THE ECOLOGICAL UNCANNY

ESTRANGING LITERARY LANDSCAPES IN

TWENTIETH-CENTURY NARRATIVE FICTION

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Abstract

Contemporary ecological philosophy is homesick. It longs for a return to the natural world, to the sustainable practices of bygone eras, and to our embodied, perceiving selves. In plotting a course for this homecoming, however, ecophiosophy ignores the paradoxical way in which, following Freud, our “home” in the natural world necessarily houses the unhomely (das Unheimliche) within itself. In The Ecological Uncanny, I open this paradox to investigation by rethinking the status of homeliness in contemporary ecological thought. I do this within the context of narrative fiction, where I pit the active presence of landscape description against the unsettling obscurity of ecological realism.

In narrative, landscape names a descriptive practice that actively gathers otherwise unfamiliar space into a safe and comforting place for the viewing subject. Landscape description therefore invokes a narrative power that at once organizes a world around the subject and brings her home to her most primordial sense of self. This focalizing power constitutes landscape’s “homely metaphysics.” Ecology, by contrast, refers to something essentially virtual and hence unrepresentable as such. Because it cannot appear directly, ecology emerges negatively as a concealed presence. It warps landscape’s homely metaphysics with an unhomely realism. This realism forms the basis for what I call the ecological uncanny: the defamiliarization of the natural world that arises from our repressed sense that “Nature” lies absolutely beyond the horizon of human knowledge and perception.

Because the ecological uncanny draws attention to human finitude, it invokes fear of the unknown. Taken to its extreme, this fear sponsors apocalyptic visions of the world’s end. If landscape functions as a worlding figure that consolidates a human dwelling place, then the ecological uncanny actively, even violently unworlds the home gathered by landscape—it has the character of what Martin Heidegger calls “a certain ‘de-worlding’ [Entweltlichung] of the world.” Close
attention to such apocalyptic visions leads away from ecological theories that privilege human agency (ethics, activism, etc.), and instead demonstrates the need for a radical posthumanism that democratizes being and affirms all forms of life.

I weave these philosophical threads through seven chapters that concern a diverse array of writers. I have organized these chapters into two parts, loosely clustered around two central tropes: landscape as a comforting “home,” and landscape as a self-contained “world.” Part One maps an initial trajectory from landscape metaphysics to the ecological uncanny. It begins with a reading of Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology as a metaphysics of home, and it continues with an analysis of the ekphrastic status of landscape description in the narrative architecture of Willa Cather’s 1925 novel *The Professor’s House*. Part One concludes with a discussion of the “weird anima” that haunts D. H. Lawrence’s uncanny New Mexican landscapes.

Part Two makes a conceptual shift from landscape as an imaginative “homemaking” practice to landscape as a “worlding” mechanism. It also makes a geographical shift from the American Southwest—the scene of writing for both Cather and Lawrence—to southern Africa—the original site of the (post)colonial farm novel. Throughout the chapters of Part Two, I argue that English-language farm novels by Olive Schreiner, Doris Lessing, and J. M. Coetzee develop unique forms of ecological realism. In each novel, this realism emerges as an uncanny, insurgent force that dismantles the totalized “world” of the white southern African farm. I read this insurgent force as part of a posthuman critique, one that displaces postcolonial theory’s anthropocentrism, trading dead-end accusations of historical complicity for the more fecund ecological concept of contingency.
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I owe much to a lot of other people who, over the years, have asked me about my work and offered their attention and patience as I attempted to explain just what I meant by “the ecological uncanny.” Their questions, engagement, and reflections have been invaluable, and though they are too numerous to list here, I extend my thanks to every one of them.
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In memory of my grandparents, Jack and Eleanor Eggan—
the possibility makers.
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Prologue

The flowers were a housewarming gift, and a welcome one. My partner and I had just moved into a house in North Portland, and though we are both expert nesters who like to unpack and “make a home” as quickly as possible, we struggled with our new dining room. Maybe it was the room’s unusually large size or our awkwardly small table, but we couldn’t figure out how to make it into an inviting space where we’d actually want to sit and eat. We decided to push the table against the wall, centering it on the large picture window that overlooked the front garden and the street. This was a felicitous solution, as it retained the room’s spaciousness while still making it functional. And when a friend delivered a bouquet of fresh-cut dahlias, we knew it would be the perfect final touch. There on the table, against the south-facing window, the flowers were gorgeously backlit by the sun, glowing warmly in the light. The refracted sparkle coming through the water in the vase softly accented the image, catching the eye in just such a way as to make the flowers into the focal point the room needed. Behold the magic of interior design!

Having settled into the new house, daily life continued. We went back to work, forged a new relationship with our neighborhood, and discovered new pathways through the city. Still on the table one week later, and standing in a vase of increasingly brown and slimy water, the dahlias began to wither and droop.

One morning, I sat down at the table to eat breakfast and looked out the picture window to observe the neighborhood’s early-morning goings-on. A few dog walkers shuffled past. Parents packed their school-age kids into cars. Others rushed along, hastening to make the next downtown train. Spooning my granola, I wondered about what was in store for each of these people. Would they have totally banal and unmemorable days, or would something dramatic happen that might alter the course of their lives? While speculating on what good or ill might befall my neighbors, I lost
myself in thought. My mind slipped into that weird perceptual murkiness where consciousness becomes suspended and, despite being open, the eyes somehow cease to see. At some point, I even ceased to think; my speculations trailed off into a spaced-out mindlessness. It’s always a little strange coming back to yourself after one of these episodes; it takes a moment to adjust and let the world come back into focus. To me, this transitional moment feels like sliding back into space and time. I experience a bizarre sort of homecoming, re-inhabiting myself after having temporarily deserted it.

So there I was, spaced out at the kitchen table with a spoon in my hand and granola in my mouth, gazing blindly out the window. But when I slipped back into familiar space and time, I found that I was no longer looking out at the street; my gaze had drifted downward, and I was now staring right into the face of a dahlia. It was the only flower in the bouquet left standing; all the others drooped sadly over the edge of the vase. The sudden closeness of the flower—inches away!—startled me, as if it had jumped out at me from the perceptual darkness like some kind of botanical bogey.

I know it seems like an overstatement to say that I was startled, but I really was. What’s hard to describe is why. It wasn’t just that the dahlias were suddenly near to me after they had faded from my attention. What was strange was that, when the last dahlia standing came back into view, it felt to me like it was somehow reasserting its presence, as if it was taking advantage of my lapse of consciousness to seize my attention. This single flower had been there all along, facing my direction and “looking” right at me the whole time. Imagine sitting in a café and realizing that a stranger is staring at you, only they don’t politely look away when you catch them. It was that kind of feeling, but with a different kind of implication. In this case, the moment of recognition provoked an unsettling sense of embarrassment and remorse. The solitary soul left standing among its fallen comrades was looking back at me with an accusatory gaze—“eyeless, and so terrible,” as Virginia
Woolf once wrote about flowers\(^1\)—as if to remind me that they, too, were (are?) living entities whose lives had been cut short for the purpose of sprucing up my house. I considered how the flowers had arrived here. Just days before, a florist had blithely beheaded them, wrapped them up in a paper bundle, and sold them to my friend as a gift for me. I then put them in a vase, admired them briefly, and then promptly forgot about them for days as they suffered a slow death at my table, where I now breakfasted and pontificated in the unacknowledged presence of their zombified corpses.

I am fully aware that this anthropomorphizing language goes too far. Surely, flowers cannot see in the way I am imagining here, so this talk of a gaze is just a metaphor for how I felt in the situation. And even if the dahlias could gaze, it’s unlikely that they would be staring me down the way a scorned acquaintance might, so this is just a case of psychological projection onto a nonhuman species. But for me the point was not about the flowers sharing similar perceptual abilities or even expressing opinions about my actions. Instead, the experience was startling because it made painfully clear to me a certain gap between aesthetics and ethics to which I had been blind. Not only had I failed to recognize that the flowers had been sacrificed for my own pleasure, but I had also forgotten the basic fact that the flowers were already in a state of protracted decline long before they had even entered our house. That a whole commercial enterprise existed that cultivated flowers solely for the purposes of beautification suddenly seemed deeply grotesque. I was reminded of an acquaintance who once said to me that giving flowers to the sick is a morbid gesture, a perverse reminder of decline and death. No less perverse was our attempt to liven things up with a bouquet of dying dahlias. Far from warming the house, the flowers showcased a banal clash of

\(^1\) In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf writes: “Violets came and daffodils. But the stillness and the brightness of the day were as strange as the chaos and tumult of night, with the trees standing there, and the flowers standing there, looking before them, looking up, yet beholding nothing, eyeless, and so terrible” (135).
beauty and brutality, made more objectionable somehow by their seeming serenity. Indeed, the flowers turned our dining room into a macabre atrocity exhibition.

All right, so this goes too far, too. But what is at issue in the talk of zombie flowers and displays of rot and death is not simply the language but the apparent absurdity of entertaining any of these thoughts at all. Even the most committed carnivore will likely admit that there are ethical issues at stake in choosing to eat meat, but I can only imagine what vegetarians would think if I tried to convince them that similar issues were at stake in consuming plant matter. Some might deny the possibility that plants experience something like fear or pain. Others might respond that we have to eat something, which point opens a whole other philosophical can of worms related to the intrinsic violence of survival—the basic truth that living means doing violence to others. Such an extreme view leads straight to more radical dietary practices like fruitarianism, the followers of which only eat fruits, nuts, and seeds that fall naturally from plants so as not to inflict pain or suffering. But this practice is neither sustainable nor nutritionally viable on virtually any scale; it, too, denies the inescapable fact that survival entails making other beings into food.

My point here is twofold. First, for numerous reasons, my culture makes it strange for me to think about plants (and other nonhumans) as living entities that perceive and experience their own worlds, albeit in ways that differ greatly from how I perceive and experience mine. This may have something to do with biological imperatives (e.g., avoiding thinking about one’s complicity in the intrinsic violence of consumption), and it’s certainly also a sociopolitical matter (e.g., why talk about our treatment of flowers when we haven’t even figured out how to treat all humans as humans?). These and many other reasons make it very difficult even to conceive of, say, a botanical ethics, 2

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2 They do. Plants release volatile chemicals when under attack from herbivorous insects. These chemicals, which are called semiocemicals (from the Greek semeion, or signal), serve as a medium of communication. Not only do the chemicals send warning messages to neighboring members of the same species, but they also attract predatory insects that will eliminate the herbivorous threat. Humans are more familiar with botanical pain than we might realize. For example, the familiar scent of pine is the result of the particular semiocemical cocktail that pine trees emit when under attack. What to many is a sign of absolute cleanliness is thus more like an olfactory scream. See Paré and Tumlinson, “Plant Volatiles as a Defense against Insect Herbivores.”
much less to develop such an ethics and disseminate it widely. The question of ethics is thus a major problem faced by the environmental movement. It is also, and more deeply, a problem for environmental thinking.

This brings me to my second point, which is that my unsettling experience with the dahlias opened me to precisely the possibility of a botanical ethics. Rather than shrugging the experience off as an absurd blip, I allowed myself to remain startled, to think about why I felt that way, and what that feeling could mean. In short, I let myself speculate, which led to some very intriguing questions. Why did the dahlias seem like such an obvious choice for a housewarming gift? And not just obvious, but natural. When we arranged them in the vase and installed them on the table, they naturally seemed to brighten up the room. Sure, they were beautiful, but something deeper than interior design was at play. What created this feeling of naturalness? What was behind the homely warmth the flowers imparted?³

I suspect that much of this has to do with a particular narrative that is deeply embedded in Western culture, one that posits nature itself as being primordially homely. This narrative tells us that nature is the home from which we, as human animals, originally emerged, and the home to which we, as modern subjects who have become alienated from this origin, must now seek to return. This narrative champions a radical homecoming, one that centers on human experience and elevates nature to a metaphysical category: Nature.

Understanding how this homecoming narrative works and why it’s such a dangerous form of idealism is this dissertation’s first goal. Its second goal is to explain why the only way to dismantle this idealism is to remain open to the kind of unsettling experience that I had with the dahlias. As disturbing as such experiences can be, they are also instructive. In this work, I explore what lessons

³ My reason for using the British word “homely” instead of the American “homey” will become clear soon enough.
are on offer and why we should heed them. Most importantly, I demonstrate why it’s vital that we trade a homely nature for an uncanny ecology.
Introduction

Ecology and the Uncanny

Contemporary ecological thinking is homesick. It longs for a return to the natural world, to the sustainable practices of bygone eras, and to our embodied, perceiving selves. These are the joint aims of the activist and the scholar alike, who together promote environmental awareness with the aim of reuniting an increasingly alienated humanity to our roots in the sensuous web of ecological interconnection. If only we can restore our primordial connection to Nature, so this logic goes, we can work to reverse the degradation that we humans, as the drivers of the Anthropocene and the agents of the Sixth Extinction, have wrought. In redeeming ourselves, we can save the earth. And in saving the earth, we can come home in the most essential sense. In the words of Martin Heidegger, a favorite philosopher among ecological thinkers, we can once again dwell in the nearness of our own being.

