar at Forty-seventh, Fiftieth, and Fifty-first to walk to Bessie’s (130, 174, 223), so she likely lives somewhere between Forty-seventh and Fifty-first Streets near Indiana Avenue, ten or twelve blocks south of Bigger’s apartment. This place Bessie closer to the economic and cultural center of the Black Belt and perhaps signifies a higher class status than Bigger has, for the black middle class gravitated toward the southern end of the Black Belt where housing conditions were better, thus helping to push the border ever farther south. The abandoned house where Bigger kills Bessie is somewhere near Fifty-third Street, some undetermined distance not far from Bessie’s apartment (231, 246). The abandoned flat where Bigger is captured is “between Fortieth and Fiftieth” (256), probably near Forty-sixth Street since he has walked seven blocks north of his earlier position at Fifty-third Street (248). Brian Dolinar pinpoints the site of capture at Fifty-third Street, which is a mistake
meticulous way in which Bigger and Bessie choose a certain house to be the site of their proposed ransom drop— not to mention Wright’s extensive site research. Of these three important yet unidentified sites, the last is the most significant, and it emerges, surprisingly, just after Bigger has located himself on the map. Once Bigger realizes the search parameters and calculates which direction to walk in order to elude capture the longest, his precise location doesn’t seem to matter as much; all that matters is that he is trapped. He is not at a certain address or intersection but only “in that white spot” on the newspaper map, “somewhere in between” the cordon boundaries of Fortieth Street and Fiftieth Streets. Through the comparative lack of geographic cues, the novel’s lessened orientation to the map here figures as a loss of spatial awareness in its primary focalizer. Bigger undoubtedly knows where he is—he knows the South Side “from A to Z”—but he seemingly ceases to care. Bigger’s recognition of himself on the map is the culmination of his newfound sense of autonomy, which emerged, ironically, through his accidental murder of Mary Dalton and his subsequent, more sinister murder of Bessie Mears. A petty criminal in the past, he has quickly risen to infamy; his life suddenly matters to the world—even if it wants him dead. Yet the lack of a street name or a house number

(“Illinois” 88). Wright’s typed itinerary suggests he intended to place the capture farther north and closer to Bigger’s apartment, on Indiana “from 43 to 39” (Kinnamon 229).

42 The site Bigger chooses for the ransom drop is at East Thirty-sixth Place and Michigan Avenue, about three blocks northwest of Bigger’s apartment (173, 181). “[The house] was tall, white, silent, standing on a well-lighted corner” (173).

43 “So close had danger and death come that he could not feel that it was he who had undergone it all. And, yet, out of it all, over and above all that had happened, impalpable but real, there remained to him a queer sense of power. He had done this. He had brought all this about. In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes. Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight” (239).
for Bigger’s final hiding place seemingly undercuts whatever power he has acquired through the process of murder and flight. Not unlike the moment when Jan forces him out of the driver’s seat, the cessation of geographic markers here connotes a radical shift in the sense of power and autonomy Bigger has experienced as an expert traveler of the South Side.\textsuperscript{44}

**Enclosure and Collapse**

The newspaper maps epitomize a fundamental narrative logic at the heart of *Native Son*, that of spatial enclosure. Bigger’s systematic boxing in by the police—the constriction of his mobility—reaches symbolic completion in Book Three with his confinement behind bars and, ultimately (the ending implies), in the leather straps of the electric chair. Moreover, the novel suggests that such enclosure is not only the result of Bigger’s crime but, indeed, also the cause of it. As Bigger concludes, “I hurt folks ’cause I felt I had to; that’s all. They was crowding me too close; they wouldn’t give me no room” (423). *Native Son*, in other words, utilizes a logic of enclosure—effected in part through clear toponymic markers—to explore the very real issue of geographical enclosure, warning against the spatial practices conspiring to keep African-Americans “in their place.”\textsuperscript{45} As Catherine Jurca writes, “Segregation in *Native Son* is never envisioned as merely the isolating effect of discrimination. … Segregation is associated with the

\textsuperscript{44} Ironically, Bigger goes mentally “outside of himself” and registers a strong ecospatial awareness in the moment of his capture (267). Just before he falls from the water tower, succumbing to the pressure of the fire hoses, he notices the wind blowing “strong, from the lake” (267). “The icy water clutched again at his body like a giant hand; the chill of it squeezed him like the circling coils of a monstrous boa constrictor. His arms ached. He was behind his curtain now, looking down at himself freezing under the impact of water in sub-zero winds” (268). This out-of-body experience is also a cartographic vision, with Bigger “looking down on himself” from above the buildings and the streets he knows so well.

\textsuperscript{45} For more on this particular meaning of place in the novel, see Houston Baker, “On Knowing Our Place.”
absolute mobility of whites and the violation and invasion of public and private black space” (Jurca 109). To that end, I suggest we read Wright’s use of toponyms and other ecospatial references, explicated above, as an effort to establish a full environmental context for the novel, which, as we will see, is an indictment of spatial practices on the ground (and on the map). In this context, Bigger’s limited mobility makes sense historically as well as metaphorically: he becomes a symbol for constricted black mobility in 1930s Chicago.46 Thus the literary geography of Native Son effectively underscores its themes, and vice versa; the novel’s logic of enclosure is a commentary on the spatiality of the South Side, not just a metaphor for Black “experience.”

Demographic maps and data from the 1930s and ’40s make clear the extent of black enclosure on the South Side during that era. Chicago was one of the primary beneficiaries of African-American migration to northern cities during the first half of the twentieth century. Although that growth slowed somewhat during the Great Depression, the legality of racial restrictive covenants and the reality of violence against black families who sought to live outside of recognized boundaries combined to black neighborhoods like the Black Belt increasingly dense. According to Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, “As of 1930 the typical black Chicagoan lived in a neighborhood that was over two-thirds black” (31). As the black population ballooned, socially rigid boundaries such as the “Line” at Cottage Grove Avenue contributed to

46 In one of the few recognitions of mobility as a critical issue in the novel, Lawrence Rodgers argues that Native Son is an example of the “fugitive migrant novel,” which he identifies as a genre in conversation with the slave narrative. For Rodgers, Bigger is a fugitive from the South who never acculturates to the North. Robert Stepto argues, further, that the literary geography of Native Son also harks back to the spatiality of plantations: “The setting is roughly that of a plantation, with the slave quarters west of Cottage Grove Avenue, a respectful long block from the Big House of the Dalton’s on Drexel Boulevard. Dalton may not be a slave-holding captain of early agri-business, but his immense profits do come from the land and from the hard toil of blacks in that…he landlords over hundreds of over-priced rat-infested tenements, including that in which Bigger and his family lead their sorry lives” (“I Thought” 62).
massive overcrowding. Meanwhile, as demand for housing increased, landlords (most of them white) raised rents to exorbitant levels without bothering to maintain their property, leading to widespread dilapidation that endangered anyone who was forced to live there. Large buildings were subdivided into one-room apartments called “kitchenettes.” Richard Wright captured this dynamic best in *Twelve Million Black Voices*, his wide-ranging polemic against the economic and social conditions keeping African-Americans in their place—both literally and figuratively. As Robin F. Bachin puts it, “While there were forces helping to expand the perimeters of the Black Belt, equally strong forces were working to keep them in check” (254).

Through some fairly subtle observations during Bigger’s travels on the South Side and, much more overtly, through the questioning during Bigger’s trial of the white real estate magnate Henry Dalton by the communist attorney Boris Max, *Native Son* registers the housing crisis as a pressing social, economic, and ecospatial issue. The ecospatiality of housing has two components: the patterns of spatial development responsible for the Black Belt phenomenon—the “here and there” of segregation—and the ecological/material aspect of living conditions—elements like cold, rats, and dilapidation—the *stuff* of urbanity reminding us that the city—what the novel calls “the world of steel and stone” (16)—is part of the natural world.

While the spatiality of the housing issue and South Side geography are readily apparent in the novel, the material aspect is less overt and, consequently, less appreciated by scholars. Most interestingly, Wright uses wintry conditions—a major blizzard, in fact—as a way of

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47 One notable exception is Kate Marshall’s “Sewer, Furnace, Airshaft, Media: Modernity behind the Walls in *Native Son* and *Manhattan Transfer*.” Marshall pays special attention to the representation of infrastructure in *Native Son*, particularly the furnace where Bigger burns Mary’s body and the air shaft down which he drops the bludgeoned Bessie. While recognizing their materiality, Marshall reads these
reinforcing the novel’s themes. Beyond the obvious, persistent visual symbolism of the snow—a black character surrounded and overcome by so much whiteness—it also creates a sense of foreboding, poses a very real challenge to human survival, and, ultimately, in its massive accumulation, physically reinforces the racist spatiality of the built environment of the South Side. When Bigger emerges on Monday morning, having murdered twice, he is surrounded by the police cordon and also by the snow, which has cut off roads and stalled the transit service Bigger frequently relies on. The newspaper states that “all roads leading in and out of Chicago were blocked by a record-breaking snowfall” (243). Too late, he realizes he should have left

primarily as symbols of media connectivity, arguing that infrastructure in the novel calls attention to the ways that novels work, and to the relations between people and networks.

48 Just such a blizzard occurred on January 29–30, 1939, as Wright, then living in Brooklyn, was finishing a revised draft of *Native Son*. That Sunday and Monday, 14.9 inches of snow fell, tying for the third largest snowfall on record and setting the record for accumulation in a twenty-four-hour period, according
town sooner and “gone to some other place, perhaps Gary, Indiana, or Evanston” (246). In effect, the snow creates a physical barrier where social barriers already exist, restricting Bigger’s mobility just when he needs it most while effectively naturalizing black enclosure on the South Side.

The housing conditions depicted in the novel also reinforce the restrictive ecospatiality of the Black Belt. With such high rental income, the South Side’s absentee landlords had little incentive to maintain the properties that were home to growing numbers of African-Americans. Some of these were the former mansions of wealthy white Chicagoans, long since fled. Wright captures these dynamics when Bigger selects a house for the ransom drop, at Thirty-sixth Street and Michigan Place, which seems typical of the most run-down buildings in the neighborhood:

He saw dusty walls, walls almost like those of the Dalton home. The doorways were wider than those of any house in which he had ever lived. Some rich folks lived here once, he thought. Rich white folks. That was the way most houses on the South Side were, ornate, old, stinking; homes once of rich white people, now inhabited by Negroes or standing dark and empty with yawning black windows. He remembered that bombs had been thrown by whites into houses like these when Negroes had first moved into the South Side. (182)

Likewise, when Bigger talks of finding a hiding place near Bessie’s apartment, he figures the abundance of old, abandoned houses to be an advantage: “It’ll be like hiding in a jungle” (228). When they find such a house to hide in, it is described as “a tall, snow-covered building whose many windows gaped blackly, like the eye-sockets of empty skulls” (231). The house’s floorboards creak, its window panes rattle in the blizzard, and Bigger matter-of-factly ponders the threat that it might collapse: “The building might fall upon him as he slept, but the police to the Chicago Tribune (“Fair Today; City Shovels Out”). Major highways and most streets were blocked, and 6,400 men worked to clear streets and transit lines. While it is unclear whether Wright knew of this event, the fictional blizzard’s occurrence on the same days of the week is a notable correlation.
might get him if he were anywhere else” (232). The threat is quite real, for Bigger recalls “the time when the police had come and driven and his mother and his brother and sister out of a flat in a building which had collapsed two days after they had moved” (248). The conditions in Bigger’s family’s apartment, while perhaps less dangerous, are nevertheless indicative of the harsh living conditions in the Black Belt. Bigger seems to realize this only when he returns there after having moved into his own room at the Daltons’. “He looked round the room, seeing it for the first time. There was no rug on the floor and the plastering on the walls and ceiling hung loose in many places. There were two worn iron beds, four chairs, an old dresser, and a drop-leaf table on which they ate. … He hated this room and all the people in it, including himself. Why did he and his folks have to live like this?” (105).

The novel also conveys the deplorable living conditions on the South Side through the opening scene, in which Bigger and his family do mortal battle with a resident black rat (with Bigger and a frying pan prevailing). This chaotic scene, which Wright devised only after a first draft of the novel, establishes an exciting tone for the story and a convenient symbol for Bigger’s own experience of being hunted, trapped, and killed.\(^4^9\) In searching for a better opening scene, Wright remembered that Chicago was “overrun with rats”:

I recalled that I'd seen many rats on the streets, that I'd heard and read of Negro children being bitten by rats in their beds. At first I rejected the idea of Bigger battling a rat in his room; I was afraid that the rat would "hog" the scene. But the rat would not leave me; he presented himself in many attractive guises. So, cautioning myself to allow the rat scene to disclose only Bigger, his family, their little room, and their relationships, I let the rat walk in, and he did his stuff. (“How Bigger” 460).

\(^{49}\) James Baldwin was among the first of many critics to read the rat symbolically, in his essay “Many Thousands Gone.”
But among the rat’s obvious functions as a literary device is its contribution to a sense of place in the novel, its presence implying a widespread prevalence of rats that conveys something memorable about the natural and built environment of the Black Belt. And, indeed, the rat must also be read as a member of the more-than-human world (to borrow David Abram’s formulation), an animal occupying a niche within the urban ecosystem—and terrorizing humans in the process. From an ecospatial perspective, the rat provides an important contribution to the novel’s realism, rather than a challenge to it.

In scenes like this, *Native Son* effectively treats housing segregation on the South Side as an environmental justice issue. For Wright and others, the kitchenette apartment—the sort the Thomas family live in—typified all the inequities of 1930s housing in Chicago and other cities whose black populations had dramatically increased during the Great Migration. These apartments were generally filthy, cramped, and dilapidated, leading to problems of all kinds. As Rashad Shabazz argues, “Kitchenettes were central to [Wright’s] racial geography of the city because they coalesced the legal and discursive practices that underwrote segregation” (42). Wright wrote most scathingly of the kitchenette in *Twelve Million Black Voices*, faulting the new arrangement for its inflictions upon the physical and mental health of African-Americans across the northern United States:

> The kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks.

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50 In an ecocritical reading of the rat, Monika Geilern notes that “Critics tend to treat the rat as a trope, as a perforation of Bigger’s fate, as a phallic symbol, as a test of Bigger’s masculinity, and as a confirmation of his status as ‘badman.’ They look at the rat and automatically see something other than a rat,” rather than acknowledging “that the rat is *indeed a rat*, a biological entity, a parasitical creature, an environmental factor, and a part of nature” (103).
The kitchenette, with its filth and foul air, with its one toilet for thirty or more tenants, kills our black babies so fast that in many cities twice as many of them die as white babies. …

The kitchenette is the funnel through which our pulverized lives flow to ruin and death on the city pavements, at a profit….. (10)

Figure 19. Kitchenette Apartment (Twelve Million Black Voices)\textsuperscript{51}

The text and photos of Twelve Million Black Voices emphasize the fundamental ecospatiality of the housing issue. The housing crisis in the northern Black Belts derives from segregationist spatial practices like red-lining and violence but quickly becomes an issue of human survival, a fight for proper shelter, warmth, and sustenance in a crumbling environment. In many ways, Voices, which Wright began writing in the summer of 1940, while Native Son

\textsuperscript{51} Digitized version from Tumblr user thesunatmidnight2.
dominated the bestseller lists, is a postscript to the novel, for it shows the physical conditions of black sequestration in the urban North and describes the political and economic factors that led to them. While Robert Stepto has convincingly argued that Wright’s autobiography *Black Boy* authenticates *Native Son* through by revealing how the author’s personal experience corresponds to the novel’s individual themes, I would argue that *Twelve Million Black Voices* serves as a truer completion of the novel by highlighting its communal themes. In a similar way, Horace Cayton argued that *Native Son* served as an important prologue to his own research for the monumental *Black Metropolis*; in a review of *Twelve Million Black Voices* he wrote, “For every adjective which Wright used we have a label, for every move that Bigger took, we have a map; for every personality type he encountered we have a life history” (Cayton 26).