Paradigmatically, and as if to assert the naturalness of an earthly homecoming, many ecological thinkers turn to the etymology of “ecology.” Referencing its Greek roots, οἶκος and λόγος, such thinkers define the term as the logos of the oikos—that is, the discourse of home. On an abstract level, this definition feels intuitive and appropriate. After all, the science of ecology is all about how organisms interact with each other and with the physical environments in which they live. Taken loosely, then, home seems like a suitably universal concept that could apply to all life forms, regardless of Linnaean taxonomic status. And yet, however poetic the ascription, it would be wrong to neglect the anthropocentric bias of the concept of home. While it is true that all living entities require an environment that can sustain them, it is not true that all living entities have equally developed senses of home. Home is an undeniably human construct—not simply a physical living

Nature is a haunted house.
Emily Dickinson
space, but a culturally defined and ontologically charged dwelling place. Home is that which, in Gaston Bachelard’s famous words, “concentrates being within limits that protect” (xxxvi). History has shown that home is also a surprisingly chameleonic concept, one that can be used to refer to a wide range of ideological spaces. It is at once a domestic, economic, and national signifier; it consolidates identity and status at the same time as it concentrates being. Home is thus a multivalent metaphorical conceit. It is anything but natural.

In addition to these issues with the poetic extension of *home*, the etymology that such critics use to promote it is itself deeply problematic. Those who celebrate the Greek roots of ecology do so in favor of rooting human being more firmly in *terra firma*, but they resist fully unpacking the etymology. *Oikos*, for instance, is a much slipperier term than ecocritics let on. In the Ancient Greek context, the word gathered three closely related concepts: house, property, and family. Taken together, the physical house, its associated wealth and property (*oikoi* were often attached to large farms), and the patrilineal line of inheritance that transferred all of this from one generation to the next served as the building block of Greek city-states. Oikos is thus a social and political unit as much as a domestic one, which explains its etymological connection to “economy,” which originally referred to the management of household resources and affairs. This link to economics is certainly not lost on ecologists⁠¹ or on ecocritics.² And yet, the metaphor of Nature as an economy cannot naturalize the oikos, which remains a construct created by and for humans.³

*Logos* proves even trickier given its status in philosophical and theological discourse from the Greeks to the present. For Heraclitus, logos linked human reason to the hidden logic of the material universe, both of which he held to be rational. In Aristotle’s understanding, logos named a rhetorical

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³ Only rarely do Ancient Greek texts use *oikos* to refer to nonhuman dwellings, like beehives or birdcages. See the entry on *oikos* in H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott’s *A Greek–English Lexicon.*
mode of reasoned argument, a rational discourse meant to persuade. Later, Zeno and his
descendants, the Stoics, endowed the logos with a spiritual dimension, defining it as a form of
reason that permeates and animates the material universe and hence is identical with Nature. In the
Stoic view, the logos is thus the soul of the universe. Philo of Alexandria introduced this Stoic
concept into Jewish thought, casting it as an intermediary between the human mind, the cosmos,
and God. This paved the way for the Gnostics’ later identification of Christ and of God with the
logos and the Sufis’ understanding of the logos as that which makes contact between the created
(human) and the uncreated (God) possible.

The longstanding emphasis on the logos in Western thought (and beyond) came under
scrutiny in the era of poststructuralism, most famously in Jacques Derrida’s Of Grammatology. In that
work, Derrida argues that “logocentrism” constitutes philosophy’s central preoccupation. Briefly
put, logocentrism is the view that speech ontologically precedes writing. The idea here is that speech
is produced directly from thought, and this makes speech primordially meaningful. Writing, by
contrast, derives from speech. Like a Xerox copy whose quality is a diminished compared to the
original, writing provides a less vivid representation of what speech communicates. The reason for
this is that speech is a physically present phenomenon; that is, speech requires an actual speaker
whose words are communicated via sound waves that interact physically with the fluid and tiny hairs
inside the listener’s cochlea. Its physical immediacy makes speech vitally present. Writing, however, is
a second-order and unvoiced system of representation that lacks the vitality of speech; it seems
absent by comparison. Because of its apparent absence, writing generates a desire for the presence
of speech. Indeed, it could be understood as an attempt (though forever a failed one) to restore this
presence. This desire is precisely what is at issue in Of Grammatology. For Derrida, logocentrism
names a characteristic of texts, representational modes, and signification systems to produce a
yearning for unmediated access to presence, which becomes a shorthand for other metaphysical
entities like meaning, knowledge, and being itself. The logos therefore stands at the center of what Derrida calls the “metaphysics of presence;” it is thus also implicated in the search for a “transcendental signified” that would, so to speak, bring us home to the origin of all things. But the point Derrida wishes to make is that logocentrism’s distinction between speech and writing is an illusory one, as is the desire this distinction generates for direct access to some primordial presence. Like Jacques Lacan’s objet petit a, the logos is a fundamentally unobtainable object.

Ecological Homecoming Revisited

If ecology really means the logos of the oikos, then what we are talking about is not a scientific notion of how organisms interact with their environments or even a softer notion of the discourse (or “poetics”) of home, but rather a profoundly human desire for direct access to the very essence of our being and to the transcendental presence in which it is housed: capital-N Nature. Framed in this way, the narrative of coming home to the natural world appears highly unnatural. And yet, it is this narrative that continues to permeate contemporary ecological thinking. Why, then, is this narrative so powerful?

Perhaps most importantly, the ecological homecoming narrative emerges as a corrective to another one that posits humans as being in a state of alienation from the natural world. Much like the Christian paradigm of human exile from the Garden of Eden, this narrative sees human civilizations (and especially Western civilization) as having alienated themselves from their natural origins. According to various accounts, this state of affairs has worsened gradually over time through the development of various cultural, political, religious, and intellectual institutions. Such institutions include, principally, Enlightenment rationalism, the technological drive of the Industrial Revolution, and (speaking of logocentrism) the perverse modern tendency to privilege writing over

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4 For an important account of the deleterious effects of such institutions on discourse about the environment (and hence on the environment itself), see Lynn White, Jr.’s essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.”
speech. More radical perspectives locate the origins of human alienation as far back as the advent of agriculture during the Neolithic Revolution circa 10,000 BCE, or even with the evolution of the earliest known hominids, *Ardipithecus ramidus*, nearly 6 million years ago. In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams writes of an analogous phenomenon in British pastoral literature, which has longed mourned the death of rural life and its associated values and yet never seems able to pinpoint the moment of rupture, always pushing it further back into the time of abstract memory. Similarly, those who espouse the ecological alienation paradigm seem unable to identify the moment of our collective exile from Nature.

My skepticism here should not suggest that there is no merit to such arguments. On the contrary, it is certainly true that the comforts and conveniences of modern living shield us from the basic struggle for survival. These comforts and conveniences also create an ideological barrier that separates civilization from Nature, such that the latter seems like something we need to plan a day trip to visit. To the city-dweller in particular, Nature often appears to be far away; patches of green may be zoned within city limits, but “real” Nature you have to drive to. To my mind, however, what is at stake is whether gestures aimed at “rewilding” ourselves can truly bring us back home to our more essential selves and the transcendental realm of Nature from which these selves supposedly emanate. For it is precisely this kind of homecoming that the alienation paradigm of contemporary ecological thinking sets up. The problem is that many ecological thinkers take the alienation paradigm and the need for return for granted without ever questioning whether there is such a thing as an “essential self” or a “transcendental Nature” to return to in the first place. Moreover, the

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5 On this point, see David Abram’s *The Spell of the Sensuous*, especially chapters 3–5.

6 See, for example, Daniel Quinn’s speculative novel, *Ishmael*, and Timothy Morton’s *Dark Ecology*.

7 I extrapolate this point from the view that the human species is in itself inherently violent and destructive—a view that is at least as old as Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*.

8 In conservation biology, “rewilding” refers to the restoration of land to an uncultivated state. Recently, a contingent of ecologically minded individuals have reconceived rewilding as “[the restoration of] ancestral ways of living that create greater health and well-being for humans and the ecosystems that we belong to. . . . Rewilding learns from the examples of indigenous people past and present provided by anthropology, archaeology, and ethnobiology. It means returning to our senses, returning to ourselves, and *coming home to the world we never stopped belonging to.*” See rewild.com.
further back in time we situate our alleged exile, the more urgent and more profound this need for home seems to become. Much like Odysseus’ journey, in which the power of his final nostos depends on his having suffered and wandered through not one but two epics, ecological homecoming seems sweeter the further we imagine ourselves to be from Nature.

More than on any other front, the homecoming narrative has influenced the strain of ecological thinking known as ecophenomenology, of which David Abram’s work is a standout (and commercially popular) example. Both of his major publications, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) and *Becoming Animal* (2010), offer lyrical and often brilliant meditations on the embodied experience of the natural world. These meditations are meant to inspire readers to develop their own personal practices that, through mindfulness, will open them to their local environments and to the “natural magic of perception” (*Becoming Animal* 8). Whereas *The Spell of the Sensuous* spends more time examining how the shift from speech to writing has progressively drawn humans (and particularly Westerners) away from our natural origins, *Becoming Animal* dives deep into the phenomenal experiences that may help to redeem both our earthly selves and the earth itself.

In addition to some other problematic aspects of his work that I will discuss at other points in this dissertation, Abram’s method leads him toward two tendencies that I resist. First, his appeal to what he calls the “more-than-human world” speaks to a quasi-spiritual approach that, ironically, tends to mystify Nature rather than to engage more fully with ecology. The term *more-than-human world* implies a sense of connectivity, a seamless and organic whole that at once includes nonhuman entities and yet continues to insist on the centrality of human experience. This leads to the second problematic tendency: the final point of Abram’s phenomenological approach is, as he says explicitly, not so much to connect us to the sensuous web of natural phenomena, but to enable us to become *more human*. This desire to reify the essence of the human is surprisingly common in
ecological thinking. As for the lone hiker who treks into the wilderness to make himself whole again—himself because this desire is also historically gendered—for the ecocritic, the phenomenology of Nature becomes a tool for self-actualization.

Like other ecophenomenologists, Abram is very much invested in the work of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I suspect that this return to twentieth-century phenomenology has in part been motivated by the ever-greater emphasis in the physical sciences on microscopic, atomic, and subatomic scales of the material universe. The lessons of quantum physics have increasingly entered the public imagination, alternately indicating the profound strangeness of reality and demonstrating a fundamental disconnect between scientific investigation and everyday existence. The quantum phenomenon of entanglement will never be known to us experientially—only through abstract mathematics and experimental modeling. Likewise, the recent discovery of gravity waves has elicited great excitement in the physics world, but it changes nothing of how our embodied selves sense the planet’s pull. Similar developments in cognitive science seem to lead us away from everyday experience. Whereas some investigators continue to emphasize the epiphenomenal level of perception, many others increasingly search for the material seat of consciousness in the bewildering network of neurons and synapses. Thinkers like Abram who use phenomenology to celebrate the wonders of the human sensorium do so to eschew the invisible (i.e., absence) and return us to the visible (i.e., presence). This approach

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9 Only recently has this desire come under critical scrutiny, most notably from Sarah Jaquette Ray. In her book The Ecological Other, Ray considers the trope of disgust in environmental discourse. Specifically, she investigates how disgust functions to separate “natural” bodies from “unnatural” ones. Ray claims that the “whole” body (i.e., healthy, nondisabled, straight, and white) is the most environmentally “pure” body; hence, the paradigmatic ecological other is disabled, obese, unhealthy, or sexually and/or racially marginalized. The rhetoric of wholeness in environmental discourse thus provides the foundation for what she considers “the uncritical turn to the body as an ideal way to connect with the environment” (25).

10 See, for example, Douglas Hofstadter’s I Am a Strange Loop and Dan Lloyd’s Radiant Cool.

11 See, for example, Christof Koch’s The Quest for Consciousness.
encourages us to attune our senses to natural phenomena and to develop our individual skills of perception, allowing us to commune more closely with the biosphere itself.\textsuperscript{12}

However appealing its central narrative of homecoming, I believe that the ecophenomenological approach marks an impasse in ecological thinking. As a response to global warming and the threat of extinction it intimates, this approach unfolds a desire for self-development. Ecophenomenology thus works to consolidate human being and to revive our sense of ecological belonging; it avoids what is strange—even estranging—in the multiple time scales and spatialities of the natural world in order to pursue a revitalized sense of the human. This seems contrary to the ethical ideals of preservation and care on which most ecological thinking is supposedly grounded. The practice of ethics is, after all, rooted in the encounter with difference, and difference is, by definition, \textit{strange}—that is, different from what is usual, normal, or expected; not known, heard, or seen before; not entirely comfortable. The practice of any ethics should involve holding space for what is strange, recognizing that strangeness and the discomfort it can generate are a kind of psychological mirage that occurs when viewed through the veil of difference. That is to say, strangeness is not an innate feature of a given object; it is merely a second-order effect of the perceiver’s experience of that object. I will discuss this in greater detail later on. For now, my point is that there is little room for discomfort in contemporary ecological thinking, where strangeness is often ignored in the pursuit of something more pleasing and closer to home.

For all its longing to restore what it means to be human, much contemporary ecological discourse has a surprisingly hard time encountering even \textit{human} difference. Take, for example, the tendency to romanticize indigenous livelihoods as models of sustainable living. This tendency is so old (going back at least to Jean-Jacques Rousseau) and so widespread (I will offer numerous examples in subsequent chapters) that it is as if indigeneity \textit{itself} has become a sign of naturalness.