In *Native Son*, the depiction of South Side geography is supported and fulfilled through its thematic treatment of the housing issue, a topic that is, arguably, as central to this novel as it is to Lorraine Hansberry’s classic South Side drama, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Wright accomplishes this through his ingenious choice of Henry Dalton’s occupation. While on the stand in court, Dalton clarifies the technicalities of his relationship to the Thomas family’s apartment and other Black Belt properties: he is the president of a company (the Dalton Real Estate Company) that owns stock in another company (The South Side Real Estate Company)

52 Stepto, “Literacy and Ascent: *Black Boy.*”

53 Also set on the South Side, *Raisin* depicts the plight of a black family longing to escape their oppressive conditions by purchasing a house in a better neighborhood, only to run up against the veiled racist threats of the neighborhood association where their new house is located. When Hansberry was eight years old, her parents bought a house in a white neighborhood. When they were wrongfully evicted, her father, Carl A. Hansberry, sued; the U.S Supreme Court ruled in his favor, finding racial restrictive covenants unconstitutional (Lee vs. Hansberry, 1940), though the practice would continue in some places, including Chicago, for years.
that owns Bigger’s housing unit; he acknowledges that he directs these companies’ policies and that the Thomases, therefore, pay their rent, “indirectly,” to him (325–6). Such policies include charging higher prices to blacks than whites (though Dalton attributes this to market forces and deems it ethical, as a refusal to “undersell” his competitors) and refusing to rent houses to African-Americans outside the Black Belt boundaries (which he calls “an old custom”) (326–7). Bigger’s attorney, Boris Max, attempts to blame Dalton personally for these racist policies and, by extension, for the crime Bigger commits, asking him whether he thinks “that the terrible conditions under which the Thomas family lived in one of your houses may in some way be related to the death of your daughter?” (328). For Max—and presumably for Wright—Dalton is the embodiment of all the forces (economic and ecospatial) keeping Bigger and his people in their place;54 Bigger’s act of violence is therefore logical, if not wholly justified.55

54 This point is conveyed quite effectively (and much more succinctly) in the dramatic adaptation of *Native Son*, by Wright and Paul Green. In the courtroom scene, Max argues his case against the prosecutor, Buckley, as follows:

MAX: Mr. Dalton rents his vast Chicago real estate holdings to hundreds, to thousands of Negroes, and among these thousands is the family of this Bigger Thomas. The rents in those tenements, those foul ghetto buildings—

BUCKLEY: I object, Your Honour.

JUDGE: Objection sustained. *(Calling down to the stenographer.)* Strike the words “foul ghetto” from the record.

MAX: The conditions in those buildings are among the worst in the city... (337).

Although the play eliminates numerous elements crucial to my reading of the novel (namely most place references, Bigger’s geographic orientation, and the police chase) it seems quite effective as an adaptation, in part because of its strong scenic structure. While much of the spatial imagery was eliminated, Craig S. Walker suggests that some sense of claustrophobia was conveyed by director Orson Welles’ innovating staging and lighting choices (298).

55 James Baldwin called Max’s speech “one of the most desperate performances in American fiction” (59). In one of his most blatant moments as authorial mouthpiece, Max refers to Bigger as a “test symbol” through which are isolated “the complex forces of society.” He exhorts the court “to see this tiny social symbol in relation to our whole sick social organism” (382–3).
The third part of *Native Son* spares nothing in its indictment of South Side spatiality, effectively explaining in more theoretical terms what Bigger’s geographical experiences in the first two parts have already demonstrated—what Catherine Jurca terms the novel’s “consistent rhetoric of confinement” (103). Perhaps owing to Max’s influence, Bigger himself increasingly acknowledges the extent to which his life and options have been limited, and he frequently deploys spatial imagery to express this idea. As to his former ambition to become a pilot, he says, “they built a big school [for aviation] and then drew a line around it and said that nobody could go to it but those who lived within the line. That kept all the colored boys out” (353). A second career idea, also thwarted, he describes in similarly spatial terms: “I’d like to be in business. But what chance has a black guy got in business? We ain’t got no money. We don’t own no mines, no railroads, no nothing. They don’t want us to. They make us stay in one little spot.…” (354). And in response to the stereotype, perpetuated in the media, of black men raping white women, he says: “They say we do things like that and they say it to kill us. They draw a line and say for you to stay on your side of the line. They don’t care if there’s no bread over on your side. They don’t care if you die. And then they say things like that about you and when you try to come from behind your line they kill you” (351). What *Native Son* makes most clear is that the social “lines” to which Bigger refers have strong correlations on the ground and on the map—in grid-lines like Cottage Grove Avenue. And this was the case not only in the Jim Crow South but also in the Urban North, in cities like Chicago, where to experience racial segregation was to be “hemmed in, limited, circumscribed” (358).

Jurca develops this case most saliently in her chapter on “*Native Son*’s Trespasses,” pointing out that the novel “was written during and responds to a crisis of geographical
immobility” (113). Jurca’s reading of the novel relies upon the socio-geographical history of the South Side and, in particular, the ongoing tension between the city and the suburb, embodied in the places where *Native Son* is set. The Hyde Park-Kenwood neighborhood, where the Dalton family lives, began as a city in its own right but was annexed by Chicago in the late nineteenth century. Home to the University of Chicago, Hyde Park, to this day, maintains a palpable separateness from the surrounding neighborhoods, cordoned off from South Side blight by tree-lined boulevards and historic buildings—not to mention a huge private police force, employed by the university. This area was home to some of the strongest racial restrictive covenants in the country, attempts to resist integration that were long successful because the Supreme Court had tacitly upheld their legality. By the late 1920s, such covenants were said, in the *Hyde Park Herald*, to stretch “like a marvelous delicately woven chain of armor” from “the northern gates of Hyde Park at 35th and Drexel Boulevard to…all the far-flung white communities of the South Side” (qtd. in Hirsch). Yet to the African-American community such policies served as an “invisible barbed-wire fence” (Drake & Cayton 382).

Jurca’s somewhat ironic inclusion of the urban-centric *Native Son* in a study of literature of the suburbs nevertheless reinforces the novel’s attention to geography and spatiality, positing the Black Belt-Hyde Park area as a kind of borderland that is always being contested. Jurca’s analysis, while insightful, risks tokenizing the African-American experience as represented in *Native Son* by privileging the suburban (largely white) perspective on spatiality. She admits to

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56 For more on the social and spatial dynamics of Chicago, Hyde Park, and the University of Chicago, see Robin F. Bachin’s *Building the South Side* (2004), as well as Julia Abrahamson’s *A Neighborhood Finds Itself* (1959).

57 Hirsch, “Restrictive Covenants.”
including *Native Son* as “a kind of reality check, to gauge through Wright the real injuries inflicted on those who are denied the opportunity to become upwardly mobile in the suburbs” (8). Jurca re-frames *Native Son*’s emphasis on enclosure (keeping black people in) as a problem of suburban defense (keeping them out). While the point is well taken, it runs counter to the message and logic of the novel, perhaps because it focuses more on the border as “armor” than as “barbed-wire fence.” In the end, Jurca’s work well describes the spatial and political dynamics of the South Side borderlands but seems to present some of the issues, as it were, from the wrong side of the Line.

A final look at one of the most important sites in the novel reveals the complexity of the spatial/racial issues with which Wright was engaging, as well as some of the difficulties posed by geocritical interpretation. The Dalton residence, as detailed above, sits at 4605 Drexel Boulevard, one block east of the Line at Cottage Grove, and Wright presents it as being securely in the predominantly white neighborhood of Hyde Park-Kenwood. Wright’s selection of Drexel Boulevard is notable not merely because of its proximity to the Line but also because of its decidedly distinct layout: as one of Chicago’s prominent boulevards, it was designed to be especially spacious and lined with trees, with a median running between the two directions of roadway travel. The separated boulevard begins at Thirty-eighth Street and continues south to Fifty-first Street, where it turns one block west and enters Washington Park. This fact makes Drexel part of the system of parks and avenues envisioned by city planners and promoters as early as the 1840s, which later visitors dubbed the “Emerald Necklace” of Chicago (Holland 143). From a practical standpoint, this means that anyone driving to the Daltons’ place would have had to arrive from the south in order to reach the house, as the police do when they take
Bigger there for a photo-op (334); arriving from the north would mean having to park on the other side of the median. This situation is compounded by another geographic quirk, the fact that Forty-sixth Street, like the other even-numbered streets along Drexel, does not properly intersect the boulevard but rather dead-ends at the median on each side, touching the boulevard without crossing it. At Number 4605, the Daltons’ house would have been located right on the corner of Drexel and Forty-sixth, effectively buffered by a tree-lined median and a full block of houses to the north and south. In this way, the Daltons’ home site mirrors the family’s social position toward the African-American community: it is proximate but detached, geographically close yet spatially and socially closed.

With respect to the historical dynamics of South Side spatiality, however, the Dalton mansion is less comfortably situated. The most widely reproduced map of the Black Belt is Drake and Cayton’s, from Black Metropolis, titled “Expansion of the Black Belt.” Adapted from a map appearing in the 1922 study, The Negro in Chicago, Drake and Cayton’s map details, through varied shading, the Black Belt boundaries as they appeared by 1920, by 1930, and by 1941. The Hyde Park-Kenwood neighborhood is labeled “white middleclass” while the neighborhood to the west is labeled “lower class white.” In addition, black dots indicate homes that were “bombed between 1917 and 1921 in conflict over housing” (63). According to this map, the area surrounding the Dalton house was actually “added” to the Black Belt during the 1920s. Jurca reads this as “the great unacknowledged joke of Native Son”: “at 4605 Drexel

58 Indeed, a 1939 Tribune article reinforced the notion that in Kenwood the “mere width of one street” created a kind of boundary from the “envious glances” of Black Belt residents (qtd. in Jurca 116).

59 A 1947 map of racial restrictive covenants also displays the Daltons’ block as nonwhite territory (Hirsch).
Figure 20. Expansion of the Black Belt (*Black Metropolis*)
Boulevard, one short block from Cottage Grove, the Daltons really are Bigger’s neighbors; their territory is already being annexed” (117). If true, it’s a clever (and harmless) joke, coming from an author who conducted painstaking field research to select the novel’s key sites.

Other maps, however, complicate this understanding of the Dalton site. Census maps from 1934 indicate that Forty-sixth and Drexel was still over 99% white at that time, one of the least integrated tracts on the near South Side (Abbott). A 1939 “Residential Security Map” by the federal Home Owners’ Loan Corporation—the kind of map that notoriously described, if not outright endorsed or dictated, housing segregation for the United States government—includes the 4600 block of Drexel in the area of lower “risk” than the Black Belt neighborhood just to the north and west (marked “hazardous”), suggesting that the area was still generally white, but just barely—with Drexel and Forty Fifth Streets both appearing as dividing lines (Dintino). A 1947 map of racial restrictive covenants appears to reiterate these boundaries, and a map adapted from the Chicago Urban League for a subsequent edition of *Black Metropolis* indicates that this block was not wholly occupied by blacks until sometime after 1950 (817). The larger body of cartography, then, counters the notion presented in the Drake and Cayton map and embraced in Jurca’s comment that that the Dalton house is “already being annexed.”

Taken all together, these maps resist the geocritical impulse to match the fictional reality with the cartographic evidence, producing ambivalence instead of clarity on the issue of exactly how white or black the 4600 block of Drexel Boulevard would have been in the late 1930s. On the one hand, the discrepancies might indicate the degree of difficulty in collecting and/or depicting demographic data cartographically. One explanation can be found in a footnote in Edith Abbott’s *The Tenements of Chicago* (1936), where the author suggests that census maps
may portray population inaccurately because their use of census tracts to organize data lends the illusion that these spaces are filled in all the way; so, for instance, a neighborhood that is evenly
segregated along a given dividing line—all black on one side, all white on the other—would appear evenly integrated instead—fifty percent black, fifty percent white—the census boundaries effectively subsuming any such line. On the other hand, the discrepancies might also complicate those theories of black expansion and white flight whereby the borderlines gave way in a more or less uniform pattern, with one pioneering black family successfully settling into a house across a given border and thus opening the entire block to African-Americans, a process known as “blockbusting” (Massey and Denton 37). What is clear, however, is that Wright placed the Dalton house on a block of the South Side that was particularly contested, a site that reinforces the novel’s depiction of urban segregation as a spatial and environmental practice.

Plotting and Reckoning

Reading Native Son through the lens of place reveals how the novel’s reliance on notions of spatiality, mobility, and South Side geography fully supports its themes of identity, race relations, violence, and criminal justice. Indeed, shifting away from a character-based interpretation of the novel (as Wright himself advocated, with Bigger as the black male threat to white American society) toward an environmentally-informed, place-based reading suggests an important heuristic element at the novel’s core: Wright’s social realism exposes such issues as crowded living conditions, housing segregation, media racism, liberal white hypocrisy, and the

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60 The Drake and Cayton map acknowledges this uncertainty, to some extent, through its use of curved shading that does not align precisely with street grids or census tracts.

61 In his application for the Guggenheim Fellowship that enabled him to write Native Son, Wright pitched his novel as a work dealing with “Negro juvenile delinquency on Chicago’s South Side against a background of bad housing, crime, residential segregation, and lack of vocational opportunities.” He added that the novel was a realistic portrayal of the African-American urban experience, a first for American fiction (Rowley 157).
failure of capitalism to offer solutions for any of these problems. Not unlike Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, which, in 1939, immediately preceded *Native Son* atop the bestseller lists, Wright’s novel fundamentally derives from and responds to historical conditions.\footnote{Indeed, one can imagine a different text, modeled on *Grapes*, in which the fictional representation is combined with the broad-focus, documentary-style nonfiction, with the searing prose of *Twelve Million Black Voices* appearing as intercalary material among the scenes of Bigger’s crime and punishment.} Reading *Native Son* ecospatially demonstrates Wright’s understanding of Black Belt spatiality as an issue of not only social and economic justice, but environmental justice as well.

Sometime before Bigger Thomas is captured and held responsible for the murder of Mary Dalton, he traverses his neighborhood in search of an abandoned house to use as a base for collecting the ransom money he has decided to extort from the Dalton family in light of Mary’s disappearance. Arriving at the 3600 block of Michigan Avenue, he finds just the place, a building which happens to be owned by Mr. Dalton’s South Side Real Estate Company. At this moment, his social and spatial situation begins to come into focus:

He had heard that Mr. Dalton owned the South Side Real Estate Company, and the South Side Real Estate Company owned the house in which he lived. He paid eight dollars a week for one rat-infested room. … Mr. Dalton was somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god. He owned property all over the Black Belt, and he owned property where white folks lived, too. But Bigger could not live in a house across the “line.” Even though Mr. Dalton gave millions of dollars for Negro education, he would rent houses to Negroes only in this prescribed area, this corner of the city tumbling down from rot. In a sullen way Bigger was conscious of this. Yes; he would send the kidnap note. He would jar them out of their senses. (173–174)

This moment is remarkable for several reasons. For one, it depicts Bigger as the expert traveler, effectively navigating the streets of the Black Belt. At the same time, it reveals Bigger’s dawning understanding of Mr. Dalton’s role in producing the environmental conditions in which his life has been spent. Moreover, Bigger’s sudden resolve to follow through with his ransom scheme
arises from this recognition of Dalton as a villain; he suddenly (and retroactively) conceives the ransom as an act of revenge against the segregationist housing practices to which he has been subject: “He would jar them out of their senses.” The novel, then, presents a double act of reckoning: Bigger always knows where he is going (reckoning as wayfinding), and his life and crimes make better sense in the context of Black Belt spatiality (reckoning as revenge against the geography of segregation).