\textsuperscript{12}This, for example, is the basic premise of Mitchell Thomashow’s volume \textit{Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change}. 
Although the tendency to romanticize is often meant to offer solidarity with indigenous peoples or to justify indigenous rights, this form of idealization has an equally powerful ability to dehumanize, placing indigenous peoples so close to Nature that they disappear into it. The language that does this work is so ubiquitous one can almost select at random. In 2014, for instance, The Guardian published a story authored by Damian Carrington about Amazonian “tribesmen” who were living “deep” in the Peruvian rainforest, but who had recently “emerged into the outside world” for the first time. The anthropological sensationalism of this language is bizarre and misleading given that these Peruvian “tribesmen” didn’t stumble into “the outside world” on accident—they were being terrorized and pursued by Brazilian drug runners. What’s even more bizarre, though, is that The Guardian classified this not as world or regional news but as a story about the environment (see Figure 1). Not only does such a categorization deny the basic humanity of the Peruvian forest-dwellers; it also invokes a temporal and spatial schema that relegates them to a time that is anterior to modernity and to a place that is symbolically primeval.¹³ In casting the article as a story about the environment, The Guardian’s editors subtly reorient the reader back to the safety of the forest from which these people were driven rather than to the danger of the modern world into which they’ve been thrust. This is one way in which the logic of ecological homecoming quietly reasserts itself in everyday discourse.

(Un)homely Nature

It seems clear enough that the way forward for ecological thinking cannot take the form of a homecoming. But if we are not to look homeward, then where shall we turn?

¹³ The anthropologist Johannes Fabian calls this the “denial of coevalness.”
Perhaps counterintuitively given what I have written thus far, I pursue this question by taking a note from the early phenomenologists, whose methods suggest that the only way out is through. This precept is most clearly demonstrated in Heidegger’s notion of *der Schritt zurück*, or “the step back,” which paradoxically moves forward by going backward. The step back should not be understood as anything like a scientific method. Instead, it describes a way of thinking, both a manner and a direction. As Heidegger writes in *Identity and Difference*, “‘Step back’ does not mean an isolated step of thought, but rather means the manner in which thinking moves” (50). The trajectory charted by a method so nebulously described is, unsurprisingly, a long one, and like a forest path (*Holzweg*), it is full of digressions. Hence, following this intellectual path “requires a duration and an endurance whose dimensions we do not know” at the start (51). Just like the *Schritt* is not an isolated step, *zurück* isn’t regressive in any straightforward sense. Indeed, like many German words, *zurück* lacks a single obvious translation. It can be directional (“backward”) or positional (“behind”), and it can also indicate return: “back to” (*zurück zu*) or “to be back” (*wieder zurück sein*). Heidegger’s *zurück* is all of these things: it implies a return to the source of something to explore and uncover its essence. This is what makes the step back central to Heidegger’s project, which seeks to rescue ontology from the Western philosophical tradition by moving deeper into metaphysics, separating the wheat of being (*Wesen*) from the chaff of mere presence (*Anwesenheit*). The path described by the step back therefore leads “out of metaphysics” by going deeper “into the essential nature of metaphysics” (51).

The only way out is through. What this means is that dismantling the narrative of homecoming requires going deeper into its fundamental nature: the *homely* itself. Indeed, homeliness is what makes the idea of home so powerful. It designates the abstract essence of home as a protective space of absolute comfort and belonging—what Bachelard calls “felicitous space.”

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14 I am referring here to the tendency in the metaphysical tradition to equate being with physical presence. See my discussion of Derrida and logocentrism, above.
homely is thus a metaphysical concept: it is the first principle of the home as such. This is why it has such widespread currency: “home” can be mapped onto virtually any space at virtually any scale, from the most modest domicile to the planet itself and beyond.

The homely is a source of idealization. It draws on nostalgia to make us homesick for our childhood houses. And yet, as Witold Rybczynski reminds us in his meditation on the concept of home, however powerful nostalgia for the homeliness of the home may be, it is our own invention. Anyone who has gone home for the holidays knows that the experience is often burdened by complication and deflated by disappointment. The actual experience of homecoming reminds us why the saying “You can never go home again” is more than just a cliché. Nationalism provides a more extreme example of the dark side of the homely ideal. Territorial wars and skirmishes have always been fought in the name of the homeland. However, with the advent of nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the notion of the homeland was at once broadened and formalized, offering images that fostered a wider sense of belonging within what Benedict Anderson terms “imagined communities.” As Anderson argues, the identification with the national “home” creates an unusually strong bond: citizens fight fervently and die willingly in the name of their national allegiance. This state of affairs has led to some of the bloodiest conflicts the world has seen.

The examples need not proliferate further. The point here is that the homely constitutes a metaphysical idealism that, like other idealisms, is part of an invented tradition and hence tends to actualize in deviant forms. Stepping back into the essence of the homely therefore forces us to confront our own idealism. Particularly where ecology is concerned, it forces us to recognize that our desire for a homely Nature may in fact have a degrading effect. Earthly homecoming is no less of a fantasy than, say, green consumerism. Advertisements for outdoor gear and cars with low CO₂ emissions encourage the delusion than consumption can actually solve the problem of climate
change and bring us closer to Nature in the process. Such advertisements “advocate a state of mind that denies basic reality and builds up a more pleasurable phantasmatic reality of their own” (Seppänen 203). As with the pleasure of green consumerism, the pleasure of ecological homecoming is rooted in a narrative that actively denaturalizes Nature, making it into the mere sign of naturalness. Acknowledging this bait and switch can be profoundly troubling.

The Ecological Uncanny

Returning to the homely can have an unsettling effect on ecological thinking. It should not be surprising, then, that it also opens ecology to a Freudian logic. In his 1919 essay, “The Uncanny,” Freud famously proposed an intimacy between the homely and the unhomely: “heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich” (226). Usually translated as “the uncanny,” das Unheimliche names an affective experience that “arouses dread and horror” (219) in relation to that which is closest: that is, it denotes “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (220). Uncanny experiences put us in contact with that which is not simply strange, but strangely familiar: its familiarity attracts us even though we find its strangeness repulsive. Like the uncanny valley effect in which almost-but-not-quite perfect replicas of humans cause cognitive dissonance, unheimlich experiences crash our systems and leave us reeling without quite understanding why. It’s like déjà vu, but more disturbing.

For Freud, the paradoxical structure of the uncanny—that is, its strange familiarity—has more than one psychological origin. For instance, he locates one source of uncanny experience in substitutive relations, such as the Oedipal association between the eye and the phallus. The uncanny also emerges in instances of doubling, such as the appearance of a doppelgänger that provides a shadowy reflection of the (super-)ego. What these and other sources have in common, however, is
repression. According to Freud, “The essence of repression lies simply in turning something away and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious” (“Repression” 147). As the horror genre teaches us, keeping unwanted knowledge hidden from view is a dangerous game: when it inevitably resurfaces we do not recognize it, and it terrifies us utterly. This is why repression and its complex psychic dynamics of denial and repetition generate the perverse obsession with one’s own death known as morbid anxiety. However, what distinguishes the uncanny from other causes of morbid anxiety is that it emerges from the repression and recurrence of something more personal, closer to home: “[The] uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (“The Uncanny” 241).

If repression is the source of the uncanny, then what, exactly, is being repressed? According to Freud, it is, in some sense, the sources of the self. He notes, for example, that the uncanny can erupt from the involuntary return to a primitive past, “a regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people” (236):

Nowadays we no longer believe in [primitive superstitions], we have surmounted these modes of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something actually happens in our lives which seems to support the old, discarded beliefs we get a feeling of the uncanny. (247–48)

In addition to wrenching us back to our primordial selves, uncanny experience also returns us to our primordial home. Freud notes that many of his male patients are filled with unheimlich sensation at the sight of female genitalia: “This unheimlich place, however, is the entrance to the former Heim [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning” (245). The repression of the primordial home renders it unhomely, hence the paradoxical intimacy Freud initially suggested between the heimlich and the unheimlich.
But what does all of this have to do with the ecological homecoming narrative? Why doesn't the homely discourse that pervades ecological thinking ever seem to court uncanny experience? One possibility has already emerged: the narrative of ecological homecoming is grounded in the rhetoric of alienation. The notion of alienation generates longing for return and restoration, and thus it promotes comforting rather than unsettling imagery. As I’ve argued, however, the preoccupation with alienation is an ideological one, and every ideology comes with its own strategies for repression. Indeed, alienation is itself a repressive strategy. In this dissertation, I argue that what the concept of alienation represses in contemporary ecological thinking is no less than the profoundly contingent and hence limited nature of human being. The ecological homecoming narrative is all about the longing to become whole again, to reinsert the human more fully into being and hence to find a radical sense of belonging in the world. This longing inflates our understanding of what it means to be human, and this kind of metaphysical inflation ends up repressing the strange way in which to be human is itself already to be *posthuman*. What I mean is that, as long as the word “human” designates a particular kind of entity that is produced by genetics as much as—if not more than—by various social, political, and scientific institutions, then we at once over- and underestimate the human. We overestimate the human for its apparent exceptionalism in the natural world—for our superior consciousness, our ingenuity, our innate desire for progress, and so on. And yet, in extolling the virtues of the human, we neglect to see what is “incomplete” about it—the very limits that have led to our understanding of Nature as little more than a mirror of ourselves, reflecting our desires.

What I am suggesting is that the metaphysical investment in Nature actively represses what is strange and hence estranging about the natural world. As humans, we tend to repress what is strange and estranging about Nature because we also repress what is strange and estranging about ourselves. Seriously entertaining a posthuman perspective would entail defamiliarizing ourselves from ourselves, which is a difficult and unsettling task. Humanism is no doubt more comforting in its
attempt to offer a fuller account of the human. But humanism has yet to institute a world where all humans count as human. Instead of further consolidating our sense of ourselves as humans, it may be time to dismantle the very category of “the human.” Like all other living entities, human beings are radically impure and incomplete. The more we learn about biology, the more we understand that organic life greatly depends on inorganic matter and that an individual human body is comprised of more “foreign” cells than “native” ones. Likewise, the more we learn about consciousness, the more we understand just how selective and limited our perceptual capacities are. Acknowledging that humans are less pure—less human—than previously thought is not easy. And as Freud has shown better than anyone, coming to grips with the fact that the conscious self is neither seamless nor complete can be profoundly uncanny.

In Fantasia of the Unconscious, D. H. Lawrence illustrates what is at issue here in an unexpected digression on the unsettling nature of trees in Germany’s Black Forest. Frustrated by a screaming baby, Lawrence retreats to the foot of a fir tree to write. Before he can put pen to paper, however, he is taken aback by an unheimlich feeling: “I think there are too many trees. They seem to crowd around and stare at me, and I feel as if they nudged one another when I’m not looking. . . . I seem to feel them moving and thinking and prowling, and they overwhelm me” (42). Although initially unsure why he should feel this way, Lawrence suggests that the trees seem so terrifying because there is no way for him to relate to them in a familiar way. They “have no hands and faces, no eyes,” and yet they still possess a “vast and individual life, and an overshadowing will—the will of a tree; something that frightens you” (43). This thought leads to a bizarre conundrum: “Suppose you want to look a tree in the face? You can’t. It hasn’t got a face” (43). In this moment, Lawrence both

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15 Scientists have often stated that there are about ten times more bacteria cells that human cells in the human body. Researchers at the Weizmann Institute in Israel have recently revised this figure, estimating that there are approximately 39 trillion bacteria cells and 30 trillion human cells. Even with these data, bacteria cells outnumber human cells 3 to 1. See Sender, Fuchs, and Milo.

16 We also learn that consciousness is not an all-or-nothing thing; “mind” exists in degrees as on a scale, which strains claims about the exceptionalism of human consciousness.
acknowledges and ridicules his own instinctive desire to anthropomorphize the trees. Yet, with wry economy, he also emphasizes the uncanny nature of his own proposition. He acknowledges that the trees are alive, but he instantly frames their vitality in human (or at least mammalian) terms: “Great full-blooded trees, with strange tree-blood in them, soundlessly drumming” (43). In recognizing the absurdity of the comparison, though, a gap of difference rips open. There is no way for Lawrence to commune with the tree, and so there is no way for him to understand the tree’s “vast and individual life” or its “overshadowing will.” His is a desire without a real object: it’s precisely like trying to look someone in the face when they haven’t got a face. Such an experience is no doubt shocking, even terrifying.

Lawrence’s weird, faceless tree poses a problem for ecological aesthetics and ethics. The tree with(out) a face is neither beautiful nor stately, but creepy, and thus cannot inspire in human observers the feelings of love, care, or even empathy that could otherwise make Nature an object of homely desire. For Lawrence, the faceless tree inspires another affect, a strange feeling that arises from the ontological gap that renders “tree being” permanently unknowable to him. It is his dim recognition of this unknowability that makes the trees towering above him appear menacing: “They have no skulls, no minds nor faces, they can’t make eyes of love at you. Their vast life dispenses with all this. But they will live you down” (46; my emphasis). As suggested by his strange obsession with how non-human-like the trees are, Lawrence’s fear results from repression. But this is not only the repression of the trees’ difference; it is also the repression of his own inability to surmount this difference. In other words, it is the ontological gap that separates him from the tree and his radical inability to bridge that gap that Lawrence experiences as dread.

Lawrence’s faceless tree emblematizes what I call the ecological uncanny. Like Lawrence’s arboreal uncanny, the ecological uncanny references the strange (and hence estranging) way in which Nature persistently defies our desire for it to act as a mirror. The more the natural world seems to
resist our humanizing projections, the more unsettling Nature appears. The ecological uncanny therefore thwarts human desire for a comforting organic holism and instead reveals “Nature” for what it is: an idealist metaphysical construct. It defamiliarizes the natural world, and it does so by tapping into our obscure (i.e., repressed) awareness that what we call “Nature” itself recedes absolutely beyond the horizon of human knowledge and human being. By making this horizon visible at all, the ecological uncanny punctures our belief in the limitless self. It shatters our perception of the world as a seamless whole.

If the propagators of the ecological homecoming narrative don’t find Nature unheimlich, it is because they are not looking hard enough. Freud suggests as much near the end of his essay on the uncanny, when he turns from psychological forms of the uncanny to literary ones. Literature provides much more fertile ground for thinking about the uncanny because, as Freud admits, it doesn’t require the same kind of reality test: the effectiveness of the literary uncanny is “[not] a question of the material reality of the phenomena” (“The Uncanny” 248). This is one of the things that makes fictional worlds so absorbing for readers, who often pay closer attention to fictional realities than they do to their own environments:

In the main we adopt an unvarying passive attitude towards real experience and are subject to the influence of our physical environment. But the storyteller has a peculiarly directive power over us; by means of the moods he can put us into, he is able to guide the current of our emotions, to dam it up in one direction and make it flow in another. (251)

The uncanny becomes much more interesting in literature because authorial manipulation makes it easier for uncanny phenomena to appear. Furthermore, the multiple levels of mediation involved in fiction also make it possible for the uncanny to manifest in various ways. It is perhaps most common for characters in the storyworld to have uncanny experiences, and readers may or may not share in the sensation. It is also possible for readers to pick up on uncanny resonances to which the characters are blind. The narratological distinction between story and plot enables these divergences.
There is, however, a third possibility, one that Freud forecloses in his distinction between real and imagined worlds and the kinds of attention we afford each. Fictional environments may be more capable of provoking uncanny experience because they are constructed and manipulated, but in making this distinction Freud also implies that, if “our physical environment” seems less uncanny, this is only because we aren’t paying attention. As Samuel Weber has theorized, the uncanny can only appear when the perceiver is keenly aware of his or her surroundings and has the “desire to penetrate, discover and ultimately to conserve the integrity of perception: perceiver and perceived, a wholeness of the body, the power of vision.” Only in such cases does denial—the root of repression—take an active form: “a [form of] denial that in turn involves a certain structure of narration, in which this denial repeats and articulates itself” (qtd. in Seppänen 205). If, as the ecophenomenologists tell us, we need to attune our senses the more-than-human world more fully, then we are as likely to find an unheimlich Nature as a heimlich one.

Because this is an issue of different levels of attention, the ecological uncanny can creep up on you. Thus, unlike the beautiful, the picturesque, or the sublime, the uncanny is not an aesthetic category; one does not seek it out, nor is it a way to frame, package, or consume Nature. It is true, however, that the affective quality of the uncanny seems quite close to that of the sublime. Edmund Burke writes in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757): “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime” (36). Yet as Immanuel Kant makes explicit in *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), sources of the sublime can only be found in Nature, and particularly in natural things that are apparently purposeless (252–53, §26). Animals are thus not
sublime, but mountains and oceans are. And as nineteenth-century paintings such as Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (ca. 1817; see Figure 2) suggest, proper distance and careful framing are usually required in for the sublime aesthetic to register fully.

By contrast, the ecological uncanny operates on much smaller scales, and it works through proximity rather than distance. It can also involve inanimate as well as animate entities. An example from Olive Schreiner’s *Thoughts on South Africa* illustrates the matter. The first chapter of this work provides a historical and geographical survey of South Africa, and Schreiner indicates that her home country’s “colossal plenitude” is primed for the sublime: “If Nature here wishes to make a mountain, she runs a range for five hundred miles; if a plain, she levels eighty; if a rock, she tilts five thousand feet of strata on end; our skies are higher and more intensely blue; our waves larger than others; our rivers fiercer” (49–50). As if to assist her readers in experiencing this colossal plenitude, Schreiner includes vignettes that read like traveler’s guides for framing an optimal landscape experience. In one instance, describing the coastal lowland bush, she writes:

To see this land typically one should outspan one’s wagon on the top of a height on a hot summer’s day, *when not a creature is stirring*, and the sun pours down its rays on the flaccid, dust-covered leaves of the bushes, if you stand up on the front chest of the wagon, and look out, as far as your eye can reach, you will see over hills and dales, the bush stretching, silent, motionless, and hot. *Not a sound is to be heard;* your hand blisters on the tent of the wagon; *suddenly* a cicada from a clump of bush at your right sets up its keen, shrill cry; it is glorying in the heat and the solitude of the bush. You listen to it in unbroken silence, till you and it seem to be alone in the world. (35; my emphasis)

Schreiner begins by emptying the landscape, only to reveal that life persists in the apparent emptiness. This revelation, along with the play of scales involved in this landscape vision, generates the potential for an uncanny ecological encounter. Only when the viewer seems guaranteed of absolute solitude and a clear view of a distant landscape cleared of all others can a profound aesthetic experience be had. Yet despite the traveler’s efforts, and precisely at the moment when she stands atop the wagon like a conqueror to gaze onto the intense purity of South African Nature, the sudden screeching of a cicada that is both very loud and very close interrupts her solitude; it
troubles the narrator’s ideological framing devices and so undermines the sublime aesthetic that is this outing’s raison d’être.

What I find significant about this passage is not just the way it empties the landscape only to reveal its hidden fullness, but also the subtle way the passage represses this revelation, seeking to preserve a sense of Nature as a noble backdrop for the solitary subject. Despite the cicada’s sudden cry, the traveler doesn’t blink. The cicada’s shrillness quickly becomes recast as “glorying,” and regardless of its forceful presence, the traveler seems to absorb it into her experience to remain paradoxically alone in the world together with the cicada. This reading might seem too forced if the passage didn’t also employ second-person direct address. The guide-like nature of the vignette has an instructional quality, and its suppression of the cicada’s strange irruption into the narrative has the effect of being quietly inculcating. The passage tells us to keep our focus outward. Only in this process of imaginatively clearing space to be “alone in the world” can we fully experience Nature’s ennobling beauty and thus consolidate our sense of self. As Schreiner goes on to claim, “It was amid such scenes as these, amid such motionless, immeasurable silences, that the Oriental mind first framed its noblest conception of the unknown, the ‘I am that I am’ of the Hebrew” (41). What is telling, though, is that Schreiner wants to purify this experience of all anxiety, and she does so insistently: “It is not fear one feels, with that clear, blue sky above one; that which creeps over one is not dread” (41). In resisting the ecological uncanny that disrupts her landscape vision, Schreiner also resists the potential defamiliarization of the “I” that might result from it.

The reason the aesthetics of the South African landscape win out over the uncanny of the cicada has something to do with Kant’s understanding of the sublime. In Kantian aesthetics, the power of the sublime does not reside in the ability of natural objects to elicit existential dread. Instead, sublime experiences are ultimately about human superiority; they are characterized by the feeling that human reason is more powerful than Nature. This is particularly true for what Kant calls
“dynamically sublime” experience, which occurs when natural phenomena inspire fear even though we know we are safe. The dynamically sublime is thus a kind of fearful delight, one in which “the irresistibility of [nature’s] power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of nature and a superiority over nature . . . whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion” (261–62, §29). The sublime reaffirms human exceptionalism, placing the species both exterior and superior to Nature. (Incidentally, the sublime’s implicit hierarchy explains why Friedrich’s wanderer appears above the sea of fog.) When Schreiner tells her prospective traveler (i.e., us readers) to bask in the great vastness of the landscape view, she is insisting on landscape’s power to bolster our own self-conception. She also demonstrates the sublime’s ability to reframe such aesthetico-metaphysical experience. When the cicada irrupts into the narrative, Schreiner adjusts the frame to return it safely to Nature, where it belongs.

“Dark Ecology”

Schreiner actively ignores the ecological uncanny to preserve a sense of Nature as perfect surface that can reflect the viewing subject back to herself. By contrast, instead of smoothing over the cracks that appear in this phenomenal surface, I want to pry them open. In doing so, I want to explore how the ecological uncanny haunts Nature from within. I also want to engage with the strangeness of Nature and keep its otherness intact. Rather than relying on metaphysical glue to hold the natural world together in an apparent unity that feels comforting and familiar, I seek to allow Nature to fragment and proliferate as a reminder of the radical incompleteness of things. As the sign of this incompleteness, the ecological uncanny invites more speculative modes of thinking that engage, however indirectly, with what lies behind the homely façade of Nature.
Given its emphasis on the obscenity that persists despite the familiarity of Nature, this project has something in common with recent theoretical work that has explored ecology in terms of its inner “darkness.” However, unlike much of this literature, I am not primarily interested in how this darkness is linked to generic conventions, or to the evils of contemporary geopolitics. Nor am I invested in a notion of ecology as presenting what David Peak calls a “horror reality.” Rather, I want to explore how prying open perceptual gaps can offer distorted access to a reality which, by necessity, only appears horrifying because it is not fully known or knowable.

For this reason, my project is much closer in orientation to the “dark ecology” of Timothy Morton, who first coined that phrase in his 2007 work *Ecology without Nature* and developed it further in his 2016 volume *Dark Ecology*. Morton’s conception seeks to reverse the usual framing of Nature as something that is “over there,” set apart from the human, and instead to usher it into radical proximity. In his view, the very concept of Nature implies distance and separation. This is what has allowed Nature to become bound up with the aesthetic categories that, since the eighteenth-century writings of Burke and Kant, have been so closely associated with landscape. According to Morton, however, a truly ecological ethics must be based on that which is most difficult to love: not the picturesque, beautiful, or sublime of Nature, but the abject of ecology. As he puts it: “The ecological thought, the thinking of interconnectedness, has a dark side embodied not in a hippie aesthetic of life over death, or a sadistic-sentimental Bambification of sentient beings, but in a ‘goth’ assertion of the contingent and necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world” (*Ecology without Nature* 184–85).

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17 Both David Peak’s *The Spectacle of the Void* and Eugene Thacker’s *In the Dust of this Planet* explore connections between ecology and the horror genre. Ben Woodard’s *On an Ungrounded Earth* derives a “new geophilosophy” in response to several works of science fiction. Scott Wilson makes an intriguing move to contemporary music in *Melanocene: Black Metal Theory and Ecology*, where he meditates on the melancholic aspects of ecology in relation to the musical genre of black metal.

18 See, for example, Reza Negarestani’s work of theory/fiction, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials.*
Morton’s emphasis on the ethics of the abject instead of the aesthetics of naturalness represents a powerful challenge to much contemporary ecological thinking. Perhaps most obviously, the notion of dark ecology signifies on “deep ecology,” an ethical paradigm originally developed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss. Deep ecology advocates for the inherent worth of all living beings, regardless of whether they can be used to benefit humans. This philosophy also characterizes the environment as a living whole, a unified realm that humans should respect and regard as possessing intrinsic inalienable rights. “Ironically,” Morton writes, it turns out that deep ecology’s tendency to totalize Nature “does not respect the natural world as actual contingent beings, but as standing in for an idea of the natural” (195; my emphasis). Dark ecology, by contrast, “leav[es] things the way they are,” and in doing so the “task becomes to love the disgusting, inert, meaningless” and “constantly and ruthlessly [to] reframe our view of the ecological: what was ‘outside’ yesterday will become ‘inside’ today” (195). Based on this logic, Morton introduces Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein as an ecological narrative par excellence. Not only does the novel radically question what nature is in the first place, but it also instructs the reader both to love and to identify with the Creature: “We identify with the monstrous thing. We ourselves are ‘tackily’ made of bits and pieces of stuff. The most ethical act is to love the other precisely in their artificiality, rather than seeking to prove their naturalness and authenticity” (195). Dark ecology therefore compels us to “muck in” and love things as they are—not as some idea of Nature or ideology of naturalness dictates.

Although Morton’s work has greatly influenced my own, as will become clear at various points in this dissertation, The Ecological Uncanny diverges from dark ecology in subtle though significant ways. Simply put, my work retains Morton’s ethics of ecological difference (i.e., learning to love what he calls the “strange stranger”) but rejects his rhetoric of “darkness,” which has disquieting racial undertones. The implicit racial inflection of the term “dark ecology” is important to acknowledge when, as I have already mentioned, indigenous peoples (not incidentally, always
people of color) are persistently equated with and hence disappear into Nature. Acknowledging this is especially important in this project, which engages with literatures from the American Southwest and southern Africa—two sites of settler colonialism with complex racial histories that remain deeply contested to this day.