In the same way, Bigger retroactively makes sense of his crime(s) by buying into Max’s argument: the environment made him do it (328, 390). Although he had no intention of murdering Mary, he begins to view the crime not as an accident but as a logical consequence of his life experiences. Bigger’s chilling conclusion at the end of the novel—“What I killed for, I am” (429)—reveals the extent to which he has accepted his death sentence, and also, perhaps, his attorney’s (and Wright’s) argument that the environment has produced the criminal, as well as the crime: “He had been so conditioned in a cramped environment that hard words or kicks alone knocked him upright and made him capable of action—action that was futile because the world was too much for him. It was then that he closed his eyes and struck out blindly, hitting what or whom he could, not looking or caring what or who hit back” (240). Bigger is at once a child of the Great Migration—Buckley dismisses him as “Just a scared colored boy from Mississippi” (310)—and also a product of the environmental injustices of Chicago’s Black Belt, a person whose life has been, in Max’s words, “hemmed in, limited, circumscribed” (358). *Native Son* drives this point home through its commitment to a realistic literary cartography—Wright’s double act of *plotting*—that positions Bigger Thomas as a traveler of the South Side whose
intimate knowledge of his surroundings is, finally, no match for the systemic spatial/racial forces contriving to keep him in place.
CHAPTER FIVE
ECOSPATIALITY AT THE CROSSROADS: MAPPING CENTRAL NEW MEXICO IN
WILLA CATHER’S *DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP*, LESLIE MARMON SILKO’S
*CEREMONY*, AND ANA CASTILLO’S *SO FAR FROM GOD*

Some fifty miles west of Albuquerque, New Mexico, a seasonal stream called Acoma Creek drops north into the Rio San Jose, thence south into the Rio Grande, which eventually becomes the present-day border between Mexico and the United States. Running thirty-seven miles, Acoma Creek is situated in a country of mountain and high desert ecosystems, red rock mesas, immense skies, and a long history of human habitation. Adjacent to the streambed (also known locally as a “wash” or an “arroyo”) lies the Acoma road, a historic route connecting the Pueblo communities of Acoma and Laguna, now a paved highway known as Indian Route 23—as opposed to “State Route 23”—due to its position on tribal reservation lands. While unremarkable in many ways, this particular stretch of road emerges as a shared site of literary representation in three major twentieth-century novels: Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977), and Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God* (1993). Although their respective literary cartographies are more broadly representative of the geographical construct of region, their stories converge, at least momentarily, on the Acoma road, jointly reflecting more than a century of local history. Characters in these novels traverse the path between Laguna and Acoma by many modes and at a variety of speeds: by mule train, on foot, and in motor vehicles. Beyond this coincidence of literary geography—which is
repeated in the novels’ references to places like Albuquerque and Santa Fe, and historic travel routes such as the Rio Grande River Valley (also known as Interstate 25 or the Camino Real) and Route 66 (also known as Interstate 40 or the Santa Fe Trail)—the path between Laguna and Acoma occasions moments of reflection in which the characters’ circumstances are connected (implicitly or explicitly) to the long social and environmental history of the region. On the Acoma road, these characters—and, by extension, the novels themselves—become more physically, psychologically, and symbolically connected to place.

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the French immigrant and future archbishop Father Jean Latour first travels from Laguna to Acoma in the early 1850s, on his way to celebrate mass in the Catholic mission in the historic pueblo. Latour knows Acoma only by its reputation as a “cloud-set pueblo” (81) atop a natural rock bastion and by the rumor that rain falls there more frequently due to the presence of a magical painting of Saint Joseph—which is to say that he knows next to nothing about it. With his mule train nearing Acoma, Latour stops beneath the formation called Enchanted Mesa to reflect on his surroundings: “This mesa plain had an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness; as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together, on the eve of being arranged into mountain, plain, plateau. The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape” (94–95).¹ Throughout the chapter on Latour’s visit to Acoma, Cather repeatedly suggests that the priest’s dominant impression of the place is a blend

¹ My ecospatial approach somewhat diverges from other treatments of “landscape” (a more aesthetic term) in Cather’s work. Carol Steinhagen’s “Dangerous Crossings: Historical Dimensions of Landscape in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia, The Professor’s House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*” offers a representative example.
of “antiquity” and “incompleteness.” This view is essentially pre-historic, to the extent that, even after arriving in the village of Acoma, Latour feels “as if he were celebrating the Mass at the bottom of the sea, for antediluvian creatures…” (100). For Latour (if not for Cather herself), the region around Acoma—and indeed the whole American Southwest—seems less an active community and prominent cultural site than a blank slate, where the sparseness of the landscape suggests a concomitant lack of culture, despite the region’s many centuries of human history. Even as Latour learns more about this history—including the story of the dictatorial priest who first presided in Acoma in 1600, the novel’s most devastating indictment of Spanish colonialism—he never quite overcomes his basic impression that is reiterated on the road to Acoma: for Latour, New Mexico is a primitive landscape in the middle of an unmapped “dark continent” (20).

A hundred years later, in the 1950s, Silko’s protagonist, Tayo, a biracial Laguna Pueblo man, wakes up in a culvert along this same road, where he has been hiding overnight. Tayo knows this territory well, but with a view of Enchanted Mesa and Acoma Pueblo at dawn, and nearing the completion of his ceremony—his physical and spiritual journey toward reconciliation with a host of personal, cultural, and environmental traumas—his location suddenly takes on new significance:

All things seemed to converge there: roads and wagon trails, canyons with springs, cliff paintings and shrines, the memory of Josiah with his cattle; but the other was distinct and strong like the violet-flowered weed that killed the mule, and the black markings on the cliffs, deep caves along the valley the Spaniards followed to their attack on Acoma. Yet at that moment in the sunrise, it was all so beautiful, everything, from all directions, evenly, perfectly, balancing day with

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2 Of course, Silko was writing only fifty years after Cather, with Ceremony being published in 1977, five decades after Archbishop (1927).
This passage is not only highly evocative of various elements of place—with ecological details like violets, springs, and seasons; spatial details like the roadway itself and the sense of geography in “all directions”; and cultural details like petroglyphs, colonial history, and personal memory—but also illustrative of the very dynamics of place itself, where “all things seemed to converge.” Indeed, place as convergence or totality accords well with geographer Doreen Massey’s definition of place as “a bundle of trajectories” (119), “an intertwining of histories in which the spatiality of those histories (their then as well as their here) is inescapably entangled” (139). For Tayo, a modern man traveling this centuries-old route, historical and environmental awareness converge in a moment of acute orientation and personal clarity that presages the outcome of his journey—and that of the novel.

Lastly, sometime in the late 1980s, Castillo’s Caridad, a Chicana from Tome (a small town in the Rio Grande Valley south of Albuquerque), drives her pickup down the same route (now a highway) from Laguna to Acoma with her would-be lover, Esmeralda. Castillo provides no description of this journey—except that it begins south of Albuquerque as Caridad drives her truck north toward Interstate 40—but there is only one route to Acoma from there. The women soon gain entry to the “Sky City,” courtesy of Esmeralda’s Acoma tribal status, and visit her grandmother in the family’s “thousand-year-old house” (208). Not long after, the two women impulsively sprint to the edge of the mesa and—to the dismay of family, neighbors, and tourists alike—leap together off the steep cliff. No less disconcerting is the fact that, in doing so, the women’s bodies completely disappear, “not out toward the sun’s rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and
live forever” (211). The novel’s narrator interprets this event in terms of Acoma spirituality, with the women answering the call of the spirit deity Tsichtinako, “the Invisible One who had nourished the first two humans, who were also both female…” (211). Thus one of the novel’s central interpretive concerns—how to make sense of “reality” (not only literary reality, as the reader grapples with Castillo’s magical realist techniques, but also place-based social and environmental realities)—gains momentum after a flying trip up the Acoma road.

This introductory exploration of fictional scenes from a particular geographic site (the Acoma road near Enchanted Mesa)3 is intended as a microcosm of this chapter’s argument that the region of Central New Mexico and its literary representations are best understood through the multifocalizing practice of an ecospatial literary criticism. As works of literary cartography, these novels (as well as other works not treated here) may and should be understood as a collective natural and cultural mapping of the region, each text supplementing the others, as a road atlas or a landscape painting might supplement a topographic map. From Latour’s impressions of New Mexico as primordial empty space, to Tayo’s counterbalancing recognition of the place’s deep and conflicted history, to Caridad’s final earthly journey that leads to her ostensible entering of the landscape, these scenes are bound together by the shared geographical referent, the place to which they refer. While one story may contain more physical or historical resonance than the others, each provides a new perspective about the identity of the Acoma Road while opening up the place to further literary, geographical, and historical exploration.

3 Enchanted Mesa also retains a special significance, as an ancient dwelling site that, according to Acoma history, was abandoned after a devastating landslide cut off access to the top. Archaeologists found artifacts on top of the 450-foot butte in the late 1900s (Simmons).
In the same way, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Ceremony*, and *So Far from God* collectively “map” Central New Mexico while contributing to a greater understanding of the environmental and cultural issues that define the region. In this chapter, I interrogate these three novels’ mutual representation of New Mexico from an ecospatial and literary-historical perspective, pursuing Bertrand Westphal’s suggestion that the geocritical approach should, ideally, involve multiple texts and authors. Written from the cultural perspectives of New Mexico’s three most prominent racial/ethnic groups—Native American, Chicano/a, and White—at various historical moments, these texts map the physical and social geography of the region in very different ways. Published in 1927, Cather’s novel addresses the historical era of United States control in New Mexico, focusing on episodes in the life of Father Latour and his colleagues while hinting at the social and environmental costs of colonization in the region. *Ceremony* takes place in the mid-twentieth century and tells us the story of Tayo and the landscape and culture of Laguna Pueblo, a place that also must cope with the environmental legacy of uranium mining and other extractive practices. Lastly, in *So Far from God*, Ana Castillo tests some of the boundaries of realist literary geography (through magical realist techniques and events like Caridad’s vanishing) while highlighting environmental justice issues such as the toxic impacts of industrial chemicals on human health and local water quality. Together, these novels provide a compelling, multicultural view of Central New Mexico in the era of United States control.

Each of these novels has a strong history of literary critical attention, much of it intersecting in interesting ways with many of the themes I will expound upon in this chapter, including cultural specificity, individual psychology, colonialism, and environmental justice.
With gratitude to the critical background established by my predecessors, I would like to shift the criticism of these novels toward a place-centered approach, demonstrating the ways in which these novels generate an individual and collective sense of Central New Mexico as place and to show how a multifocal literary analysis attuned to geography and environmental history can enhance our understanding of that place in particular and ecospatiality in general. These stories, while written with different perspectives, themes, and audiences in mind, overlap in compelling ways, both spatially and historically: their persistent ecospatial reference puts them in conversation across a shared natural and cultural terrain.

While each of these novels emphasizes certain local settings over others, in all three the overall literary cartography is decidedly regional. In Cather’s novel, the initial task of priests Jean Latour and Joseph Vaillant is to get to know the territory that becomes their home. Latour establishes himself in Santa Fe, which is to become the seat of the new American Diocese in New Mexico, but both he and Vaillant travel frequently to many other Native and Spanish/Mexican pueblos throughout the region. Therefore, much of the novel is devoted to their efforts to comprehend the physical and cultural landscape they seek to govern—the same task, not coincidentally, that the United States faced in those same years after its annexation of New Mexico Territory. Silko’s novel also centers on a particular place, Laguna Pueblo, yet the majority of the action takes place not in town but in the surrounding areas, in the rural grazing lands on or near the reservation, as well as in the neighboring cities of Gallup and Albuquerque and all the towns that sprang up between them in the mid-twentieth century along the famous Route 66. Indeed, the contrast between Tayo’s experiences drinking and driving with his friends in places along the highway, which the novel clearly associates with White America, and his
time in the rural canyons and highlands, which are deeply connected to Laguna history, starkly represents the cultural tension he so keenly feels as a Native U.S. military veteran. In So Far from God, the focus shifts not only to Tome and the other small towns and agricultural lands of the Rio Grande Valley south of Albuquerque, but also away from the physical landscape and toward the social impacts of late-twentieth century environmental practices. Castillo’s characters spend comparably less time than Latour and Tayo do in reflecting on the meaning of place and more time simply dealing with the pressures of inhabiting it, in a time when the environment has seemingly turned against them. In the aggregate, we get a glimpse of the region as it might have been in 1851–1888, from a White European perspective, a post-World War II representation of Laguna Pueblo and the surrounding areas from a Native American perspective, and a late-twentieth century depiction of the Chicana/o Rio Grande communities in the 1980s. Each of these representations counterbalances and reinforces the other, providing a greater sense of the region as an ecospatial entity.

I have selected this particular set of novels because they seem to create the strongest case for Bertrand Westphal’s geocritical model while also testing its boundaries in important ways. However, while the methodology is inspired by Westphal, the theoretical grounding comes directly from Heat-Moon. While Westphal offers critical tools for interpreting place in literature, Heat-Moon offers the philosophical tools, reminding us what place is comprised of in the first place. As PrairyErth demonstrates, to understand a place is to dig as much into its stories as its soil, to access the multifocal cultural archive from which its history can be constructed. The full

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4 With its multiple-text, multiple-author format, this chapter is perhaps the most “Westphalian” of all sections of this dissertation; at the same time, it expands Westphal’s original vision by applying the geocritical methodology to a regional site, rather than an urban one, and by focusing on its ecological, in addition to its geographical, aspects.
archive of Central New Mexico as a place would include works of poetry, environmental history, visual art, cartography, and so on. This is much the same spirit in which Heat-Moon assembled the *PrairyErth* “Commonplace Book” from quotes about Kansas history, prairie ecology, and environmental conservation. It also resembles his approaches to particularly “historied” (*River-Horse* 16) sites like Diamond Spring, which “bears such an accumulation of voices and recorded events” (464), or Osage Hill, “a centripetal force of a hill” (338), “an earthen bottle of messages from far travelers” (345). Heat-Moon demonstrates that places are essentially archival, literally containing the stories by and through which they are knowable. In this view, it is primarily through their literary cartography that places become legible.

To a much greater extent than Kansas’s now-obscure Diamond Spring or Osage Hill, Central New Mexico is a land brimming with representations of itself, of which these novels comprise but three relatively well known literary examples. While each of these novels is powerful enough in its own right, I argue that reading *Ceremony*, *So Far from God*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* together enables us to comprehend their shared regional setting, along with the cultural and environmental issues they raise, in a much more holistic way. Following Heat-Moon’s philosophy, I propose we understand these texts not merely as literary artifacts in and of themselves, but also as Heat-Moonian fragments in a regional literary cartography in which they consciously or unconsciously participate. Each of these novels conveys a strong sense of regional place that includes one or more environmental issues; each relies on real place names and emphasizes different localities within the regional framework; and each offers a different cultural perspective (including examples of “environmentalist” thinking) that is vital to the region’s social history. When considered together, they offer a much stronger sense of
historical and geographical coverage than is available in each individual text. In effect, applying Heat-Moon’s philosophy and Westphal’s methodology enables us to see these texts and the issues they raise as complementary representations of Central New Mexico, as critical entries in the literary and ecospatial archive of the region.