To see why this is a significant issue, allow me to turn to Morton’s somewhat awkward defense of the term “Anthropocene,” a now commonplace term that refers to the most recent geological age when humans have become the dominant agents of geological change. Early in *Dark Ecology*, Morton argues that there are two kinds of “Anthropocene deniers”: those who reject the term as colonialist, and those who reject it as racist. According to Morton, the first camp rejects the concept of the Anthropocene because it gestures to humans on a species level without acknowledging that some humans (particularly Westerners, mostly white) are relatively more responsible for climate change than others. The reasons for this rejection are primarily historical and have to do with imperialism as an economic enterprise that made it possible for European nations to consolidate massive amounts of wealth. As it happens, the Age of Imperialism also coincided with the Industrial Revolution, which is commonly considered both advent and cause of the Anthropocene itself. Morton’s counter to this position is odd and characteristically flippant: “it turns out everyone wants air conditioning.” Morton’s point here is that desire precedes need, not the other way around. Because of this, the kind of developmental (i.e., historical) narrative that would follow a “transition from ‘needing’ to ‘wanting’ ” ignores the possibility that, say, “Neanderthals would have loved Coca-Cola Zero” (15). Though amusing, it isn’t clear how this refutes the claim that the Anthropocene is at base a colonialist concept. In making a philosophical point, Morton wants to sweep history under the rug. He writes, for example: “Desire is logically prior to whatever ‘need’ is,

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19 Note, already, the overly defensive tone of such a phrase, which problematically casts those who question the efficacy of the term *Anthropocene* as flat-out “deniers” of human-driven climate change.

20 Morton includes a note at this point attesting to the “genetic affinities between humans and Neanderthals” (165, n. 29), which doesn’t really hammer his point home.
histories of consumerism notwithstanding” (15). But histories of consumerism are indeed the point, and Morton himself argues as much in his previous work, *Ecology without Nature*, where he claims that the Romantic period (the genesis of imperialism and the Industrial Revolution) gave birth to capitalist subjectivity—that characteristic of the modern subject constantly to (re)imagine him or herself in relation to the material goods made available in the consumer market. Capitalism’s success certainly does depend on the precept that desire creates need. But capitalism’s success also—and more deeply—depends on controlling the wealth and material resources that can be used to foster desire in the first place. Ignoring the historical reality of imperialism and how it continues to shape real-world inequality is a significant oversight, and failing to see how this results in actually unequal contributions to global warming strikes me as a dangerous blunder. Returning to his bit about air conditioning, I think about friends of mine in Dar es Salaam who would love to have air conditioning on 105º summer days, but who certainly can’t afford AC. And even if they could afford cooling units, the power supply is so fickle outside the city’s university district that they might never get to use them. In the material world, desire only goes so far.

Morton also goes after those who reject the Anthropocene as a racist concept. Here, the idea that the human *race* is responsible for climate change is seen as a terminological sleight-of-hand that covers up the relatively greater responsibility of white humans. If I understand Morton correctly—which I submit I may not, as his argument is rather obtuse—he is saying that the Anthropocene isn’t a racist concept because it recognizes that there is a gap between individual humans and the human as a species-level collective, and because it maintains the integrity of this gap. Racists, by contrast, close this gap by assuming the individual (raced) to be a manifestation of the group (race), thereby conflating appearance and essence. According to Morton, however, the concept of the Anthropocene maintains that, as a species, “human need not be something that is ontically given: we can’t see it or touch it or designate it as present in some way (as whiteness or not-blackness et
cetera). There is no obvious constantly present positive content to the human” (15). Basically, this means that race is an appearance (i.e., ontic), not an essence (i.e., ontological), and the concept of the Anthropocene isn’t racist because it recognizes the difference. Once again, I find Morton’s philosophizing politically naïve. His argument strikes me as a fancy way of saying that, because the existence of “race” is not confirmable on the level of genetics, it isn’t real and can thus be dispensed with henceforth. But anyone who has witnessed the collapse of the myth of “post-racial” America and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement will be able to spot the fallacy immediately. Race may be a nonstarter in terms of biological “essence,” but when it comes to the physical appearance of human bodies, race is a hugely significant social, political, and economic reality whose complexity and pervasiveness must be examined closely and unflinchingly.

In this dissertation, I strive to avoid such pitfalls by paying close attention to the political underpinnings of ecological rhetoric. Doing so inevitably makes things more complicated, but as I’ve mentioned before (and here I echo Morton), the difficulty of navigating these competing interests should not dissuade us but compel us to “muck in” and stay with that difficulty.

Plan of the Work

Earlier I mentioned the Heideggerian method of the *Schritt zurück*, and I suggested that my project adopts this method in order to work away at the ecological homecoming narrative from within. For the project at hand, this entails a return to the older aesthetic category of *landscape*. As I have already intimated, and as I discuss at length in the first two chapters of this dissertation, landscape aesthetics play a central role in the ecological homecoming narrative. This is particularly true in the context of narrative fiction, in which landscape has an ekphrastic status that goes beyond simply “setting the scene” or conjuring the “spirit of place” within which a story plays out. Instead, in narrative fiction landscape is the result of a descriptive practice that transforms unfamiliar space
into a viewing subject’s “own particular beloved place.” In doing so, landscape description organizes the phenomenal world around the perceiver and brings her home to her most primary sense of self—much like it did in the example from Schreiner’s *Thoughts on South Africa*. This power to gather a world around a subject constitutes what I call landscape’s “homely metaphysics.”

In contrast to landscape, *ecology* refers to something essentially virtual, and hence unrepresentable as such. Because it cannot appear directly, ecology emerges negatively as a concealed presence. It warps landscape’s homely metaphysics with an unhomely realism that forms the basis for the ecological uncanny: the defamiliarization of the natural world that arises from our dim sense that the essence of Nature lies absolutely beyond the horizon of human being. The ecological uncanny invokes fear of the unknown. Taken to its extreme, it sponsors apocalyptic visions of the world’s end. If landscape functions as a kind of “worlding” figure that consolidates a human dwelling place, then the ecological uncanny actively, even violently unworlds the home gathered by landscape—it has the character of what Heidegger calls “a certain ‘de-worlding’ [Entweltlichung] of the world” (*Being and Time* 65). Close attention to such apocalyptic visions leads away from ecological theories that privilege human agency (ethics, activism, etc.), and instead demonstrates the need for a radical posthumanism that democratizes being and affirms all forms of life.

I weave these philosophical threads through seven chapters that concern a diverse array of writers. I have organized these chapters into two parts, loosely clustered around two central tropes: landscape as a “home,” and landscape as a “world.” Part One maps an initial trajectory from landscape’s homely metaphysics to an unhomely ecology. Part Two at once reiterates and extends this trajectory in order to develop a new theory of ecological realism.

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21 I take this phrase from Terence Ranger, who uses it to describe how European travelers in colonial Rhodesia imaginatively transformed unfamiliar territory into a familiar landscape. The colonialist resonances of this phrase are important and will be examined in subsequent chapters. See *Voices from the Rocks* 12.
Part One begins by considering the status of landscape description in narrative texts. I initially address this issue through the work of Martin Heidegger, whose hermeneutic phenomenology doubles, I contend, as a metaphysics of home. In its broadest strokes, this first chapter figures landscape as a worlding mechanism—that is, a mechanism that organizes a perceptual environment around a human subject. In the context of Heideggerian ontology, landscape (Landschaft) therefore marks the horizon of human finitude beyond which the ecological as such retreats from view. If Heidegger longs to restore human being (Dasein) to its ontological home, I argue that this dwelling-place lies not on Earth (Erde), as his ecologically minded interpreters insist, but in World (Welt). As an everyday manifestation of World, landscape is where we find ourselves most essentially “at home.”

The following chapter extends this conceptual vocabulary to the work of Willa Cather. Specifically, chapter two explores the ekphrastic status of landscape description in narrative, where it actively organizes mere surroundings into a total context of meaning. I explore this phenomenon through Cather’s 1925 novel, The Professor’s House, which uses architecture as a thematic and narratological tool that focalizes landscape into a primordial dwelling place. On a thematic level, the novella at the novel’s center, “Tom Outland’s Story,” outlines how Tom’s settlement and excavation of the Cliff City re-consecrates the Blue Mesa as his own sacred ground—a meaningful landscape that coalesces around him and brings him home to himself. On the level of narrative architecture, this section serves as a kind of narratological picture window that offers the novel’s erstwhile protagonist, St. Peter, a magisterial view of a landscape and a mode of existence that resonates deeply with his own desire for a revitalized sense of being and belonging.

Chapter three begins to trouble the conceptual underpinnings of landscape by examining the obscure forces that haunt D. H. Lawrence’s landscapes of the American Southwest. Emphasizing the “weird anima” of landscape, Lawrence’s New Mexican writings—and particularly his 1925
novella *St. Mawr*—reconceive home as an intrinsically *unhomely* place. Attending to the vital complexity underlying Lawrence's notion of “the spirit of place,” this chapter turns from the homely metaphysics of landscape to the unhomely force of ecology. In the context of Lawrence's fascination with the limits of representation, ecology arises as a name for a “great reality” that remains hidden from perception and is therefore fundamentally unrepresentable.

Part Two makes a conceptual shift from landscape as an imaginative homemaking practice to landscape as a worlding mechanism. It also makes a geographical shift from the American Southwest (the scene of writing for both Cather and Lawrence) to southern Africa (the original site of the [post]colonial farm novel). Ecological realism emerges in these later chapters as an uncanny, insurgent force that dismantles the totalized “world” of the white southern African farm.

Chapter four provides an extended introduction to Part Two. It begins by defining what I call the “farmworld” ideology at the heart of the Afrikaans *plaasroman* (farm novel) tradition, wherein the farm becomes enshrined as a self-enclosed (and hence self-justifying) space—a world in itself that remains metaphysically separate from its surrounding environs. I investigate how this ideology plays out through a reading of C. M. van den Heever's Afrikaans-language novel, *Somer* (1935). After outlining the basic ideological structure of the farmworld, I return to a discussion of the ecological uncanny. In the second half of the chapter, I demonstrate why attending to the ecological uncanny leads to a theory of ecological realism. I also explain why such a realism is both philosophical and literary, at once suggesting a new frame for thinking and introducing a new way of reading.

The theoretical discussion of ecological realism prepares the way for the final chapters, where I explore how three English-language farm novels from across the long twentieth century progressively dismantle the Afrikaner farmworld ideology enshrined in the *plaasroman*. These novels include Olive Schreiner's 1883 *The Story of an African Farm* (chapter five), Doris Lessing's 1950 *The
Grass is Singing (chapter six), and J. M. Coetzee’s 1977 In the Heart of the Country (chapter seven). In particular, I examine quasi-apocalyptic visions that occur in each of these novels when, in moments of mental breakdown, white characters imagine the destruction of the farmworld by way of ecological uprising. These world-ending visions do not simply allegorize a racial insurgency that will eventually restore native lands to black African hands, as many recent readings have it. Rather, these novels disrupt the (post)colonial allegory by developing unique forms of ecological realism. Such uncanny realisms open these novels to speculative modes of reading that reorient our attention from the world of human concern to a wider universe of entities. Thus, although these novels attend closely to the social, political, and historical inequalities of settler colonial society in southern Africa, they also transcend this postcolonial vision. In doing so, they develop a posthuman critique that displaces postcolonial theory’s anthropocentrism, trading dead-end charges of historical complicity for the more fecund ecological concept of contingency.

An introduction to a project as varied in its literary and theoretical interests as this one will inevitably be incomplete; the threads cannot easily be woven together in any straightforward manner. As an overview of some of the central issues at stake in the project, I hope it has been sufficient. Whatever remains unexplained will unfold over the course of the seven chapters that follow.
Part One:

Landscape Metaphysics and the Ecological Uncanny

I found a little plot of land
in the garden of Eden
it was dirt and dirt is all the same.
I tilled it with my two hands
and I called it my very own;
there was no one to dispute my claim.
      Joanna Newsom. “81.”

What happens when you idealize the soil, the mother-earth, and really go back to it?
Then with overwhelming conviction it is borne in upon you ... that the whole schema
of things is against you. The whole massive rolling of natural fate is coming down on
you like a slow glacier, to crush you to extinction.
      D. H. Lawrence. Studies in Classic American Literature
Chapter 1

Homely Metaphysics in a Heideggerian World: Dasein, Dwelling, Landscape

Philosophy is really homesickness, an urge to be at home everywhere. Where, then, are we going? Always to our home.

Novalis

Martin Heidegger may have an enduring reputation as the twentieth century’s greatest thinker of being and time, but in this chapter I contend that his work may be better understood primarily as developing a metaphysics of home. Taken as a whole, it is not difficult to see why the rhetoric of home stands at the center of Heidegger’s work. Indeed, his lifelong philosophical project sought to wrest humanity out of its exile in the post-industrial age of technology and to manifest a radical homecoming to being. Such a homecoming did not entail the construction of a new philosophical edifice so much as the de-construction (Destruktion) of the ontological tradition within Western metaphysics, which understood being strictly in terms of beings—that is, in terms of the constant presence (Anwesenheit) of physically manifest entities. For Heidegger, relearning how properly to pose the question of being requires us to inhabit an essential mode of dwelling that the metaphysical tradition had rendered obscure. Only in rediscovering how to be can we truly find our home in the world and dwell in the primordial “house of being” (Haus des Seins).