**Mapping Central New Mexico’s “Crossroads”**

The geographic region that these novels collectively map is not easily defined, and the terminology is necessarily fraught. I have settled on the straightforward term “Central New Mexico” due to its potential familiarity for a broader reading audience, even though a host of other terms might be more physically or culturally accurate. For instance, the region could be defined instead as the land of the Pueblo peoples; however, such a designation would extend the territory in all directions (e.g., at least as far west as the Grand Canyon), well beyond the basic geographical purview of these novels. Geological, ecological, and topographical definitions are also somewhat unsatisfactory due to the wide variety of land uses and natural features in the area—from the river valley and desert lands to high mesas and forested volcanic peaks. The region lies at the southern base of the Rocky Mountains, yet it is not all mountainous. The Rio Grande cuts through the region’s heart but falls short of defining a country less characterized by water than the lack thereof; while most of the literary territory lies within this watershed, the headwaters of the Rio Grande begin farther north, across the Colorado border. The region might also be defined as “greater Albuquerque,” but neither the term’s connotations of urban sprawl nor the novels’ relative indifference to Albuquerque do much to commend it as a unifying term.
A more satisfying definition, for my purposes, emerges when we recognize the ways in which physical and cultural factors come together to form an ecospatial sense of the region. In
my view, Central New Mexico is best defined as a prominent natural and cultural crossroads, where the north-south trade route along the Rio Grande River—dubbed “Camino Real” (Royal Road) by the Spanish Empire, and Interstate 25 by the United States government—intersects with the east-west trade route(s) that became known, in succession, as the Santa Fe Trail, Route 66, and Interstate 40. At and around this crossroads, the last five hundred years of spatial development have been determined, in large part, by access to the water and transportation resources that support human settlement. Native pueblos like Acoma, many of them small in size and fortified atop a mesa, represent the earliest form of development in the region. As newcomers from Spain, Mexico, and the United States arrived, new economies of agriculture, commerce, and tourism drove development along these routes while settlement in outlying areas remained sparse. Thus, while the primary locations in these novels—Cather’s Santa Fe, Silko’s Laguna, and Castillo’s Tome—differ dramatically in both culture and terrain, they are connected historically, environmentally, and thematically by the lives of people and the flow of resources along these major corridors.

Central New Mexico’s physical and literary geography suggest that this region is best understood as a natural and cultural crossroads, a term that may help us comprehend a region whose political borders have regularly shifted over the centuries. Pueblo peoples established permanent settlements in the region as early as the 1200s, before Europeans arrived. After the expeditions of Francisco Vásquez de Coronado in the 1540s and Juan de Oñate y Salazar in

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5 Santa Fe was at or near the terminus of both the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (“Royal Road of the Interior Land”) from Mexico City and the Santa Fe Trail from Independence, Missouri. In the twentieth century, the crossroads shifted slightly, as the less mountainous Albuquerque became more strategically important for U.S. national and corporate interests and outgrew Santa Fe by leaps and bounds (roughly 550,000 to 70,000 residents as of the 2010 census).
1598, the region was claimed by the Spanish Empire and dubbed the province of Nuevo Mexico. It thus became part of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, which entailed all Spanish colonial holdings in the Americas and included most of what is now the southwestern United States. The territory changed hands in 1821 when Mexico gained its independence from Spain, and again in 1848 when the United States claimed control of New Mexico Territory when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican-American War. In 1853, the United States purchased the southernmost portions of present-day New Mexico and Arizona, both of which attained statehood in 1912. Meanwhile, the claims of numerous Native American groups to territory and sovereignty ensure that, even in the twenty-first century, the seemingly settled questions of land ownership and political control remain complicated; reservations dot this “Crossroads” region, nations within a nation. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Ceremony*, and *So Far from God* bear witness to this multifaceted story from their twentieth-century vantage points, both referring to and further developing various aspects of the region’s cultural and environmental history.⁶

*Death Comes for the Archbishop*

The first Book of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* opens in 1851 with the eponymous character as a “solitary horseman” traveling “somewhere in central New Mexico” (17). He is lost, disoriented, and stricken with thirst, his life seemingly in danger in a landscape he considers alien. “The difficulty,” for Father Latour, “was that the country in which he found himself was so featureless—or rather, that it was crowded with features, all exactly alike,” lending the impression that he hasn’t traveled any distance at all after a long day of riding (17). Latour, it turns out, is on a solo journey from Durango (in present day Mexico) along the old Camino Real

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⁶ I will discuss the novels in chronological order for the sake of expediency and historical continuity.
to Santa Fe, where he will assume his position as bishop of a new Catholic Diocese, one more geographically and politically aligned to the growing United States. He survives the journey, but only thanks to his horses, which smell water and find their way back toward the river and a community built alongside it, the fictional town of Agua Secreta (a Spanish phrase meaning “hidden water”). After his brush with death in the desert, the village is Latour’s salvation, and its occupants seem equally relieved to be welcoming a priest for the first time in many years. Once he recovers from his ordeal, Latour is struck by a realization of this village’s symbolic importance for his life and work in the region: “This settlement was his Bishopric in miniature; hundreds of square miles of thirsty desert, then a spring, a village, old men trying to remember their catechism to teach their grandchildren” (32).

Cather’s opening scene, while relatively straightforward from a plot development standpoint—protagonist in medias res—contains numerous clues about the novel’s geographical and ideological stances. The geographical vagueness in the scene—“somewhere in central New Mexico” and in the fictional Agua Secreta—firmly contrasts the specificity and realism that characterize Cather’s literary cartography throughout the rest of the novel. Such vagueness serves a clear dramatic purpose, replicating for the reader Latour’s experience of disorientation. At the same time, Cather’s momentary avoidance of real toponyms seems designed to reinforce the region’s status—in the minds of Americans and Europeans from Ohio to the Vatican—as an unknown territory “in the middle of a dark continent” (20). To the extent that Agua Secreta and its surrounding territory function as the “bishopric in miniature,” its indeterminate position (“somewhere”) makes it a metaphor of the region as a whole: it is a place with a long cultural and environmental history—indeed, it is even deemed “older than history” (31)—that is
nevertheless unknown to outsiders, particularly the Americans who have only just taken possession of Nuevo Mexico. In the opening scene, Latour (like the reader) is lost because he doesn’t know the territory, an epistemological “wash”—to adapt the terminology of the arid watershed—that Cather’s novel as a whole seems eager enough to bridge.

*Death Comes for the Archbishop* is an intimate portrait of a man (Latour) at a significant historical moment (the beginning of United States control of New Mexico) whose success depends on his ability to learn and adapt to a new and challenging physical and social environment. By that same token, it is also a novel about place and begs to be interpreted as such; Father Latour and Father Vaillant are its primary characters, but New Mexico is arguably its true subject. Much of the novel is devoted to the priests’ quest to understand the territory in which they find themselves, a quest that is both historically and symbolically linked to the twin missions of the Roman Catholic Church and the United States government to integrate New Mexico and eventually all of the Southwest more fully into their respective realms. The novel’s episodic structure gives it the air of a travel narrative; different episodes depict different places, often connected by overland journeys. Meanwhile, Cather’s reliance on real toponyms and historical references ensures that the novel’s literary geography appears largely realistic, a representation of place that is at once geographically expansive and also deeply personal.7

The literary cartography of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* begins with the assertion of both New Mexico’s geographic remoteness and also the opportunity that accompanies the shifts in regional political borders. In the Prologue, the North American missionary Father Ferrand

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7 For two broader consideration of Cather’s Southwest fiction and its relation to her Great Plains stories, see Rosario Faraudo’s “Willa Cather’s Deep Southwest” (2005) and Judith Fryer’s “Desert, Rock, Shelter, Legend: Willa Cather’s Novels of the Southwest” (1987).
proposes a strategic realignment to his superiors in Rome that will place Santa Fe at the heart of a new Diocese, which Latour will be chosen to lead. The change results primarily from the recent annexation of New Mexico Territory to the United States, but Ferrand argues an additional geographical imperative for the move. Under the existing leadership structure, the aging Archbishop of Durango, Mexico, has been tasked with overseeing the churches of New Mexico, but geography prevents him from doing the job. As Ferrand puts it, “from [Durango] to Sante Fé is a distance of fifteen hundred miles. There are no wagon roads, no canals, no navigable rivers. Trade is carried on by means of pack-mules, over treacherous trails…. The very floor of the world is cracked open into countless canyons and arroyos, fissures in the earth which are sometimes ten feet deep, sometimes a thousand” (7). (This is the same treacherous route from Durango to Santa Fe—the Camino Real—that Latour is traveling when he loses his way and encounters Agua Secreta.) In the annexation of New Mexico by the United States, Ferrand recognizes an opportunity to install a regional office in Santa Fe, effectively taking it from the margins and recognizing it as a new geographical and political center. By prefacing the novel in these terms, Cather makes clear that the text will not only retell the story of this regional remapping but also reinscribe it through the act of literary cartography; the novel provides another kind of map.

Latour and Vaillant assert and reinforce the geographical centrality of Santa Fe through the choice they make during their first year in New Mexico not to venture too far from home. As bishop, Latour is eager to learn the boundaries of the vast area he is tasked with overseeing. He asks Vaillant if anyone knows “the extent of this diocese, or of this territory?” But Vaillant demurs, imploring Latour to maintain a much more local focus: “Don’t begin worrying about the
The image of the small community of Santa Fe as the extent of the Diocese introduces a geographical logic to the novel that is fundamentally expansionist: it begins with the local and grows outward from there. Vaillant’s desire to stay close to Santa Fe also registers as an early reversal of the roles that the men will come to occupy: Latour makes Santa Fe his permanent home and seat of office while sending Vaillant to live at the far-flung edges of the Diocese, from Albuquerque to Tucson to Denver and many points between, whereas Latour embodies the centralization of power, Vaillant becomes a symbol of mission, expansion, and acculturation.

The novel proceeds according to this spatial pattern, with early episodes detailing trips to destinations in the region and later ones radiating farther out. Yet even as the priests become more and more acquainted with the communities and terrain of Central New Mexico, they are troubled by the persistent sense that they will never understand the place in its entirety. Latour, in particular, is unnerved by his lack of local place knowledge, especially when he returns from a long trip eastward across the continent to Washington, D.C., and back. He longs to experience for himself the local places he has so far only heard about: “His great diocese was still an

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8 The measurement of three days’ journey from Santa Fe by mule offers a decent approximation of Central New Mexico as a region. If Cather’s later assumption is correct, that the journey from Santa Fe to Taos takes two days, a distance of seventy miles according to Google Maps, then Vallaint is proposing an initial boundary of roughly one hundred miles in all directions. Such an area would include the majority of pueblos along the Rio Grande, including Albuquerque.

9 With its logic of expansion, Archbishop functions in a way that is opposite of Richard Wright’s Native Son, which, I argue, proceeds according to a logic of spatial enclosure.

10 Early on, Vaillant is described as “The wiry little priest whose life was to be a succession of mountain ranges, pathless deserts, yawning canyons and swollen rivers, who was to carry the Cross into territories yet unknown and unnamed, who would wear down mules and horses and scouts and stagedrivers…” (41).
unimaginable mystery to him. He was eager to be abroad in it, to know his people; to escape for a little from the cares of building and founding, and to go westward among the old isolated Indian missions; Santo Domingo, breeder of horses; Isleta, whitened with gypsum; Laguna, of wide pastures; and finally, cloud-set Acoma” (81). In this way, Cather simultaneously situates the region of Central New Mexico according to two competing geographical frameworks. On the one hand, through Cather’s setting choices, the novel upholds the small villages of the region as the most desirable places to know, thereby asserting region as the primary unit of discovery. Yet at the same time, this territory is portrayed as being at the edge of the American Frontier, the object of nineteenth-century westward expansionism.11 Despite Latour’s having traveled two different versions of the American pioneer journey from St. Louis, Missouri,12 he nevertheless desires “to go westward” among these regional communities. By the end of Latour’s life, in the late 1880s, the “Great Diocese” of New Mexico has grown to include Arizona and Colorado, with Santa Fe firmly at the political center, thus fulfilling the novel’s earlier geographical prophecy.13

11 This latter image of New Mexico as American West is reinforced through Cather’s portrayal of Kit Carson, the historical surveyor, soldier, and frontiersman who appears as a character in the novel and becomes a friend of the priests. For Cather, Carson, who has traveled all the way to California, is the quintessential American explorer and therefore a representative of geographical knowledge. The novel posits that at the time of Latour’s move to New Mexico, “The great country of desert and mountain ranges between Santa Fe and the Pacific coast was not yet mapped or charted; the most reliable map of it was in Kit Carson’s brain” (76).

12 When he first goes to New Mexico, Latour is advised to go from Saint Louis “down the river to New Orleans, thence by boat to Galveston, across Texas to San Antonio, and to wind up into New Mexico along the Rio Grande valley” (20–21). He later travels to once to Washington and once to Rome, returning both times via Pittsburgh, Saint Louis, Independence, and the Santa Fe Trail (81, 158).

13 In the Prologue, Father Ferrand proclaims to the archbishops: “Here [in Rome] you can scarcely understand what it means that the United States has annexed that enormous territory which was the cradle of the Faith in the New World. The vicariate of New Mexico will be in a few years raised to an Episcopal
Through its logic of expansion, *Archbishop* recapitulates the twin missions of the Catholic Church and the United States government of converting residents to believers and citizens, respectively. With 1850 as its starting point, the novel can’t help but tell the story of Central New Mexico becoming American. Yet the underlying message is that many established Native American and Hispano pueblo communities fail to or refuse to change with the times. Toward the end of his life, Latour admires the stolidity of these communities while discounting their traditions and denouncing their ideological inflexibility: “His great diocese was still a heathen country. The Indians travelled their old road of fear and darkness, battling with evil omens and ancient shadows. The Mexicans were children who played with their religion” (211).\(^\text{14}\) His final analysis is that “his diocese changed little except in boundaries,” a description that also seems to fit his assessment of Central New Mexico as a region, in spite of increased United States and Roman Catholic influence. In the novel’s most blatant colonialist statement, Latour writes that “The Church can do more than the Fort to make these poor Mexicans ‘good Americans.’ And it is for the people’s good; there is no other way in which they can better their condition” (35–36). Vaillant sees his fundamental mission as “saving souls,” a job that goes hand-in-hand with his life in the saddle, always expanding the borders of the Diocese (243). Both the priests and their mission are portrayed sympathetically, despite the associations with the history of colonization in New Mexico. With the probable exception of a certain tyrant priest at Acoma, Latour looks upon his Spanish forbears, the Franciscan missionaries of the 16\(^{\text{th}}\) and 17\(^{\text{th}}\) See, with jurisdiction over a country larger than Central and Western Europe, barring Russia. The Bishop of that See will direct the beginnings of momentous things” (6).

\(^{14}\) In Latour’s assessment of these groups he tends also to essentialize them: “The Mexicans were always Mexicans, the Indians were always Indians” (284).
centuries, with unabashed admiration and sees himself as part of a second wave of Catholic
evangelism.15 Cather even lets Kit Carson off the hook for his role in the violent expulsion of the
Navajo from their sacred lands.16 A postcolonial novel this is not.17

Rather, in Death Comes for the Archbishop, Cather effectively places human settlement
in an explicitly ecospatial context, considering both geographical and ecological factors as
instigators of spatial development. Much of the novel takes place outdoors, as Latour and
Vaillant journey from one village to another. This emphasis on routes and topography results in a
narrative that is strongly rooted in place. Cather offers descriptions of many of the villages across
the region and keeps such a careful catalogue of place names that parts of the novel read like an
index of an atlas,18 with only one or two names fictionalized (“Agua Secreta”) or apparently
mistaken (“Costella Valley”).19 Many, if not most, toponyms are accompanied by a brief and

15 Cather describes Latour’s admiration thus: “…[T]he Spanish Fathers who came up to Zuñi, then went
north to the Navajos, west to the Hopis, east to all the pueblos scattered between Albuquerque and Taos,
they came into a hostile country, carrying little provisionment but their breviary and crucifix…. [I]n the
alkali deserts the water holes were poisonous, and the vegetation offered nothing to a starving man.
Everything was dry, prickly, sharp…. Those early missionaries threw themselves naked upon the hard
heart of a country that was calculated to try the endurance of giants” (275–6).