Perhaps ironically, Heidegger’s homely rhetoric taps into a deep-seated nostalgia intrinsic to Western thought that persists in his work despite its apparent Destruktion of metaphysics. This nostalgia manifests in what I call the alienation paradigm, which subscribes to a logic that at once laments the loss of something essential and, in the absence of what has been lost, promises its future restoration. Christian theology provides a touchstone example, in which Paradise lost may be regained in the afterlife, though believers must live out their earthly existence as expatriates, exiled from Eden until the grace of God restores their heavenly citizenship. That which has been lost shall
be regained, though, tragically, it always remains absent in the present moment. A more charismatic version of the alienation paradigm appears in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass,* when the White Queen explains to Alice the paradoxical rule of jam: “The rule is, jam to-morrow and jam yesterday—but never jam today.” Objecting to the Queen’s logic, Alice exclaims, “It MUST come sometimes to ‘jam to-day.’” “No, it can’t,” the Queen retorts: “It’s jam every OTHER day: to-day isn’t any OTHER day, you know.” “It’s dreadfully confusing!” Alice concludes. Jam yesterday and jam tomorrow, but never jam today.\(^1\) Faced with Alice’s perplexity at this logic, the Queen admits: “That’s the effect of living backwards.”

The alienation paradigm has always haunted Western thought, causing it to “live backward” in precisely this way. From its beginnings, Western civilization has always mythologized the loss of its own origins. As far back as Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (c. 700 BCE), the Greeks imagined the first era of humanity as a Golden Age of primordial peace and harmony, long since lost to those suffering through the Iron Age of decline in which Hesiod himself lived. Whether due to our being cast out of the Garden of Eden, getting sealed within the prison house of consciousness, or as more recent arguments go, becoming urbanized into a state of alienation from rural life, the reigning dogma stretching from the Greeks into our own modernity declares that we live (and, it would seem, have always been living) in an age of exile: exile from the good old days, from ourselves, from our communities, from Nature, and so on. In all of its various manifestations, the alienation paradigm has endowed the Western metaphysical tradition with deep-rooted nostalgia, a desire for some radical form of *nostos,* or homecoming. Heidegger’s own project grows from these roots, as does all philosophy, according to the epigraph from Novalis that opens Heidegger’s *The Fundamental Concepts*

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\(^1\) Characteristically for Carroll, “jam” doubles here as a pun on the Latin adverb *jam,* which means “now” or “already” and hence explicitly references the temporal paradox at the heart of the Queen’s logic: the present moment can only exist at other times.
of Metaphysics: “Philosophy is really homesickness, an urge to be at home everywhere. Where, then, are we going? Always to our home” (5).

Heidegger’s own strategy of “backward living”—encapsulated in his method of taking a Schritt zurück, or “step back”—harnesses phenomenology in order to lead us home to our most essential dwelling in being. Admittedly, I am not the first to emphasize the “homely” aspects of Heidegger’s hermeneutics. Many of Heidegger’s interpreters, and particularly his ecologically minded ones, have read his work through the lens of what in his later essays he calls Wohnen, or “dwelling.”

Despite a shared emphasis on dwelling, however, what distinguishes our interpretations is a fundamental difference in our understandings of “where” dwelling might be said to “take place.” The question of the “location” of dwelling proves a difficult one, and one that always haunted Heidegger. He felt particularly deflated by persistent misunderstanding of “Dasein,” the term he used to refer to human being. Dasein is the ordinary German word for “existence,” but its literal meaning, “being-there,” has fueled much confusion. Where exactly does Dasein, as a being-there, dwell? The answer: no specific place, if place means some location that could be plotted on a map. Heidegger frequently guards against all literally spatial understandings of the Da of Dasein, as when he complains about its rendering in French as être-là—a literal translation of “being-there” that comes across less gracefully in a language unused to compound nouns and hence fails to signify Dasein’s colloquial meaning as existence (existence, in French). With this rendering, Heidegger

2 While ecologically inclined readers tend to celebrate the concept of Wohnen, others emphasize the dark side of dwelling, most notoriously in its apparent connection to the National Socialism of the Nazi Party. This strain of critique began with the 1987 publication of a book by Chilean historian Victor Farías, Heidegger and Nazism, in which the author indicted the life’s work of his former teacher as implicitly fascist. The recognition of Heidegger’s entanglement with National Socialism has led some of his less charitable interpreters to draw damming connections between his concept of dwelling—itsel frequently paired in his writing with the notion of homeland (Heimat)—and the Nazi ideology of Blut und Boden, which invokes an exclusive definition of German identity based on the pairing of blood descent (Blut, blood) and loyalty to the homeland (Boden, soil). For readers such as David Harvey and Neil Leach, the concept of “dwelling” articulates a potentially fascist strain of Heidegger’s thinking. See, for example, Harvey’s The Condition of Post-Modernity, 207–9, as well as Leach’s “The Dark Side of the Domus: The Redomestication of Central and Eastern Europe.” Conversely, I follow a contingent of scholars such as Hannah Arendt, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jeff Malpas, and Herbert Marcuse who denounce such criticism for its failure to engage rigorously with Heidegger’s writing as well as its attempt to “discredit ideas explicit in the later thinking largely on the basis of the political engagement apparently present in the earlier” (Malpas 20).
complains, “everything that was gained as a new position in Being and Time is lost. Are human beings there like a chair? . . . Dasein does not mean being there and being here [Dort- und Hiersein]” (Heidegger and Fink 126). Gaston Bachelard falls prey to this mistake in The Poetics of Space when he asks: “Where is the main stress, for instance, in being there (être-là): on being, or on there? In there—which would be better to call here—shall I first look for my being? Or am I going to find, in my being, above all, certainty of my fixation in a there?” (213). But for Heidegger there can be no fixed “hereness” or “thereness” of being. Ironically given his debt to Heidegger, Bachelard entirely misses the point.3 Dasein dwells in a more abstract location: not a specific place, but rather an “openness where beings can be present for the human being, and the human being also for himself” (Zollikon Seminars 120).

What, exactly, is at stake in revisiting the question of dwelling’s location? In this chapter I am particularly concerned with challenging the appropriation of Heideggerian dwelling for environmental philosophy. Whereas Heidegger’s environmentally inclined readers tend to locate dwelling on what he termed Earth (Erde), I assert that the “openness” Heidegger describes above refers exclusively to what he called World (Welt). Ecophilosophical and ecocritical understandings of Earth tend to take this term too concretely, imagining it to be the earthy soil that physically grounds human existence and mobilizing it for an ethics that would return humans to a more harmonious balance with Nature. In this sense, Heidegger’s environmental interpreters suffer from the same

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3 For those unfamiliar with Heidegger’s work, a reading of The Poetics of Space fails to disclose the fact that Bachelard’s “phenomenology of intimate spaces” develops directly out of Heidegger’s phenomenological project. Not only does Bachelard never mention Heidegger by name, but he also quietly disavows any association with Heideggerian ontology. For example, in the concluding chapter Bachelard takes to task what he calls the “language of agglutination” in contemporary philosophy: that is, a language that multiplies hyphens, creating compound words “that are sentences in themselves, in which the outside features blend with the inside” (213). For Bachelard, one particularly mischievous aspect of this agglutinating language is its tendency to unwe prefixes and suffixes from their etymological roots and allow them “to think for themselves.” “Because of this,” Bachelard complains, “words are occasionally thrown out of balance” (213). As it turns out, être-là is the term Bachelard singles out for criticism. Whereas Heidegger plays on the ambiguity of Da, which in German simultaneously means “here” and “there,” Bachelard insists on a certain fixity. He rejects être-là in favor of an être-ici, which squares better with his notion of how being gets concentrated within intimate places. Hence, Bachelard’s theory of “felicitous space” stems from a misunderstanding—or Bloomian “misprision”—of the Heideggerian Da.
homely nostalgia as their favorite philosopher. Just as they see Heidegger calling for a return to the earth, they call for a similar restoration of humanity to the sensuous web of what David Abram calls the “more-than-human world.” Often, this calls leads environmental philosophers further astray, appealing, for example, to the figure of “indigenous people” (it matters little from where) who purportedly embody a more harmonious and sustainable ethics that has been lost to those of us exiled from the earth in our technologically driven civilization. I argue, by contrast, that if we are to consider the use-value of Heideggerian phenomenology for ecological thought, we may need to curb our enthusiasm about Earth and reject romantic fantasies of a primitive return to the soil—a fantasy that Heidegger himself resists.4

The distinction between my interpretation of Heidegger’s homely metaphysics and the Earth-centric understanding advanced by his environmentally inclined readers is threefold. I will expand on each of these points in the sections that follow. First, as will already be clear, whereas Heidegger’s eco-interpreters emphasize his concept of Earth, I emphasize the enduring importance of World throughout his career, even as it develops in tandem with Earth from 1936 onward. Second, whereas readers invested in extracting environmental lessons tend to focus on the implications of Earth for the development of an earthy new ethics of “letting-be,” I remain skeptical of the relevance of such an ethics. This does not mean that I reject the conceptual importance of

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4 In *Being and Time* Heidegger discusses “the difficulties of securing a ‘natural concept of the world’ ” that he associates with “primitive peoples.” Heidegger does argue that “Primitive Dasein often speaks out of a more primordial [ursprünglichen] absorption in ‘phenomena’ ” (50). However, despite this unfortunate misstep, Heidegger goes on to reject the significance of any “natural” world concept that develops from such a “primordial absorption.” He indicates that it may appear seductive to gather anthropological information from “the most far-flung and manifold cultures and forms of existence available today” (50), but such data, ethnographically sourced, always remains ontic—that is, related to the experience of existence rather than to the essence of existence, which essence is the province of ontology. Anthropological data therefore does not help further an ontological project:

Subjecting the manifold to tabulation does not guarantee a real understanding of what has been ordered. The genuine principle of order has its own content which is never found by ordering but is rather already presupposed in ordering. Thus the explicit idea of world as such is a prerequisite for the order of world images. And if “world” itself is constitutive of Dasein, the conceptual development of the phenomenon of world required an insight into the fundamental structures of Dasein. (51)

In other words, World must be understood as constitutive of Dasein; it is not simply built from “natural” world images that have been gathered from “primitive” peoples.
Earth in Heidegger’s work as a whole. However, as I discuss at length below, I think its importance lies in its function as a figure for withdrawal more than in its poetic translation into a specifically environmental ethics. In this sense, instead of sponsoring a vision of environmental enmeshment, Earth more aptly marks an epistemological breach between what comes into appearance for Dasein (within the World) and what remains beyond human knowledge—in what Quentin Meillassoux cleverly calls “the great outdoors” of thought. I am therefore arguing for an interpretation of Heidegger as a philosopher of human finitude. Even as he posits an “outside” to human thought and being, his strength lies, rather, in his thinking of World as an ontological horizon for Dasein—a limit beyond which Earth radically retreats from view.

Third, and following closely from this last point, whereas those invested in environmental ethics hope to prepare the way for a postmetaphysical ecology of dwelling, I believe that Heidegger’s work better positions us to examine the homely metaphysics intrinsic to landscape. In the final and most important section of this chapter, I turn to a central passage in Heidegger’s 1951 essay “Building Dwelling Thinking” that exhibits a curious slippage between the terms World and landscape (Landschaft). I exploit this slippage in order to demonstrate how landscape, as a gathering of mere surroundings into a meaningful context, represents a concrete or “ontic” manifestation of World, which is otherwise a more primordial (i.e., ontological) phenomenon. Landscape both takes place and makes place in the World, ushering the homely aspects of the World into radical nearness. As I will also show, narration plays an important role in the passage from “Building Dwelling Thinking,” as Heidegger must actively narrate the “gathering” (Versammlung) of Earth into World, of land into landscape.
World, not Earth

Critical consensus among Heidegger scholars posits a so-called Kehre, or “turning,” midway through the philosopher’s career as he moves away from Dasein and the “meaning of being” (the preoccupation of Being and Time) to the “truth of being” (the preoccupation of his writing from Contributions to Philosophy onward). This turning also apparently entails a shift in emphasis from World to Earth. It is perhaps due to this latter shift that Heidegger’s eco-interpreters tend to focus exclusively on the later essays, which are characterized by a philosophical language that is more “down to earth,” so to speak. Drawn to Heidegger’s more poetic style, ecocritics talk up the earthly significance of language, and ecophilosophers contemplate the newfound prominence of Earth among Heidegger’s catalogue of concrete abstractions. In both cases, as the Earth takes center stage, it becomes the site of our (i.e., humans’) most primordial dwelling. According to the ecocritics, the power of poeisis enables us finally to “come home” in an age of exile, so long as we learn to sing the “song of the earth” as Heidegger’s favorite poets—Hölderlin and Rilke—have done. For the ecophilosophers, the development of an Earth-centric ethics will return us to our original selves as members of a more-than-human community.

Unlike these interpreters, however, I remain skeptical of any significant turning in Heidegger’s work. Although a clear stylistic and lexical transformation occurs, I disagree that Heidegger’s newfound earthiness constitutes a major advancement in his thinking as such. Instead, threaded throughout his lengthy career I see a profound and even monotonous continuity organized around a single theme that remains central from Being and Time to the late essays. Indeed, all of Heidegger’s work concerns the constant, dynamic oscillation between presence and absence, appearance and withdrawal. Contrary to those who emphasize the ecological resonances of his post-turn career, I argue that, within the broader context of Heidegger’s hermeneutics, Earth emerges simply as one polarity of this enduring oscillation. In particular, it names the polarity of absence, or
concealment. Furthermore, as part of a twofold dynamic, Earth cannot be thought independently from its companion, World, which names the polarity of presence, or unconcealment. These polarities exist in a mutually sustaining relationship of tension that Heidegger calls “strife” (Streit). However, despite the essential belonging-together of Earth and World, in this section I aim to demonstrate that within the context of Heidegger’s analysis, Earth is a secondary concept, one that serves primarily as a tool for defining World as the open region within which Dasein most essentially dwells.