16 For his role in the expulsion of the Navajo, Carson is portrayed as merely “misguided”: “Carson was a
soldier under orders, and he did a soldier’s brutal work” (291).

17 As Joseph R. Urgo argues, the global dimension in Cather is at least as important as the local: “What
distinguishes Cather in [One of Ours and Archbishop] is that she takes empire as a political fact and
depicts life within the context created by that historical contingency. The scope of her literary vision,
while often grounded in very specific places, is consistently global in its projection of a spatialized and
dynamic conception of history” (43).

18 At times Cather lists toponyms as an effective rhetorical strategy, connoting the friars’ broad coverage
of the territory. So it is with her description of Vallaint’s travels in Colorado in his homemade wagon:
“Creede, Durango, Silver City, Central City, over the Continental Divide into Utah—his strange
Episcopal carriage was known throughout that rugged granite world” 255
evocative description. The “Indian pueblo” of Santo Domingo, for example, is described as “a large and prosperous pueblo, set among clean sand-hills, with its rich irrigated farm lands lying just below, in the valley of the Rio Grande” (53). Arroyo Hondo, which Vaillant loves to visit, is “a sunken world of green fields and gardens, with a pink adobe town, at the bottom of this great ditch” (164). In the latter case, Cather even makes an overt cartographic comparison, likening the landscape to the kind of map that might be used to represent it: “How often [Vaillant] had ridden over there on fine days in summer, or in early spring, before the green was out, when the whole country was pink and blue and yellow, like a coloured map” (164). Here and elsewhere in the novel, Cather seems to grasp that writing is a kind of cartography, that she is using the story of Latour and Vaillant to render the exotic environments of Central New Mexico for her readers.

Within this framework, one of the fundamental questions underlying the priest’s travels is, “How did these communities come to be in this seemingly hostile place?” To answer this implied question, at various moments Cather includes some detail that puts human activities in an overtly environmental context. For instance, the episode detailing Latour’s fortunate discovery of Agua Secreta contains a message about the kind of spatial development that characterizes desert places like New Mexico. Once Latour has recovered from his journey, he begins to investigate the town’s surroundings, looking for clues about its mysterious existence. How did it come to be here? The answer, he realizes, has everything to do with water access:

19 At one point the novel refers to an attack in the Costella Valley (156), but no such place seems to exist. However, this could be a spelling error, as there is a town named “Costilla” on the Rio Grande near the Colorado state border, as well as a Costilla Creek just to the southeast of it, which drains to the Rio Grande.
About a mile above the village he came upon the waterhead, a spring overhung by the sharp-leafed variety of cottonwood called water willow. All about it crowded the oven-shaped hills—nothing to hint of water until it rose miraculously out of the parched and thirsty sea of sand. Some subterranean stream found an outlet here, was released from darkness. The result was grass and trees and flowers and human life; household order and hearths from which the smoke of burning piñon logs rose like incense to Heaven. (31)

In this passage, Cather recognizes the role of natural resources (particularly water) in determining human settlement patterns. The stream gives life to the plants and animals, but also to the people and the town itself; Cather’s description of Agua Secreta (Latour’s “Bishopric in miniature”) highlights this causal relationship, subtly arguing for the ecological impetus for human spatial development. The description also aligns well with the historical record. As Frank Wozniak points out, “When Americans occupied New Mexico in 1846, they found a largely agrarian society that was concentrated in the Rio Grande Valley and depended for its survival upon irrigation agriculture” (63). The region’s development, in other words, was largely dependent on the water access that made subsistence possible in formidable places like the one Cather describes.

A similar logic is at play in one of Cather’s descriptions of Vaillant’s ceaseless journeying among formidable landscapes in his customized wagon. Vaillant is known for seeking out a mountain path where none exists, and his reasoning follows from the geographical principle that, especially in the mountains, humans and (other) animals often create paths alongside watercourses. Indeed, Vaillant has been known to claim that “the mountain torrents were the first road builders, and that wherever they found a way, he could find one” (256). In both cases, water and topography determine human use and development of the land, whether for settlement or transportation.
By some contrast, Cather presents the case of Acoma Pueblo as a settlement that, while certainly defined by the stark topography of its clifftop position, developed for more cultural reasons—defense from enemies. It is Jacinto, Latour’s Pecos Puebloan guide, who introduces this hypothesis. He argues that “A man can do whole lot when they hunt him day and night like an animal. Navajos on the north, Apaches on the south; the Acoma run up to a rock to be safe” (96–97). Acoma’s position, by this account, is based not primarily on the accessibility of water or food—most of which must be harvested in the valley below—but on the natural protection of the steep cliffs: community defense as natural resource.20

Such depictions are relevant because human spatial development—why and how people live where they live—is the most prevalent environmental issue Archbishop raises. By depicting decades of journeys by Latour and Vaillant from their base in Santa Fe, the novel narrates a progression in the priests’ attitudes toward the region that accords with their accumulated knowledge; the unknown territory becomes known, the ostensibly empty lands become settled, and a foreign country becomes home. At the end of his life, Latour feels that he has “accomplished an historic period”: “Yes, he had come with the buffalo, and he had lived to see railway trains running into Santa Fe” (271). But beyond this and other accomplishments—the establishment of a Diocese, some shrewd political maneuvering, and the construction of a fine cathedral made from local stone21—Latour also manages to make New Mexico his home,

20 The first road up the Acoma mesa was built just two years after the publication of Archbishop.

21 In planning the Santa Fe cathedral, Latour remembers the words of a French architect friend and puts them into practice: “‘Setting,’ Molny used to tell Father Latour, ‘is accident. Either a building is a part of a place, or it is not. Once that kinship is there, time will only make it stronger’” (270). For Latour, the final product has proven him right: “How it was of the South, that church, how it sounded the note of the South!” (269).
maintaining a country estate four miles north of Santa Fe, near Tesuque pueblo. Indeed, his connection to the place is so strong that he chooses to remain there rather than return to France in retirement, as he always intended. He states unequivocally, “Je voudrais mourir á Santa Fe” (“I would like to die in Santa Fe”) (267), and so he does. In effect, he becomes a naturalized citizen of New Mexico, a representative of the kind of cultural work the Catholic priests and the Americans like Kit Carson were sent there to do.

Cather’s portrait of Latour is nuanced in the sense that he is a convenient symbol of colonization (sent by far-off governments at the time of American colonization) yet he becomes a resident of New Mexico, choosing it as his home and his sphere. He is a sympathetic character, in other words, only to the extent that readers identify with his religious/colonial mission or his personal achievements, both of which hinge on interpreting his relationship to the place he calls home. The ambiguity of Latour’s character is underscored by his horticultural practices. On his country estate, he cultivates cherries, apricots, quinces, pears, and vegetables, but he also domesticates and develops native wildflowers. He colonizes the land, in other words, with exotic species while also cultivating native wildflowers; he effectively adapts the land for

22 While the novel’s geographical logic is expansionist, Latour’s progression is decidedly inward. Vaillant seems to be his only true friend, and his relationship successes tend to be either politically or financially motivated. Cather’s depiction of this insular figure leaves open questions about the nature of his relationship to existing communities in the Crossroads region.

23 Vaillant, by contrast, dies in Denver, where he has been working to expand the edges of the Diocese.

24 In a chapter on Cather, Alan Williamson argues that Latour’s decision to make New Mexico his home signals a broader acceptance of his Americanness as well as his westernness, and that this process aligns him with other Cather characters and with Cather herself (Westernness: A Meditation, 2006). Joseph Urgo goes so far as to call this the “Cather thesis”: “The idea of America is accomplished through migration from one place to another, intellectually, physically, spiritually; Archbishop Latour is its patron saint” (50).
his own gustatory and aesthetic pleasure. In this latter sense, he subverts his initial impression of New Mexico’s incompleteness and makes his property “into a landscape” (95). While it is difficult to argue against these kinds of improvements, which make dwelling in Central New Mexico more livable and sustainable, such practices also reinforce Latour’s colonial mindset.

At the end of the novel, Latour seems confident in his knowledge of the territory and its communities. To a large extent, his life’s work has been to familiarize himself with Central New Mexico—its landscapes and its cultures. To that end, any new priests that arrive from France for training in Santa Fe must receive instruction “in Spanish, in the topography of the Diocese, in the character and traditions of the different pueblos” (265). This training is, in effect, an orientation to the place that is also the business of the novel. In another instance, Cather emphasizes the extent to which Latour’s career has been focused on comprehending the place, as well as a more metafictional issue—the role of writing in representing place for readers. Here the narrator relates the story of Latour’s sister, who works as a nun in France, reading a letter from Latour to her own protégées. One of these young women responds most emphatically to the correspondence, which holds a certain representational power:

“Look,” she said, “after the Mother has read us one of those letters from her brother, I come and stand in this alcove and look up our little street with its one lamp, and just beyond the turn there, is New Mexico; all that he has written us of those red deserts and blue mountains, the great plains and herds of bison, and the canyons more profound than our deepest mountain gorges. I can feel that I am there, my heart beats faster, and it seems but a moment until the reti ring-bell cuts short my dreams.” (181–182)

This is one of the strongest arguments for what good place writing can do—create an image for the reader that simulates what E.V. Walter calls the physique and morale of a place—and this is
one of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*’s primary objectives. Through the experiences of Latour and Vaillant, Cather maps Central New Mexico, the center of the “Great Diocese,” making it comprehensible to an outside audience. She draws upon both natural and cultural history while presenting the processes of human settlement and spatial development in an environmental context. In so doing, Cather also implicitly puts her novel in conversation with other fictional and nonfictional representations of the region, providing a compelling literary basis for future geocritical and ecocritical projects.

*Ceremony*

Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* offers a counterpoint and complement to Cather’s pioneer vision of Central New Mexico. *Ceremony* presents a segment of the same territory from a Native American perspective, placing issues of natural resources, land ownership, and cultural heritage within a realistic, postcolonial geography. The novel is a healing story, with the main character, Tayo, progressing from trauma and darkness to healing and enlightenment by way of a spiritual and physical journey into and through the lands around Laguna. Silko’s literary cartography provides a deliberate contrast to Cather’s vision, tracking the ways in which an explicitly modern, Anglo-American geography (embodied in the highway and the uranium mine) literally and figuratively cuts across the ancestral lands of the Pueblo peoples. Tayo traverses these territories with a mix of trepidation and resolve, gradually coming to an understanding of the ways Native-white conflicts have been irrevocably mapped onto the territory.

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25 I don’t mean to assert that there is one monolithic Native American, Pueblo, or even Laguna perspective; with its exploration of Tayo’s biraciality and the tensions between Pueblo and non-Pueblo “Indians,” the novel itself reminds us that cultural identity is multifaceted. On the contrary, I am suggesting that our understanding of the Crossroads region would be incomplete without an examination of Native communities and their stories, of which *Ceremony* serves as an important example.
Ceremony’s literary cartography centers on Laguna, the pueblo and surrounding tribal reservation bordering Acoma and located some forty miles due west of Albuquerque on the San Jose River. Laguna lies in the Rio Grande watershed, just to the east of the Continental Divide. Throughout the novel, Silko uses real toponyms to ground her narrative in place. The named sites of greatest importance include the reservation (and its boundary fences), the nearby volcano most commonly known as Mount Taylor, and the numerous towns along the now-legendary (and mostly extinct) United States Highway 66, which runs alongside the river and the train tracks through the heart of Laguna. Such place names orient the reader to real places in the world, opening the text to greater geographical and historical inquiry.

Into this realistic geography Silko introduces a powerful dichotomy that plays out in explicitly spatial terms: she associates the highway with white culture and values, while the ancestral lands through which it passes are strongly correlated with Native culture and values. Tayo and his friends, most of them American military veterans, travel either east to Albuquerque or west to Gallup to take advantage of the taverns that do not exist on the “dry” reservation lands. This raucous pastime is called “going up the line”: just past the reservation border to the west, “the bars were built one after the other alongside 66, beginning at Budville and extending six or seven miles past San Fidel to the Whiting Brothers’ station near McCartys” (24). In Silko’s telling, this spatial development has contributed to the poverty and alcoholism affecting so many Native people. The epitome of this is the town of Gallup, the largest city on the New Mexico-Arizona border. When he visits, Tayo sees people from many of the Pueblo communities—Navajo, Hopi, Zuni, and Laguna—who are stuck in Gallup, often homeless and jobless, “hungry and dirty and broke” (115). “They walked like survivors,” he observes, “with
dull vacant eyes, their fists clutching the coins he’d thrown to them” (115). Highway 66 is the only route to the short-term “kicks” (as the song has it\(^\text{26}\)) or long-term misery awaiting Native people in Gallup.\(^\text{27}\) As Alan Williamson explains, in *Ceremony*, Route 66 “is more than a temptation to Indians to get drunk and lose their souls and their heritage. It is the epitome of the superficiality and destructiveness of Euro-American culture—a strip of speed, waste, and glitter laid down across the ‘stolen’ land” (91). It is no coincidence, then, that Tayo’s gradual rejection of the destructive behaviors associated with going “up the line” coincides with an embrace of Native history and values borne of experiences in the highlands and backroads of the reservation, many of which occur on foot and along a perpendicular, north-south axis. The highway is a destructive force in Native lives, while the outlying areas become, for Tayo at least, ultimately restorative. The novel’s critique of white colonialism in the Southwest is unsparing, and it is based, to some extent, upon Silko’s use of real place names that tie the narrative to New Mexico’s history.

To that end, the novel also recognizes the role of geographic naming in colonization and the impact that renaming has on Native peoples. In describing the tension between Tayo’s mother and her family, the narrator speaks of a time long ago when all people in the community “shared the same consciousness” (68), claiming that such unity was broken with the arrival of the Europeans and their language(s): “…the names of the rivers, the hills, the names of the animals and plants—all of creation suddenly had two names: an Indian name and a white name” (68). In

\(^{26}\) The song was written by Bobby Troup and first recorded by Nat King Cole’s trio in 1946 (Route 66 News).

\(^{27}\) Tayo is old enough to remember when the highway was constructed, and he recalls specifically “how the white men who were building the new highway through Laguna had pointed at him” because of his lighter complexion, mocking his mixed-race parentage (57).
this particular instance, such renaming is cited as the main source of the cultural confusion felt within Native communities. Where unity once was possible, now the disparate feelings among individuals “were twisted, tangled roots, and all the names for the source of this growth were buried under English words, out of reach” (69). For Silko, this gradual destruction of Native language(s) and culture(s) can be traced back to the systematic renaming of environmental features. It is no coincidence that when Tayo visits with the medicine man, Ku’oosh, he has trouble understanding much of the old man’s story; he must “strain to catch the meaning, dense with place names he had never heard” (34). Yet rather than recover a sense of Laguna linguistic geography—the cone-shaped Mount Taylor, or Tse-pi’na in Laguna, is the only place given two names in the novel (87)—Silko embraces non-Indigenous toponyms in order to ground the novel in a historical reality familiar to modern readers. (With respect to geographic location, a novel containing only Laguna toponyms would have a decidedly disorienting effect on the reader.)