Heidegger first investigates this relation between Earth and World in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art.” Initially delivered as a lecture in Freiburg in 1935 and expanded for a three-part lecture in Frankfurt the following year, Heidegger’s “Origin” essay circles around the question of whether the work of art originates in its status as a “thing.” Although the thingliness of art is his primary preoccupation, for my purposes here, the essay’s greater significance resides in its investigation of the “work-character” of the work of art. Heidegger claims that an artwork, as a work, possesses the power to “gather [sammeln]” together two opposing forces: Earth and World. Heidegger introduces these terms in his famous analysis of a Van Gogh painting, where he claims that the well-worn pair of boots depicted in the work at once “belongs to the earth, and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman” (159–60). However, it is not until the later passage on the Greek temple that Heidegger begins to clarify the nature of Earth and World. He begins by establishing these concepts’ cryptic interrelation through the example of a building and its surroundings:

Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the [temple] draws up out of the rock the obscurity of that rock’s bulky yet spontaneous support. Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first [erst] makes the storm itself manifest in its violence. . . . The temple’s firm towering makes visible the invisible space of the air. The steadfastness of the work contrasts with the surge of the surf, and its own repose brings out the raging of the sea. Tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first [erst] enter into their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are. (167–68)
The contrastive, even dialectical language Heidegger employs in this passage describes something of an ontogenetic relationship between the temple and its surroundings. The temple stands between ground and sky. The very fact of its standing there reveals something about the sturdiness of the rock on which it is built, and through this sturdy grounding the temple brings the aerial chaos of the storm into appearance. Ground, sky, and temple each initially come into appearance in the context of their interrelations. This is why Heidegger repeatedly stresses that the storm as well as the plants and animals “first” emerge in relation to the temple.

Yet Heidegger’s dialectical narration proves trickier than it initially seems. After all, Heidegger is no traditional dialectician, which has made his peculiar form of dialectical thinking easy to misapprehend. Mark Wigley, for instance, takes the temple as an entity that actively creates its surroundings rather than simply making them apparent. Wigley argues that the site on which the temple stands is not pre-given for Heidegger: “It does not stand on a ground that preceded it and on which it depends for its structural integrity. . . . The building’s structure makes the ground possible. The ground is constituted rather than simply revealed by that which appears to be added to it” (61; my emphasis). Here Wigley falls victim to Heidegger’s admittedly confusing lexicon. By no means does Heidegger suggest that the temple actually produces the physical ground on which it stands; nor does he mean that the temple produces its own metaphysical foundation in the philosophical sense of Grund. Rather, he says that the temple establishes its own site, which emerges from the relation between temple and surroundings. For Heidegger, “site” (Stätte) designates an open region within which beings can come into view—a “clearing” (Lichtung) that brings otherwise concealed entities into phenomenal appearance.5

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5 Throughout his career Heidegger develops a dizzying topological lexicon, one that has perhaps limited scholarly engagement with the spatial thrust of his work. The proliferation of topological terminology is especially confusing in later essays like “Building Dwelling Thinking,” where Heidegger distinguishes between up to six different words for “place.” Although rigorous definitions of his terms remain elusive, Jeff Malpas has pointed out a crucial distinction between two main clusters of spatial terms: Ort, Ortschaft, and Stätte on the one hand, and Platz, Stelle, and Statt on the other.
The dialectic of concealment and appearance constitutes the basic dynamic of Earth and World, respectively, a dynamic that Wigley misapprehends when he prioritizes the architectural figure over its relation with its surroundings. Indeed, it is the relationship that is primary. Furthermore, as Heidegger goes on to clarify, Earth does not correlate with the surroundings (the rocks, the sky, the sea) in any simple way, nor is the temple equivalent to World. Instead, Earth and World name two polarities that emerge within the interrelation between surroundings and temple, and yet remain separate from each of these specific entities. Earth, for instance, does not refer to our home planet or to an “earthy” mass of organic and mineral matter. Rather, it signifies that which allows what comes into appearance (here: the temple and its surroundings) to be what it is precisely by keeping its essential properties hidden from view: “In the things that arise [i.e., come into appearance], earth occurs essentially as the sheltering agent” (“Origin” 168). Earth preserves the vitality of things by keeping their essence secret.

What is challenging about Heidegger’s language is that he means it concretely and abstractly at the same time. Eco-interpreters, however, tend to stress the concreteness of Earth. Even some non-ecologically inclined scholars such as Joseph Fell have claimed that “Earth is not a category, nor is it advanced by Heidegger as a speculative ground,” but is, rather, “intended concretely” (196–97). Such an understanding is correct insofar as Heidegger uses very concrete examples to elaborate his concepts. In the “Origin” essay, for instance, Heidegger discusses a stone to clarify the meaning of Earth. In this example, Heidegger does mean to talk about an actual stone, but by no means does he claim that its physical “concreteness” constitutes its earthy character. Instead, Earth occurs in the stone insofar as we cannot penetrate to the stoneness of the stone by way of measuring, say, its...
weight or volume. Rational or scientific analysis betrays the earthly nature of the stone, transforming it into numerical data expressed in arbitrary units of kilograms or cubic centimeters. The stone, by contrast, “shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained. Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate it. It causes every merely calculating importunity upon it to turn into a destruction. . . . The earth appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is essentially undisclosable” (“Origin” 172). Although the stone in the example really is a stone, the earthly character Heidegger identifies does not simply lie in the stone’s concreteness as a dense assemblage of minerals. Earth signifies precisely that which cannot be disclosed about the stone, that which withdraws and hence cannot be directly equated with the stone as a mere mass of matter (Stoffmasse). Hence, the apparent concreteness of Earth recedes into a more obscure realm of undisclosable essences.

If Earth represents a mode of concealment, then its dialectical companion—World—manifests what Heidegger calls “unconcealment [ἀλήθεια, aletheia].” Just as Earth indicates something more than mere matter, World refers to something more than a realm stuffed with beings; nor is it a simple catalogue of entities that populate a certain space. World is not a container for other beings. Instead, it is better understood as something that allows phenomena to appear in the first place. As Heidegger explains: “The world worlds [Welt weltet], and is more fully in Being [seiender] than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home [worin wir uns heimisch glauben]. World is never an object that stands before us and can be seen. World is the ever-nonobjective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into Being” (170). World may not directly designate the realm of the tangible or perceptible as such, but it does name an essential openness that allows beings to become perceptible

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6 I have emended this translation so that it is more consistent with the spelling conventions used in English-language translations of Heidegger. Whether the error of the translator or the editor, the translated text renders “seiender” as “more fully in being.” However, since “seiender” refers to the concept (Being) rather than to an individual entity (being), I have changed “being” to “Being.”
to other beings in the first place. Not unlike a clearing in the forest (one of Heidegger’s favorite metaphors), World is that open arena within which beings come into appearance.

Crucially, for Heidegger, World is something that belongs exclusively to Dasein, an entity he describes in Being and Time as most primordially a “being-in-the-world.” The phenomenon of unconcealment transpires only for Dasein insofar as phenomena are events that happen in the World. This is one of the reasons why Heidegger’s phenomenology begins with an exclusive focus on Dasein. Dasein has “ontic-ontological” priority for Heidegger not only because it is a being (seiende) that thinks about being (Sein), but also because, through its enmeshment within the phenomenal (ontic) realm, it provides access to ontological interpretation. Dasein therefore makes phenomenology possible in its most originary sense as apophainesthai tâ phainómena—“let[ting] what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself” (Being and Time 32).

In subsequent sections I shall expand and refine this understanding of World. For the moment, however, what is at issue is its dynamic interrelation with Earth. I suggested above that just as the temple could not be correlated with World, neither could Earth be linked to the temple’s “natural” surroundings. How, then, does the relationship between temple and surroundings exemplify the World–Earth polarity of appearance and concealment? In the “Origin” essay, Heidegger continues by describing how the temple itself “sets up a world.” As an artwork—a “built thing” (gebantes Ding) that gathers materials together into a meaningful assemblage—the temple represents more than just a physical construction: it is an Er-richten, an “erecting” that is also a dedication and a consecration of space. In this sense, the erection of the temple constitutes an act of space-making: “A work, by being a work, makes space [räumt ein] for that spaciousness [of world]. . . . The work as a work sets up a world. The work holds open the open region of the world” (“Origin” 170). By gathering physical materials into a meaningful structure, the temple sets up an environment in which those very materials can come forth into phenomenal appearance. As the
following passage demonstrates, however, even as the materials are “set forth” as phenomena, they are simultaneously “set back” into the hidden essences that make these materials what they in themselves are.  

[The] temple-work, in setting up a world, . . . causes it to come forth for the very first time and to come into the open region of the work’s world. The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes a rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colors to glow, tones to sing, the word to say. All this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of wood, into the hardness and luster of metal, into the brightening and darkening of color, into the clang of tone, and into the naming power of the word. (171)

Hence, the elements of the temple’s construction at once shine forth “within” the World set up by the temple and retreat back into the obscure mystery of their earthly essence.

The setting forth of World paired with the setting back of Earth instigates a dynamic relation that is manifest in the temple work. These modes belong together despite being “essentially different” from one another (174). Yet, instead of representing a hollow unity of opposites, Heidegger speaks of this relationship as a mutually sustaining dynamic of strife:

In essential strife [wesenhaften Streit] . . . the opponents raise [heben] each other into the self-assertion of their essential natures . . . In strife, each opponent carries the other beyond itself. Thus strife becomes ever more intense as striving, and more properly what it is. The strife, for its part, outdoes itself, the more inflexibly do the opponents let themselves go into the intimacy of simple belonging to one another. The earth cannot disperse with the open region of the world if it itself is to appear as earth in the liberated surge of its self-seclusion. The world in turn cannot soar out of the earth’s site if, as the governing breadth and path of all essential destiny, it is to ground itself on something decisive. (174)

In setting up a World that sets itself back into the Earth, the temple work instigates a dialectic of strife reminiscent of the Heraclitean notion of polemos (war), the essential dynamic through which all things come into being. In this sense, World and Earth cannot be thought independently of one another. As the above passage demonstrates, the polarities of appearance and concealment must be understood as gleichursprünglich, or “equiprimordial” as John Macquarrie translates the term; they are equally primordial such that, from an ontological perspective, neither one precedes the other.

7 Here I echo Heidegger’s use of italics to signal the ontological resonance of the verb “to be.”
Indeed, it is their essential belonging-together that provides Dasein with its ontological ground: “Upon the earth and in it, historical man grounds his dwelling in the world” (172).

The “equiprimordiality” of World and Earth and their dynamic oscillation between appearance and withdrawal stands at very heart of the “Origin” essay. Yet at the same time, the essay turns on the problem of the work of art. Like the temple, the artwork gathers mere stuff into a meaningful order that in turn allows for things to come into appearance. The work of art sets up a World. Hence the real goal of Heidegger’s essay is less to bring greater clarity to the particular problem of Earth, or even to refine the explication of the presence-absence dynamic begun in Being and Time. Instead, I argue that Heidegger’s primary concern in the “Origin” essay is to demonstrate how World, as the openness of a “site” or a “clearing,” emerges from out of the radical withdrawal represented by Earth. Heidegger may insist on the significance of Earth as that which grounds the World, but as a figure for concealment, Earth remains unknowable to Dasein. Indeed, as I mentioned above, Dasein only has access to World. Hence, despite his claim for the equiprimordiality of World and Earth, Heidegger is ultimately more concerned with World. Another way of putting this is that, in developing his phenomenology, Heidegger is necessarily more invested in how phenomena come into appearance than in how things withdraw into themselves. For this reason, Heidegger must effectively bracket the problem of Earth in favor of investigating World through the particular being (i.e., Dasein) to which it belongs. This is why, at the conclusion of his temple example in the “Origin” essay, Heidegger gestures to the radical dependency of World on Earth yet still insists that “historical man” ultimately “grounds his dwelling in the world.” Dasein is at home in the World.