Meanwhile, several environmental issues prove integral to how the novel functions. The first is drought, which poses an existential challenge to the Laguna community. Much of the local economy is based on ranching, and from the novel’s outset, a severe drought has required people to relocate their livestock in hopes of ensuring their survival. This is the case with Tayo’s

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28 To a lesser extent, Cather also raises the naming issue in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, coincidentally at one of two or three times when Father Latour is traveling near or through Laguna (90, 234). On the way to Acoma, Jacinto, Latour’s guide, articulates frustration with colonial naming rituals. When Latour asks about the name of a geographical feature, Jacinto claims that he doesn’t know any of the officially recognized names but only the Indian names. He then bursts out angrily when Latour expresses appreciation for the name, declaring sarcastically, “Oh, Indians have nice names too!” (90).

29 This volcano is sacred to the Navajo, Laguna, and Acoma peoples. It was named after U.S. President Zachary Taylor in 1849, just one year after the U.S. annexed the territory from Mexico (Julyan 348).
family, who move their cattle and sheep to an area called “Montaño” until the drought subsides or the new location is overgrazed.³⁰ Tayo’s confused mental state—he is recovering from his experiences during the war—makes him feel that the drought is somehow his own fault. (While stuck in the jungle during the war, he had prayed for rain to stop, so he feels he has cursed New Mexico by mistake.) Alternative explanations for the drought come from the poems about Laguna mythology (13, 49, 173). But the novel also provides a scientific explanation, the fact that drought periods in the high desert are relatively common; the narrator alludes to drought conditions after the First World War (10). Also significant are the special breed of cattle that Tayo’s uncle bought and had stolen. These cattle are essentially drought-resistant, “descendants of generations of desert cattle, born in dry sand and scrubby mesquite, where they hunted water the way desert antelope did” (74),³¹ and Tayo’s mission to rescue them becomes one of the novel’s central events. By the end of the novel, the drought is lifting, which connects it symbolically to Tayo’s trauma and recovery. Drought is an essential component of Silko’s restorative vision in the novel, with Tayo’s wellness seemingly tied to that of the land he inhabits.

³⁰ Montaño is described as somewhere southwest of Tayo’s house in Laguna (24), but it does not appear on present-day maps of New Mexico. However, Bernabé Montañó was the name of an eighteenth-century land grant from the Spanish government, which J.J. Bowden places about twenty miles west of Albuquerque on the Rio Puerco, on land that is now part of the Laguna Reservation. It is also the surname of Ts’eh, the mysterious woman who grows close to Tayo and helps him save Josiah’s cattle (223).

³¹ Interestingly, Josiah’s cattle are bred for their adaptation to local conditions and are presented as native, in contrast with the “white-face” Herefords, which are more common in the region (75). Among their curious characteristics is the propensity to run south, which is figured as an atavistic instinct to return to Mexico, as though Mexico somehow remains in their blood (79, 197).
A second and even more fundamental environmental issue in the novel is the ownership and control of the land. *Ceremony* frequently invokes the complex history of ownership in Central New Mexico, including European colonization, the Spanish-Mexican land grant system, and further partitioning by the United States and various corporate interests. Whereas *Death Comes for the Archbishop* takes ownership issues for granted (what was Mexican is now American), *Ceremony* presents them as a contentious historical and ongoing issue, especially for Native peoples. The wise old Navajo man, Betonie, captures the essential dynamics here, saying that “Indians wake up every morning of their lives to see the land which was stolen, still there, within reach, its theft being flaunted” (127). Most of the people in Tayo’s family and community are ranchers, an occupation that is dependent on a degree of physical mobility. However, barbed-wire fences have been erected all across the region, restricting the movement of people and animals except within the boundaries they govern themselves, which on the Laguna reservation is a relatively small area, at least by historical comparison. We see this particularly in Tayo’s mission to recover Josiah’s cattle, when he must cut through a large barbed-wire fence to track them down and recapture them. When Tayo is caught and assaulted by the white men hired to guard these property lines for the wealthy landowner, one of them utters the novel’s most incisive and ironic statement on the issue: “These goddamn Indians got to learn whose property this is!” (202).

32 As the first Western system of “ownership” in North America, the Imperial Spanish land grant program undergirds much of the history and literature of the North American Southwest—from New Mexico’s “Crossroads” region to California’s “Steinbeck Country”—and the differing cultural perspectives on it are telling. While Tayo seems to consider the land grants negatively, as the first inroads of colonialism on Pueblo lands, the Chicana/o families in *So Far from God* celebrate the land grants as the basis of their inheritance and worry over growing threats to their land claims. Meanwhile, for Adam Trask, in *East of Eden*, his Salinas Valley property’s history as the Sanchez grant is a matter of vague nostalgia, and he revels in the vestiges of Spanish history, from the adobe house to the wooden irrigation pipes.
The dominant symbol of territorial conflict is Mount Taylor, a traditional hunting ground northwest of Laguna and a sacred place in Laguna spirituality that nevertheless lies outside the boundaries of the modern reservation. Silko effectively uses the mountain and the land surrounding it to tell a version of the region’s environmental history. As the narrator recounts, “All but a small part of the mountain had been taken. The reservation boundary included only a canyon above Encinal and a few miles of timber on the plateau. The rest of the land was taken by the National Forest and by the state which later sold it to white ranchers who came from Texas in the early 1900s” (185). In Silko’s telling, control and management of the mountain was seized from Native peoples by a combination of state agencies, in collusion with private hunting and logging corporations and wealthy individuals, whereby the high country was fenced off and access to its unique natural and cultural resources heavily restricted. Yet despite this lack of control, Native people still lay claim to the mountain. As Betonie explains, the white people “only fool themselves when they think it is theirs. The deeds and papers don’t mean anything. It is the people who belong to the mountain” (128). Tayo reinforces this philosophy through his successful attempt to cut through the white men’s fence and retrieve his uncle’s stolen cattle. This righteous act of trespass is a personal and symbolic victory for Tayo and his community, a defining moment in the novel that takes place against the backdrop of environmental wrongdoing that has been perpetrated against the Laguna people for centuries.

If Silko uses the drought to mirror Tayo’s personal and cultural experiences and the land ownership issue to drive the narrative forward, she uses a third environmental issue—uranium

33 Incidentally, Father Latour twice passes through the highlands north of Laguna in Death Comes for the Archbishop (90, 234).
mining—to conclude the novel while wholly redefining Central New Mexico and the Native peoples’ relationship to the land. Toward the end of the novel, a conflict between Tayo and his group of friends escalates. He gets word that Emo, his primary antagonist, has been warning people that Tayo’s wanderings in the rural areas are a sign of a deteriorating mental state, that he poses a threat to the community. Representatives of government agencies are looking for him, apparently in hopes of recommitting him to the mental hospital. After accepting a ride from his friends, Harley and Leroy, into a remote area north of Laguna—“the hills northwest of Cañoncito” (241)—Tayo realizes they have turned against him. He runs away, taking shelter in an abandoned uranium mine. While hiding there, he witnesses Emo torture and kill Harley, and it takes all of Tayo’s courage for him not to emerge and take revenge. For Tayo, this place of personal and environmental violence becomes the key to understanding his entire journey, including the healing ceremony that constitutes the novel’s plot. Tayo seems to know the mine’s history, from the original land grant at Cebolleta to a seizure of property by the New Mexico territorial government, to when the United States government claimed the territory surrounding the mine until its closure in 1945.

For Tayo, the mine becomes a site of insight, a place that helps him make sense of his disparate experiences fighting overseas and his battle of recovery back home. It is there he has a geographical realization, seeing himself as sitting at one corner of a sinister triangle of U.S. nuclear development:

Trinity Site, where they exploded the first atomic bomb, was only three hundred miles to the southeast, at White Sands. And the top-secret laboratories where the bomb had been created were deep in the Jemez Mountains, on land the government took from Cochiti Pueblo: Los Alamos, only a hundred miles northeast of him now, still surrounded by high electric fences and the ponderosa pine and tawny sandrock of the Jemez mountain canyon…. (245–246)
Rethinking regional geography in this way allows Tayo to understand why the voices of Japanese soldiers he fought in the Philippines had merged in his consciousness with Laguna voices: New Mexico had produced the atomic bombs that were dropped on Japan in 1945, the same year the mine was closed. For Tayo, these distant places are connected symbolically by the specter of U.S. nuclear extraction, production, and destruction. Through these insights, Silko effectively redefines Central New Mexico as a place of cultural and environmental exploitation, a Native landscape under outside control.

Figure 23. Uranium Mine Locations in the Grants Mineral Belt, 2009 (USEPA “Mines”)

Without question, mining for uranium and other resources has permanently altered the environment of Central New Mexico, particularly Laguna, along with residents’ physical health and their relationship to the land. Since the mid-twentieth century, great quantities of uranium
have been extracted from Laguna territory, Mount Taylor, and other sites in the region. This area, known as the Grants Uranium Belt, contains two-thirds of U.S. uranium deposits (Matsunaga 68). Just seven miles north of Laguna Pueblo, the Jackpile mining operation converted some of the best farmland on Laguna territory (Wozniak 53) into a primary source of uranium for almost thirty years of the Cold War Era. At over 2,600 acres (USEPA, “Superfund” 3), it included the largest open pit uranium mine in the world (Matsunaga 70). Writing two decades after the mine was opened, however, Silko took some liberties with this history in the novel. The timeline in Ceremony—in which the fictional mine was operational until 1943, when a major flood forced it to close, and guarded until August 1945, when the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan (243)—doesn’t align with the true history of mining in the area. While uranium was first discovered in the Four Corners region on Navajo territory in 1941 and development and testing occurred in New Mexico throughout the 1940s, the uranium that was used to make the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima (nicknamed “Little Boy”) was taken not from New Mexico but from the Belgian Congo (Matsunaga 80). (The “Fat Man” bomb dropped on Nagasaki was made with plutonium.) And the Jackpile mine was not even opened until 1953. Yet, as Aaron DeRosa observes, the author’s placement of the uranium mine a few

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34 The Jackpile site consisted of two open-pit mines and one underground mine (Zehner 3), and was “approximately two miles wide, several miles long, and several hundred feet deep” (Jacobs 42). In a study guide developed for Laguna school children, Philip Sittnick details how the mine was named—perhaps fittingly—for the spot where a mining official named Jack Knaebel vomited during an initial search for uranium there; the next day, when the mine was to be dug, one pilot said he was heading for “Jack’s pile,” and the name stuck (qtd. in Jacobs 49).

35 Unfortunately, even critics such as James Tarter, who writes about uranium and environmental justice in Ceremony, have too eagerly and simplistically equated the novel’s fictional mine with the historical Jackpile mine and even accepted the novel’s premise that Laguna uranium was detonated in Japan (Tarter
years earlier in time arguably lends greater power to the novel’s place-based environmental critique: “Silko’s imagined history depicts a mine closed not by economic forces (plummeting uranium prices) but the result of natural intervention—specifically flooding in an otherwise arid region—and reinforces the connections Silko makes between environment, cultural information, and narrative reinvention” (41). Furthermore, by changing the timeline, Silko was able to draw a more direct connection between the physical, psychological, and environmental traumas afflicted on Native people with similar harms perpetrated elsewhere in the world, effectively arguing that all the world is subject to “Destroyer” culture.

In 1974, while Silko was writing Ceremony from her temporary home in Ketchikan, Alaska, the U.S. government designated the Four Corners region (where New Mexico meets Colorado, Utah, and Arizona) a “National Sacrifice Area” (Tarter 107). This served as recognition from the federal government that the land had been severely contaminated, perhaps 107. While untold numbers of nuclear weapons in the U.S. arsenal undoubtedly contain Jackpile uranium, none have so far been deployed in a military strike.

36 Silko deliberately chose World War II as the basis of Tayo’s experience because of her sense of how much the world changed after the atomic bombs were dropped. She explained in a 1980 interview:

SILKO: The day after the first bomb was detonated, if you want to try to look for a single instance, seems to me the big dividing point for human beings.
INTERVIEWER: Is that why you chose the post World War II era as the setting for Ceremony and not, say, the Korean War, or Viet Nam?
SILKO: Right. Because after that day all human beings, whether you were a Hopi who believed in traditional ways or whether you were a Madison Avenue Lutheran, all human beings faced the same possible destruction. . . . When you can destroy the entire planet and make it uninhabitable for life for thousands and thousands of years, that's a big change. That's a change like never ever before. (qtd. in Nelson 172)

37 As others have pointed out, Silko is careful not to make those she calls “Destroyers” entirely synonymous with white people. One of the primary representatives of destroyer mentality is Emo, a Laguna man. Tayo’s own “mixed-blood” heritage, along with Betonie’s willingness to use items from white culture in his ceremonies, argue against a Native-good/White-bad dichotomy. Most convincing is Betonie’s unequivocal statement to Tayo: “Nothing is that simple…you don’t write off all the white people, just like you don’t trust all the Indians” (128).
beyond repair. The Jackpile site on Laguna territory was a perfect example of this. At the
time that operations finally ceased, in the early 1980s, the mines were described as having pits
“as much as 200 to 300 feet below the adjacent land surface” with “piles of waste rock as much
as 200 feet in height” (Zehner 5). “Reclamation” of the mine (simply covering the mine waste)
was completed by a Laguna construction company between 1986 and 1995, but the site still
poses hazards to water quality and was listed among hundreds of other polluted sites on the
Environmental Protection Agency’s National Priorities List in 2013 (USEPA, “Superfund). Not
only the surface water—already of poor quality due to the alkalinity of springs and soils above
Laguna (Wozniak 52–53)—but also the groundwater has been contaminated with radiation
(Tarter 107), perhaps as clear a case of environmental racism as any situation in the United
States. Nor is Laguna fully in the clear: according to a 2010 report by Virginia McLemore, New
Mexico is second only to Wyoming in terms of future uranium mining potential in the U.S. (38),
and companies have once again begun to explore extraction in the region (39), despite objections
by Native groups such as Laguna and Diné (Navajo) and the continued availability of cheaper,
high-quality uranium abroad (41). In effect, uranium extraction has redefined the region in
mostly unwelcome ways, in spite of any short-term benefits it may have had to local
economies. Silko acknowledges as much in her discussion of the Jackpile Mine in Yellow
Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: “…by its very ugliness and by the violence it does to the
land,” she writes, “the Jackpile Mine insures that, from now on, it too will be included in the vast

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38 Laguna tribal member and environmental advocate Manuel Pino points out that one stipulation of the
Laguna Pueblo’s deal with the Anaconda Mining Company to lease the Jackpile site was that hiring
preference would be given to Laguna members (Jacobs 42). Connie Jacobs estimates that unemployment
on the reservation was around seventy percent after World War II, and the addition of hundreds of jobs
provided enormous benefits to the local economy (42).
body of narratives that makes up the history of the Laguna people and the Pueblo landscape.”

In the same way, Silko’s inclusion of the uranium mine in *Ceremony* makes it a permanent part of the literary geography of Central New Mexico.

In her excellent essay “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” Silko writes, “Our stories cannot be separated from their geographical locations, from actual physical places on the land” (*Yellow* 58). In *Ceremony*, Silko presents her native land as a place in need of healing, a place devastated by “Destroyer” culture, particularly through the spatial practices of the highway, the barbed-wire fence, and the uranium mine. But at the same time, the land is also depicted as a source of healing, with Tayo’s reconnection with the land both process and outcome of his ceremony. In my view, *Ceremony* is the story of a person finding his home in place, a travel narrative that relies on Indigenous knowledge, contemporary place names, and environmental history to suggest that the modern (and Western) separation of humans from the natural world—the result of the “witchery” that has led to the destroyer culture, embodied in the highway and the uranium mine—is not at all tenable.

This is reinforced through one of the novel’s most repeated images (and its only illustration), a pattern of stars that also registers as a map of Tayo’s journey. Betonie first draws the pattern in the sand as a direction for Tayo’s ceremony (152), so when Tayo recognizes the pattern in the northern sky in late September, he knows it is time to embark on his journey to find the cattle. At the end of the novel, immediately after his revelation in the mine, Tayo looks up at the same stars and recognizes yet another connection: “…the pattern of the ceremony was in the stars, and the constellation formed a map of the mountains in the directions he had gone for the ceremony. For each star there was a night and a place; this was the last night and the last place,
when the darkness of night and the light of day were balanced” (247). It is fitting that Tayo’s physical and spiritual journey, written for him in the stars, should also be considered in cartographical terms. Just as the stars offer Tayo direction in space and time, they also confirm his proper location on the most important night of his life, when he reconciles his experiences through a rejection of violence and an acceptance of place-based physical and cultural endurance. This star-map also confirms the novel’s role as literary cartography, in mapping a part of Central New Mexico: the map of Tayo’s journey is contained in the stars, in the landscape, and also in the text, the written traces of his ceremony.

*So Far from God*

To the Euro-American perspective provided by Cather in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and the Puebloan perspective of Silko’s *Ceremony*, we can now add a Chicana perspective on Central New Mexico with Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*. This novel centers on the life of Sofia and her four adult daughters, Esperanza, Caridad, Fe, and Loca, an eighth-generation Hispanic-American family living the Rio Grande Valley in the 1980s and 1990s. An essentially tragic novel written in a largely comic voice, *So Far from God* expertly intertwines issues of place, identity, Southwestern Hispanic culture, and environmental justice. If *Archbishop*’s geographic center is the diocesan seat at Santa Fe and *Ceremony*’s is Laguna Pueblo, then the heart of *So Far from God* is the Rio Abajo region along the Rio Grande south of Albuquerque, particularly a town called Tome. (On a map, the three towns form a triangular

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39 Robert Nelson uses Carl Jung’s discussion of “constellation” as a psychological term, noting a resonance with the way that Silko deploys the star imagery in the novel: “In both Jung's sense of the term and in Silko's use of star imagery, ‘constellation’ refers not merely to a quantity—a certain number of stars or other images all given a singular, categorizing label—but also, and more importantly, to an emerging event, the event or process of constellation” (140).
constellation with Albuquerque at the center: Santa Fe sixty-five miles to the northeast, Laguna fifty miles west, and Tome twenty-five miles south.) Yet this novel also operates primarily within a regional framework that overlaps with many of the places mentioned in the other two novels, such as Acoma Pueblo, Albuquerque, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and so on. And like the other two novels, So Far from God introduces new environmental and cultural issues—particularly land ownership, subsistence agriculture, chemical production, and surface water pollution—that add to our understanding of the region’s environmental history and literary geography. Rather than attempt to deal comprehensively with the myriad literary and social issues at stake in this novel, I simply wish to point out a few of the ways in which, as a novel of place, this text maps Central New Mexico from a Chicana perspective, asserting a unique understanding of the region’s cultural and environmental identity that supplements the perspectives found in Ceremony, Death Comes for the Archbishop, and other literary and artistic representations of New Mexico.

The novel’s provocative title introduces both cultural and geographical dimensions to the story and its regional setting. The title apparently comes from a fragmentary quotation attributed to Porfirio Diaz, the dictator of Mexico during the Mexican civil war, which appears as an epigraph to the novel: “So far from God—So near the United States” (15). In both a cultural and a geographic sense, this epigraph effectively plays on the novel’s setting in New Mexico and

40 Each novel also transcends the region in a different way, from Latour’s European origins and a diocese that reaches Arizona and Colorado in Archbishop, and Tayo’s experiences in the Philippines and Los Angeles, to Esperanza’s work and eventual capture in the Middle East, to name a few examples. In each case, however, New Mexico provides the primary setting.

41 Such representations might include such varied works as Georgia O’Keefe’s landscape paintings and, more recently, the television series Breaking Bad, which is set in greater Albuquerque.
interrogates the meaning of that placement. It raises questions about, among other things, the social dimension of place (Is the region defined more by its religious devotion or by some perceived distance from the Creator?) and political and cultural ownership (Is this formerly Spanish and Mexican territory still culturally Hispanic? Can it be both part of and yet “so near” the United States?). A second in-text reference to the title occurs one-third of the way through the book and reinforces the centrality of the Chicana/o community with respect to the region’s identity. Here Castillo describes the process of making a bulto, an object used in Catholic ceremonies. When the character Francisco and his uncle work together to create a bulto in the Chicano tradition, she writes that “they labored with the natural elements, sun, air, and earth and prayed all the while as they worked together in silence—like their Spanish ancestors had done for nearly three hundred years on that strange land they felt was so far from God” (101–102). In this way, Castillo stakes a historical and religious claim for the Chicano community’s presence in Central New Mexico while aligning their cultural practices with the natural surroundings of the region. The culture and the place have become inseparable.

In an excerpt of her review of So Far from God cited in the paperback copy, the Chicana novelist Sandra Cisneros called it “a novel roaring down Interstate 25 at one hundred and fifteen miles an hour.” The description is apt, for it captures both the novel’s frenetic tone and its regional specificity—Interstate 25 is the route that follows the old Camino Real along the Rio Grande from Albuquerque through Tome to El Paso, Texas, the same route that Father Latour travels to Mexico in Archbishop—not to mention Castillo’s conviction that life is “like a freeway” (“You have a million variations and exits, like on the freeway, where you can keep making choices or redoing them.”) (qtd. in Platt 78). Like Cather and Silko, Castillo uses real
toponyms to ground her novel in the region of Central New Mexico. While the central setting of *So Far from God* is Sofia’s home in Tome, a fourth-generation house “by the ditch at the end of the road” (20), the novel’s geography is broad, asserted through Castillo’s frequent references to particular places in the region. The novel centers on New Mexico’s historic Rio Abajo region—particularly the area south of Albuquerque in today’s Valencia County—with occasional forays into the surrounding mountains and settlements, such as the towns of Chimayo, Taos, and Santa Fe.

Castillo’s selection of the obscure agricultural community of Tome as the novel’s central setting enhances its historical resonance. Tome is an unincorporated population center that, with a population of 1,867 in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau), has not grown substantially since its inception in 1739 (Wozniak 30). With its founding via Spanish land grant prior to the American Revolutionary War, Tome not only is “so far from the United States” but actually predates it. Historically, Tome had some additional geographical significance due to its position along the Rio Grande, south of the watershed’s more populous settlements like Albuquerque and Santa Fe. According to historian Frank Wozniak, a Spanish bishop named Tamaron declared in 1760 that Tome was a place of “extensive farmlands” and the first community one encountered

42 As Robert Hixson Julyan notes in *Place Names of New Mexico*, the names Rio Abajo and Rio Arriba were adopted almost as soon as the Spanish settled in Central New Mexico. While a border between the two areas was never formalized, Julyan asserts that La Bajada Mesa, located nineteen miles southwest of Santa Fe on the old Camino Real, now effectively serves that purpose (292).

43 The narrator confirms this, asserting that “Tome wasn’t even an incorporated village like Los Lunas or Belen” (137).

44 Tome was evidently named after the land’s original occupier, a man named Tomé Dominguez. According to Wozniak, settlers moved there after complaining of a “lack of land and water near Albuquerque” (30).
in the Rio Abajo region when traveling north from El Paso along the *Camino Real* (30). By 1776, Tome boasted a population of over seven hundred, with residents living “in scattered ranchos and irrigating their fields with water diverted in ditches” from the Rio Grande (Wozniak 60–61). As Wozniak demonstrates, Spanish irrigation methods are what made settlement and agricultural subsistence possible along that desert river. But this necessary proximity comes with distinct disadvantages as well; Tome was inundated with floodwaters in 1884, and in 1905 it was completely washed away (Wozniak 84). While Castillo’s reasons for choosing Tome are unclear, this settlement fits the profile of a small, rural, and predominantly Chicana/o community in the Rio Abajo region.

On its surface, *So Far from God* does not seem to be a very ecospatial novel. In contrast to *Ceremony* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, descriptions of the natural world are rare in this book. With its entertaining, code-switching, unnamed first-person narrator, the novel mentions dozens of places while only infrequently depicting them; the narrator is much more interested in the characters than in the setting. Yet the frequency of these geographic references means the narrative is nevertheless precisely emplaced, and the events, while not always realistic, are striking enough to make them an unforgettable part of Central New Mexico’s

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45 Wozniak points out that the land grants tied to Tome and nearby Belen had secondary settlements that reached as far south as Sabinal and “remained the southermost extent of Spanish settlement in the upper Rio Grande Valley until the early nineteenth century” (30-31).

46 Although the Pueblan peoples of the region have long been reputed to have developed irrigation systems of their own, Wozniak suggests there is no archaeological evidence of pre-colonial ditches or other irrigation structures, arguing that early Native American water management practices are better understood as “water or moisture conservation techniques” than “water diversion systems” (6). In fact, he argues, the Spanish “imposed on the Pueblo Indians an irreversible reliance on irrigation agriculture” that “irretrievably undermined and altered traditional Puebloan subsistence systems and lifeways” (1). For more on this, see Sylvia Rodriguez’s *Acequia: Water Sharing, Sanctity, and Place* (2006).
literary geography. Indeed, Castillo’s consistent use of toponyms, combined with the environmental history she tells, have already established *So Far from God* as a key text of American environmental literature and environmental justice literature in particular.

Place names in *So Far from God* are as profuse as they are disconnected. The sheer number of toponymic references suggests that place is important to the narrator (and, therefore, to the text). Practically every story she tells is accompanied by one or more geographic cues. At the beginning of the novel, Sofia’s homestead, the primary setting, is simply described as being located in Tome “by the ditch at the end of the road” (20)—one of several gestures toward the irrigation infrastructure upon which the agricultural community depends. Meanwhile, Caridad lives in a trailer complex “in the heart of the South Valley in Albuquerque” (43), and Esperanza resides for a while in a house in Albuquerque’s affluent Northeast Heights (26). Such toponyms are sprinkled throughout the narrative, rarely standing on their own in terms of meaningful description but nearly always appearing as pertinent details in some unbelievable story in the lives of Sofia’s family members. So, for example, when Caridad disappears for a year without a trace, the narrator tells how the search party, led by Caridad’s father, Domingo, “spread themselves out throughout the state posse-style”: “But where could she be? Not in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Taos, or any of the villages where they put out the word. They asked the peoples from the pueblos all the way from Taos to Zuñi to see if she had turned up on any of the reservations. But there was no sign of her no place” (83–84). Caridad, who has “no sense of direction and could not read a map,” is eventually found hiding in a cave somewhere in the Sangre de Cristo
Mountains. Like the search for Caridad, this novel stretches across Central New Mexico, tying fictional events to real places on the map as it indexes locations throughout the region (and the globe).

Indeed, with this narrator, even such an important political and environmental subject as historical control of the land is delivered neither in conversation nor in an informative style, but rather in a deliberately lengthy aside within a scene depicting a traditional religious procession:

> While it’s not every day that you see a crowd following a Christ-like figure carrying a cross along the highway (unless your people are from Chimayo or Tome or similar places throughout the territory controlled by the Spanish queen and friars for centuries with such ferocity that neither Mexican nor U.S. appropriation diluted the religious practices of the descendants of the Spanish who settled there, including this procession that has been performed annually for two hundred years and will probably go on for two hundred more, such is their fervent devotion), Caridad…fell in love that Holy Friday…. (74)

In this passage, a new understanding of the novel’s regional (and political) setting emerges. Here Central New Mexico is redefined, in the narrator’s purposefully offhanded way, as a site of colonial influence (Spanish, Mexican, and American) and, by some contrast, of cultural longevity, which flourishes both because and in spite of that problematic history. In the midst of this complex critique, the names of Tome and Chimayo appear—not coincidentally, in my view—as subtle cultural and geographical markers. Tome, in particular, becomes emblematic of

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47 Incidentally, during a blizzard, Father Latour and Jacinto take refuge with Jacinto in a cave in the same mountain range, somewhere between Pecos and Las Vegas (125). Although the location of this cave apparently saves Latour’s life, the experience greatly unnerves him, due in no small part to its connection with Native American spirituality; he vows not to go into another cave again (133).

48 While Central New Mexico is undoubtedly its central location, the novel’s geography extends far beyond the region, with references to events in places like San Antonio; Washington, D.C.; and Saudi Arabia. While some characters are rooted, others are transient. Loca maintains the smallest sphere of any character: she “lived her whole life within a mile radius of her home and had only traveled as far as Albuquerque twice” (245).
the durability of a Hispanic-American culture that was spawned by order of a sixteenth-century European monarch. In this way, Castillo cleverly and effectively ties elements of the region’s long history to specific places on the map and on the ground.

While place may never be the singular focus of any of the narrator’s yarns, the aggregate effect of all these geographic references is striking. For all the other things this novel is—e.g., a sophisticated study in Chicana identity formation, as Laura Gillman and Stacey Floyd-Thomas demonstrate; or a contemporary revision of the La Llorona myth, as Barbara Cook shows—it is also a representation of Central New Mexico and its cultural and environmental identity. Beyond its indexing of various sites across the region and its depiction of a deeply-rooted Hispanic-American culture in the Rio Abajo, So Far from God also makes a strong statement against the environmental racism that has affected many such communities for many years. In an important sense, Castillo’s novel tracks the centuries-long process by which Hispanic-American families transitioned from the role of occupying colonial presence in the 1700s to that of vulnerable ethnic minority by the late 1900s—all while remaining rooted in place and subsisting on the limited natural resources of Central New Mexico’s desert ecosystems.

Throughout the novel, the narrator asserts the historical claim of Sofia and her neighbors to the property they occupy while highlighting the various ways this claim has been threatened, undermined, or stolen outright. Like others in the community, Sofia’s family is eighth-generation

Certainly many additional interpretations are possible. In her argument for an environmental justice reading of the novel, Kamala Platt helpfully summarizes the critical response to the novel by pointing to “three possible and predominant readings”: “a religious reading that sees the novel as a New Mexican Catholic text; an aesthetic reading that sees the text as an example of magical realism; and the third—the kind I will attempt—a ‘political’ reading of social justice issues through the text” (79). My own “ecospatial” approach is firmly aligned with Platt’s political perspective, while some of the geocritical attention I give to place references seems to align with a more formalist way of reading.
New Mexican, and hers is one of the “original land grant families” (140) that settled the valley in the mid-1700s. (This means that her ancestors have been citizens of Spain and Mexico, as well as the United States, presumably without ever leaving the Tome area.) Yet due to various economic, social, and environmental circumstances at the end of the twentieth century, in Sofia’s time it is becoming more and more difficult for these families to support themselves through farming and ranching. Citing pressures as various as drought, elevated taxes, unemployment, the departure of grown children, poor conservation practices, and Anglo-American encroachment, the narrator summarizes the situation: “The truth was that most people had not been able to live off their land for the better part of the last fifty years” (139). In short, the agrarian tradition is in jeopardy, and the local culture along with it.

Yet for the most part, Castillo’s readers only learn about these problems when a solution is close at hand. Somewhat impetuously, Sofia decides to run for mayor in a town that has never had one, and her platform amounts to social, economic, and environmental justice for the community in response to the variety of external forces that are pressuring them. For the Hispanic community in Tome, land is a diminishing resource, with many people having sold off large tracts in order to remain in place. As one woman puts it, “All we have ever known is this life, living off our land, that just gets más smaller y smaller. You know that my familia once had three hundred acres to farm and now all I got left of my father’s hard work—and his father’s and his father’s—is casi nada, just a measly ten acres now, nomás, comadre! Barely enough for my family to live on!” (139). This sentiment echoes Sofía’s own experience, for she too has had to sell much of her property and even loses the rest—including the house she lives in—due to her husband’s gambling addiction. “No more land and to top it all off,” she complains, “I am renting
property built by my own abuelos!” (216–217). In response, Sofia and her neighbors eventually pool their funds and abilities to form a progressive organization based on cooperative ownership and stewardship of local economic and environmental resources. The narrator states that “above all, to stay on their land, to work it as their families had for many generations, was the desire of everyone who joined in and became everyone’s dream” (148). What begins as “Los Ganados y Lana Cooperative” becomes a socioeconomic engine in the valley, building on the traditional activities of ranching and weaving; radically reforming the local economy, culture, and food system; and empowering women, in particular, as weavers, leaders, and entrepreneurs. Sofia thus becomes both mayor and leader of the co-op in Tome, “the land of her ancestors” (141).50

Sadly, Sofia’s success (and that of the community) is undercut by the death of each of her daughters. And none is more devastating than that of Fe, whose sickness and death comes at the hands of the chemical plant she works for. Fe’s story raises the issue of toxic chemical handling and disposal as a grave threat to the Chicano/a community in the region, with a specific indictment of the high-tech weapons industry in the Albuquerque area. During her short yet calamitous tenure at a company called Acme International, Fe logs long hours and takes on the most sensitive jobs, working with mysterious solvents in an isolated, unventilated basement, cleaning parts for high-tech weapons. At the end of each day, she simply pours the chemicals down the drain “just like they did upstairs” (184). After enduring a miscarriage, migraines, glue-

50 In her discussion of the relationship between land and people in the novel, Mayumi Toyosato argues that Castillo “explore[s] the interrelation between the land, culture, consciousness, and action, and find[s] the potential for survival in identity grounded in place. The cultural connection to the land serves for the articulation of resistance and alternative values and practices which support social as well as biological survival of the cultural body” (309).
scented breath, and other excruciating symptoms, she finally goes to the doctor and is
diagnosed with terminal cancer. She is also put on unpaid leave and subpoenaed by the U.S.
Department of Justice, which is investigating the company’s environmental practices. In stark
contrast to her sisters Loca (who was inexplicably resurrected after her death as an infant),
Esperanza (who has disappeared in the Middle East but comes back to inhabit Tome as a ghost),
and later Caridad (who vanishes off the cliff at Acoma), “Fe just died” (186). Her demise, in
other words, is a startlingly physical one, the direct outcome of what the narrator calls her
“chemical joyride at Acme International” (186).

While, in keeping with the novel’s magical realist style, Fe’s story is exaggerated for
effect—she seems only mildly concerned when a certain chemical dissolves not only her gloves
but also her fingernails—it quite firmly rebukes the grim impacts that the high-tech industry and
other unregulated industries may be having on the health of local workers and on the natural
environment in Central New Mexico at the end of the twentieth century. As Kamala Platt points
out, shortly after So Far from God was published, The Nation magazine released a report that
identified some of the companies doing subcontract work for the high-tech industry whose
practices aligned with Castillo’s depiction of the fictional (and cartoonishly named) Acme
International. In “High-Tech’s Dirty Little Secret,” Elizabeth Kadetsky reported that “At a small
contract assembly house, U.S.M. Technology …[w]orkers handled potentially hazardous solders
and solvents with no masks, gloves, or safety sheets in violation of state safety and health laws”
(qtd. in Platt 84). Meanwhile, Joni Adamson cites Teresa Leal, the founder of a Mexican
nonprofit group named Comadres, whose account of industrial practices in Mexican
maquiladores offers another real-life counterpart (albeit a transnational one) to Castillo’s
depiction of unsafe factory work. On the subject of chemical waste in New Mexico, Platt cites a report of plutonium being “detected in chilies” in the Rio Grande watershed, downstream from Los Alamos (80), and part of Leal’s testimony is the assertion that toxic wastewater pollution can also make its way into local drinking water (Adamson 603). In Adamson’s words, “[Fe’s] ghastly death clearly alludes to the kind of chemical handling and dumping which workers employed by multinational industrial plants are routinely required to perform” (603). Such accounts provide an important historical precedent for Castillo’s depiction of human health risks from industrial chemicals, whether in New Mexico or elsewhere.

Just before her death, Fe is finally permitted to read the list of toxic substances she has handled and inadvertently dispatched into the local environment. She reads “about the chemical she more than once dumped down the drain at the end of her day, which went into the sewage system and worked its way into people’s septic tanks, vegetable gardens, kitchen taps, and sun-made tea” (188). In this way, Castillo deftly connects the problem of industrial pollution to the Hispanic community’s centuries-old traditions of living off the land; only now, people are dying off it. As the narrator observes, “most of the people that surrounded Fe didn’t understand what was slowly killing them, too, or didn’t want to think about it, or if they did, didn’t know what to do about it anyway and went on like that, despite dead cows in the pasture, or sick sheep, and that one week late in winter when people woke up each morning to find it raining starlings….” (172). While the community may not acknowledge it immediately, pollution is harming the people, animals, and birds of the Rio Abajo region, with industry the likeliest culprit.  

51 “At such points in Castillo’s fiction,” Adamson wryly notes, “there is no need to suspend disbelief; ‘real life’ serves the writer well’ (80).
Castillo’s words, New Mexico has turned from its attractive tourist slogan, the “Land of Enchantment,” into a much grimmer reality: “The Land of Entrapment” (172). Thus, through her painful death, Fe becomes not only a victim of the chemical pollution, but also a symbol of all the environmental hazards affecting the Hispanic community, which subsequently will come to see her as a martyr for the cause of environmental justice.

Despite its freewheeling tone and entertaining plot twists, as an environmental novel So Far from God develops at something of a slow burn. The issues I have highlighted appear in the novel more or less in the same sequence I have described: the Hispanic community’s historical claim to the land; the emerging threats to that claim, to subsistence agriculture, and to accompanying ways of life; the formation of Tome’s cooperative organization as a unified, strategic response to those threats; and the apparent effects of toxic chemicals on Rio Abajo residents and the environments they inhabit. All these issues culminate in a powerful scene in the novel’s penultimate chapter. With Loca dying from AIDS (which she contracted quite inexplicably), she and Sofia join a special Holy Friday procession that doubles as a social protest against everything plaguing the valley communities.

The march begins south of Tome and moves up the Rio Grande Valley to Albuquerque, growing larger as people from the villages of Rio Abajo join in.\(^53\) In this scene, Castillo

\(^52\) The suggestion of surface water pollution becomes particularly worrisome in a place like Tome that relies on surface water irrigation. In the previous chapter, Sofia is characterized as being unafraid to swim in the river, while Loca spends most of her time down by the acequia (irrigation ditch), one of the novel’s many nods to the Chicano/a myth of La Llorona. Indeed, In Barbara Cook’s view, Castillo’s revision of La Llorona challenges dominant ideologies and empowers people (particularly Chicanas) to stand up for environmental justice issues.

\(^53\) The narrative does not make this route explicit, but we can gather from the chapter’s title—“La Loca Returns to the World via Albuquerque Before Her Transcendental Departure; and a Few Random Political
powerfully weds the religious imagery of the Way of the Cross to a host of social and environmental justice issues affecting the community. In contrast to a traditional reenactment, with people portraying the biblical characters, Sofia and many of her neighbors “carried photographs of their loved ones who died due to toxic exposure hung around the necks like scapulars; and at each station along their route, the crowd stopped and prayed and people spoke on the so many things that were killing their land and turning the people of those lands into an endangered species” (241–242). As the procession continues, Castillo ties the suffering and death of Jesus with the tragedies unfolding in Central New Mexico and around the world:

Jesus fell,
and people all over the land were dying from toxic exposure in factories….
Jesus met his mother, and three Navajo women talked about uranium contamination on the reservation, and the babies they gave birth to with brain damage and cancer….
Veronica wiped the blood and sweat from Jesus’ face. Livestock drank and swam in contaminated canals.
Jesus fell for the second time.
The women of Jerusalem consoled Jesus. Children also played in those open disease-ridden canals where the livestock swam and drank and died from it.
Jesus fell a third time. The air was contaminated by the pollutants coming from the factories….
……Jesus was stripped of his garments.
Nuclear power plants sat like gargantuan landmines among the people, near their ranchos and ancestral homes. Jesus was nailed to the cross.
Deadly pesticides were sprayed directly and from helicopters above on the vegetables and fruits and on the people who picked them for large ranchers at subsistence wages and their babies died in their bellies from poisoning. (242–243)

This litany of ills unfolds over the space of two pages, with additional issues like AIDS, unemployment, and homelessness also being raised. What makes the scene so powerful, in my

Remarks from the Highly Opinionated Narrator”—that Albuquerque is the marchers’ destination. We are told that Loca, on horseback, and Sofia, on foot, join in the procession (presumably at Tome) “through the main streets of the villages and then on to the city,” gathering as many as two hundred people along the way (241).
view, is the way that different times and places, as well as holy and unholy images, are united with such striking immediacy: the torture and death of Jesus in Jerusalem nearly two millennia prior, the procession of the people walking up their ancestral valley to the regional power center of Albuquerque, and most of all the environmental disasters whose unfolding over the long term too often grants them a kind of invisibility. For the residents of Rio Abajo, the procession serves as an acknowledgement that these many disparate tragedies, with all their disparate causes, are happening in the here and now, the people’s suffering as unconscionable as that of the teacher they deify.

This scene is arguably where *So Far from God* moves the farthest away from just representing local history toward conveying a broader environmental reality for marginalized communities around the world. The imagery of pesticides settling on farm workers, nuclear power plants haunting the landscape, and air pollution coming out of so many smokestacks applies not only to New Mexico, but also to many places around the world—places known increasingly as “sacrifice zones”—where predominantly communities of color are required to bear the brunt of the modern world’s environmental carelessness. Indeed, in Adamson’s reading, the environmental justice perspective in Castillo’s novel amounts to something of a “postnational” orientation, envisioning “what cross-border, cross-ethnic affiliations organized around feminist struggles, human rights, and environmental concerns might look like” (605).

Yet despite these transnational (or postnational) overtones, *So Far from God* relies exclusively upon the geographical and cultural specificity of Central New Mexico to tell this story of environmental justice that critics like Platt and Adamson have found so broadly applicable to other sites and situations. While instilling awareness of environmental justice
seems to be one of the novel’s primary purposes, it also operates as a representation of the Rio Abajo region and draws upon a highly specific environmental history that connects it to the place’s real history, as well as other representations of it, like *Ceremony* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. In my view this rootedness in a real (if not wholly “realist”\textsuperscript{54}) geography suggests that stories of environmental damage and resistance are perhaps most effective when real places and communities are at stake. Interestingly, in Platt’s discussion of *So Far from God* as “a text that portrays battles for environmental justice,” she deliberately invokes the notion of literary cartography and notes how places in the novel “have a geography that corresponds with reality” (93). As with many literary critics, Platt more often refers to cartography in a metaphorical way, such as when she notes how Castillo “maps analysis of the effects of environmental racism onto gendered bodies” (69). But a later cartography reference is more on point, with Platt arguing that Castillo “maps environmental justice issues, not just in real space, by pinpointing ‘toxic hot spots’ on a world atlas, but also in real time, by pinpointing local struggles against degradation of human/natural habitats. The ramifications of this cartography are important for anyone with an interest in literature, the environment, feminism, and/or justice” (91). Here Platt creates space for an understanding of environmental justice literature—and the critical tools to interpret it—as derived from the author’s efforts to connect their stories to real places and communities on the ground. I find this possibility compelling, for while literary texts

\textsuperscript{54} A full discussion of magical realism and its implications for environmental criticism is outside the scope of this chapter. Can a fictional world in which non-scientific things transpire—such as young women coming back from the dead or disappearing bodily from the earth—really be equated with the empirical, historical places the author invokes as its setting? My argument here is that, to the extent that a text raises environmental issues or undertakes an environmental critique, as *So Far from God* certainly does, its claims may be buttressed by the use of a nonfictional setting with a real environmental history, regardless of whether it depicts events that don’t seem scientifically plausible.
depicting humans and the environment need not represent real places, they are perhaps more powerful when their political critique is grounded in a real history of people living in place.

**Conclusion**

In selecting the region of Central New Mexico as a focal point, along with three classic U.S. novels of the twentieth century that raise different environmental issues, I have attempted to provide just such a pluralistic image of the Crossroads region, modeling the principle of multifocalization that Westphal claims as central to geocritical practice. Certainly much more could be said about these novels’ interaction with their shared setting, the authors’ own views and experiences of the places in the text, and even alternative cultural understandings of place and mapping that might challenge many assumptions of this framework (such as those detailed by Kelli Lyon Johnson and Edith Swan in their respective studies of *Ceremony*).

But I hope I have demonstrated some of the ways in which a multifocal, ecospatial literary criticism might influence our understanding of a literary-geographical site. When I say the word “Albuquerque” to myself, I not only recall the handful of times I have gone cruising through that city on Interstate 40 between Kansas and Arizona, but I also have in mind a number of images from the city’s literary geography: Bishop Latour riding in from Santa Fe on his donkey to visit the local priest; Tayo and his friends speeding in from Laguna on Route 66 (not to mention Steinbeck’s Joad family lumbering down the same “Mother Road”); Sofia marching up the river valley toward the city in remembrance of her poisoned daughter. When I envision the Acoma Road—perhaps even pulling up images from the site on Google Street View—I

picture Tayo sleeping under the culvert; Caridad driving with Esmeralda; and Latour thinking that this long-inhabited land was somehow “still waiting to be made into a landscape.” Likewise, when we consider the region that is collectively mapped by *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Ceremony*, and *So Far from God*, we should think of Central New Mexico, insofar as this is possible, as an ecospatial whole, a place with a long history of humans interacting with their environment and all the ecological issues that entails: Cather’s thoughtful depiction of human settlement in a place of limited resources; Silko’s portrayal of the uranium mine at Laguna, of nuclear development as part of a Destroyer culture that threatens lands and cultures around the globe; and Castillo’s representation of an agricultural community poisoned by the very waters they need to survive. As the Way of the Cross march in *So Far from God* demonstrates, the places and communities depicted in the novels are all connected across a common environment and a common history. Among the environmental justice advocates in the procession are the three Navajo women who describe the uranium contamination affecting places like Tayo’s Laguna Pueblo. Meanwhile, the religious practices that help give meaning to their suffering have been passed down by priests like Latour and Vaillant who helped keep such communities alive during difficult times across the generations. Thinking ecospatially about literary places means recognizing the ways in which these kinds of culturally-specific representations intertwine and overlap, incorporating new ideas and revising our existing knowledge and assumptions about the nature(s), space(s), and stories of each place.

By reading these texts equipped with Heat-Moon’s philosophy of place—which urges us to comprehend place as textual, archival, and mappable—and Westphal’s multifocal geocritical methodology, we begin to understand how these novels’ shared geographic referent creates
literary and ecospatial meaning across time, space, and cultures. When considered together, these novels demonstrate how environmental issues like water access, land use, and pollution affect communities in the same region over time, and how these issues have different meanings from various cultural perspectives. Their reliance on a shared map of regional place names and attentiveness to environmental issues make them collaborators in the literary cartography of the region, and, from an ecocritical standpoint, our understanding of each one of these texts is greatly enhanced by the insights of the others. These texts overlap upon the map of New Mexico’s Crossroads region, telling and retelling the stories of communities that are united by geographical, social, and ecological circumstances. They supplement each other, and they supplement our understanding of Central New Mexico as a place. In that sense, these novels need each other, and we need them in order to read environmentally, to understand the ways that places interact with their own representations. Identifying and understanding this kind of shared ecospatial framework among literary (and other) representations offers a meaningful form of environmental literary criticism, one that results in new understandings of human beings and the environments they inhabit.
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