For Heidegger’s eco-interpreters, however, emphasizing Dasein as a “being-in-the-world” (in-der-Welt-sein) would seem to betray Earth’s status in the later writings as “the building bearer, nourishing with its fruits, tending water and rock, plant and animal” (“The Thing” 176). Indeed,
ecologically minded scholars of both literature and philosophy have tended to insist that Earth, not World, represents our primordial home. In the literary context of ecocriticism, the Heideggerian turn has proven most influential in studies of the Romantic period. In his volume *The Song of the Earth*, for instance, Jonathan Bate adopts Heidegger’s phenomenological poetics in order to eschew metaphysical speculation and, as it were, keep his scholarship “grounded.” For Bate, this shift requires the rejection of World and the complete embrace of the Earth. He expresses this most clearly in his book’s final chapter, “What Are Poets For?,” in which he approaches Heidegger by way of engagement with Paul Ricoeur, one of Heidegger’s successors in the field of hermeneutic phenomenology. Bate explains that, for Ricoeur, “a ‘world’ is a horizon of possibilities which constitutes an environment. . . . ‘The world is where we dwell’ ” (251). Bate insists, however, that this conceptualization of World as a dwelling place misrepresents Heidegger. “Ricoeur’s ‘world’—the abstract, disembodied zone of possibility—is a building inside the head. It is not synonymous with any *actual* dwelling-place upon the earth” (251; my emphasis). According to Bate, Ricoeur’s understanding of World fails to “speak to the condition of ecological belonging” because it remains too bound up with language, which Bate, ignoring the lessons of poststructuralism, rejects as “the archetypal place of severance—of alienation—from immediate situatedness”: “If ‘world’ is, as Ricoeur has it, a panoply of possible experiences and imaginings projected through the infinite potentiality of writing, then our world, our home, is not earth but language” (251). Bate insists that Heidegger rejects this idea that we dwell in language *as such* and instead favors a special kind of writing, one that possesses “the peculiar power to speak ‘earth.’ ” Heidegger calls this special language “poetry,” a name that Bate elevates to “the song of the earth” (251). Following from Bate, other Romanticists such as Kate Rigby have made a similar turn to Heideggerian “ecopoësis” to point the way toward a reclamation and re-enchantment of the world—or as Rigby argues, a “re-sacralization” and therefore a “saving of the earth.” Although Rigby resists Bate’s easy acceptance
of Heidegger’s adequation of truth and poetry, she nevertheless affirms the power of poetry to bring us home to the earth and to ourselves in our current “age of increasingly universal dislocation” (12).

Just as romanticists like Bate and Rigby have affirmed the power of ecopoeisis to revivify human dwelling on the Earth, a contingent of environmentally minded philosophers has emphasized the essential earthiness of dwelling. For example, Bruce Foltz attempts to demonstrate how Heidegger deconstructs the metaphysics of “nature as an object to be ‘looked at’ ” and replaces it with the more primordial notion of “nature as ‘just there.’ ” While this latter formulation may seem like a return to what Derrida has called the “metaphysics of presence,” Foltz insists that it refers “simply to the ‘nearness’ and ‘significance’ of nature, which are jeopardized by modern science and technology” (144). For Foltz, such an understanding dismantles any notion of the natural world as scenery and reinstates the Earth as an essential dwelling place: “The earth as homeland is that which unobtrusively surrounds the genuine inhabitant” (144). Although Foltz remains less convinced than Bate and Rigby that Heidegger’s notion of dwelling represents a specifically Romantic perspective on Nature, he nevertheless agrees with them on the significance of dwelling as an essentially “poetic” and Earth-centric concept. Similarly, for Michael Zimmerman, the ecological ethos of Heidegger’s later writings teaches us that “we can dwell on the Earth only by submitting to our primary obligation: to be open for the Being of beings” (99)—or to “let things be,” as Heidegger is also wont to say. Neither of these scholars seems to recall that World is fundamental for Dasein; to them, World seems too bound up with “second nature” (i.e., culture), whereas Earth names Nature directly. If only “we” can get back to (first) Nature, “we” can end our long exile in the World of civilization and come home to the Earth.8

8 Other scholars of philosophy, such as Joseph Grange and Simon P. James, have emphasized the importance of “the unity of reality” (Grange) and “holism” (James) with respect to Heidegger’s notion of gathering (Versammlung).
As I discussed at the beginning of this section, one reason why Heidegger’s eco-interpreters focus on Earth instead of World has to do with a supposed turning in the philosopher’s thought: as World seems to recede from view, Earth appears to ascend into prominence. However, understood as the name for concealment within the dialectic of strife, I think that Earth constitutes less of a significant advancement in Heidegger’s thinking than advocates of the concept think. What animates his work over the longue durée lies deeper than any turn in subject matter; indeed, it is the primordial dynamic between concealment of unconcealment that dominates Heidegger’s work from the beginning to the end of his career—from the tool analysis in Being and Time to the concept of the “fourfold” (das Geviert) that he develops in his later essays. Although not named until the “Origin” essay in 1935, the concept of Earth is already implicit in his 1927 magnum opus. Likewise, the concept of World remains central to the four-way polarity of das Geviert at least as late as 1949. It may seem reductive to dismiss the changes in Heidegger’s language and style as ornamental variations; after all, rhetorical nuances often make all the difference. And yet, as Alfred North Whitehead claims, “each phraseology leads to a crop of misunderstandings” (qtd. in Shaviro 17). In Heidegger’s case, I believe that his shifts in emphasis and rhetorical style have generated more misunderstanding than otherwise. Hence, I contend that although Heidegger must be remembered as a thinker of withdrawal, ultimately, I think he is a better thinker of appearance and of how appearance radically depends on withdrawal. This is why, even in the later work where Earth seems of utmost importance, Heidegger continues to insist that Dasein dwells within the “openness of Being” that just is the World.

Whereas I have shown that gathering pertains to the concept of World, these scholars contend that gathering prepares the way for a proto–deep ecology that takes being and ecology (i.e., Earth) as its central subjects.
Ontological Limits, not Environmental Ethics

A fuller understanding of why World, not Earth, is primary for Heidegger depends on an understanding of why ontological limits, not environmental ethics, stand at the heart of his phenomenology.

I begin by focusing on Bruce Foltz’s pioneering volume, *Inhabiting the Earth*, which represents one of the earliest comprehensive attempts to read Heidegger’s project as developing a new environmental ethics. Foltz aims to demonstrate how Heidegger works toward a “post-metaphysical understanding of nature” that also necessitates a “post-technological” ethics of nature (4–5). For Heidegger, a post-technological ethics issues a cease-and-desist order regarding (Western) modernity’s tendency to instrumentalize humans and nonhumans alike. Instead of treating all entities like present-to-hand resources sitting around like a standing reserve (*Bestand*) waiting to be processed, this ethics entails what Heidegger calls *Gelassenheit*, a “releasement” that lets entities be as they are. Hence, an ethics of “letting-be” requires us to resist the subordination of entities to the bottomless hunger of technological consumption. For his part, Foltz develops a series of five theses that attempt to formalize an understanding of “the earth as homeland” (172). The first three theses revolve around the concept of dwelling and its “poetic” resonance with notions of conservation and saving the Earth, where “saving” (*retten*) is a “rescuing” that “set[s] something free into its own essence” (165). In his fourth thesis, Foltz claims that dwelling constitutes the primordial character of ethics. Here, ethics is not simply a question of moral comportment; it’s an “understanding of what it means to dwell within the midst of beings as a whole” (168) and “how we hold ourselves in relation to the being of entities” (169). Technology represents a betrayal of this primordial character of ethics: it is “above all else a ‘bearing of human beings’ toward entities that proceeds from ‘an already decided way of interpreting the world’” (169).
The fifth thesis is an extension of the fourth. In it, Foltz claims that dwelling poetically upon the Earth constitutes the possibility for a genuine *environmental* ethic. This fifth and most important thesis depends on having a “genuine understanding of the environment itself” (171). According to Foltz, Heidegger points toward such a genuine understanding when, in *Being and Time*, he rejects the use of the term *Umwelt* (“environment”) in the biological sciences, claiming that “the environment is a structure which even biology as a positive science can never find and can never define, but must presuppose and constantly employ” (qtd. in Foltz 172). What the biological sciences ( ecology included) understand as “environment” actually refers to *environs* or mere surroundings (*Umgebung*). *Umgebung* is the province of animals, plants, and inorganic entities like stones, which, according to Heidegger, do not have a consolidated perceptual World like Dasein does. Instead, nonhuman entities languish in states with relative degrees of worldlessness (*Weltlosigkeit*). Humans are thus the only beings that have an environment in the “genuine” sense of *Umwelt*. This makes sense, given that *Um-welt*, which literally means “world that surrounds,” functions almost synonymously for Heidegger with its root, *Welt*. Hence, as Foltz asserts in his discussion of “the human environment,” “the ‘surrounding’ character of the environment must be understood with regard to the phenomenon of ‘world,’ that which in every case is ‘already previously uncovered and from which we return to the entities with which we have to do and among which we dwell’ ” (172; my emphasis). What this means is that the environment, understood as *Umwelt*, has nothing to do with Earth. Instead, the environment as such just is the World.

This conflation of *Umwelt* and *Welt* contradicts Foltz’s erstwhile association of the natural environment with “the *earth* as homeland.” Foltz’s main problem is that he neglects to consider...

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9 In *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger advances a threefold claim: humans are “world-forming,” animals are “poor in world,” and stones are “worldless.” His argument hinges on defining nonhuman animals’ “poverty” in world. Unfortunately, Heidegger never satisfactorily defines this notion of poverty, despite his extensive use of examples from the field of apiology (bee studies) and the “philosophical biology” of Jakob von Uexküll. In *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, Derrida rightly rejects the violence of Heidegger’s attempt to establish an unbridgeable ontological gap between “man” and “animal.” Michael Marder has also pointed to Heidegger’s failure to address the question of botanical worlds.
World and Earth as two poles of a single dynamic relationship. Although in earlier parts of the book he deals competently with this issue, in his culminating chapter Foltz allows these two polarities to uncouple such that his “genuine understanding of the environment itself” itself oscillates, privileging Earth one moment and World the next. This oscillation seems to be the result of an anthropocentric bias in Foltz’s environmental ethics:

A genuine environmental ethic cannot be self-contained. Rather, it must merge into an ‘ecology’ that corresponds to the full dimensions of human inhabitation, into a dwelling that gathers together (logos) the house (oikos) of the world. Just as the true scope of ethics extends to entities as a whole, so too must an environmental ethic reach out to address human existence—that is, being in the world, dwelling within the house of the world—in its entirety. . . . [Only] in this case can the earth be a true homeland for us all [presumably humans?], a household (oikos) within which we are at home. (173)

Despite his claim that an environmental ethics “cannot be self-contained,” Foltz’s own ethics simultaneously extends from and converges upon the problem of (human) dwelling in the World, with World explicitly being figured here as a house. It seems to me that a truly Heideggerian and hence “uncontained” ethics would require a revision of Foltz’s grammar and a rejection of his metaphor. Instead of an environmental ethics that refers to how humans comport ourselves toward nonhuman entities, we would need an ethics of the environment—that is, one that both emerges from and applies to all types of beings. Furthermore, such an ethics would not be modeled on a metaphor of containment, which, like some sort of metaphysical zoo, places entities in pens so they can be studied in their “natural” habitats and hence become known. An uncontained ethics cannot be developed in a house (oikos), where entities are domesticated and forced to be visible, but rather in the wild, where entities can hide from view. As I have already said, however, Heidegger does not provide us with the means for such an ethics precisely because, as a phenomenologist, he remains a greater thinker of what appears for humans than of what remains concealed from them.10 Thus,
when Foltz claims that “it is in our relation to things that the earth truly comes to be earth” (15), he neglects the way in which, for Heidegger, Earth is always already bound up with World in such a way that “a thing as such” can only come into appearance for us—and hence into relation with us—within the World. Earth recedes radically from view: we can never encounter or finally “know” Earth *qua* Earth. As a result of this limitation, even as Foltz sponsors an ethics of the Earth as dwelling, he unwittingly advances a theory of World as an ontological horizon that human thought cannot so easily transcend.

Ironically, Foltz’s unintentional stress on the significance of World as an ontological limit for Dasein brings him closest to understanding Heidegger’s larger project, which I read, ultimately, as a philosophy of finitude. While this project may lay the groundwork for thinking about what comes (as Quentin Meillassoux says) “after finitude,” I once again contend that Heidegger is a clearer thinker of appearance than concealment. This means that a more important implication of his work resides in its implicit insistence that (as Michel Serres says) before anything else “we must learn our own finitude.”

Heidegger’s thinking about finitude begins in *Being and Time*, where he offers his first account of World as the horizon of human thought and being. Despite being a work ostensibly focused on the analytic of Dasein and its “ontic-ontological” priority, *Being and Time* also theorizes World as intrinsically bound up with Dasein’s dual relation to being. Heidegger uses the term “ontic” to refer to the ways in which Dasein exists within the banality of everyday existence, whereas the more primordial designation “ontological” refers directly to the question of being as such. Dasein’s dual, ontic-ontological status positions it as the prime candidate for Heidegger’s ontological inquiry:

“natural contract,” which would require us to find a language that engages with entities on their own terms: “What languages do the things of the world speak, that we might come to an understanding with them, contractually?” (39).

11 Slavoj Žižek advances a similar claim. See, for example, Žižek and Heidegger: The Question Concerning Techno-Capitalism, in which Thomas Beckelman argues that Žižek’s work emerges largely in response to Heidegger as a thinker of finitude.
Dasein names a being (Seiende) that is concerned with its own being (Sein), and this concern is, in turn, constitutive of Dasein’s being as such. In other words, the “ontic distinction of Dasein lies in the fact that it is ontological” (11).

What this means is that Dasein provides special access to the meaning of being precisely through its everyday existence. However, this does not mean that Dasein makes ontology easy. As Heidegger frequently points out, “What is ontically nearest and familiar is ontologically the farthest, unrecognized and constantly overlooked in its ontological significance” (43). In the ontic sense, Dasein is a being whose existence transpires within the realm of sensuous experiences. Far from providing direct access to being or beings as things in themselves, Dasein merely has access to other entities as they appear phenomenally for it. Indeed, it is the totality of such phenomena that appear for Dasein that make up the World. As a being with direct access only to phenomena, Dasein must therefore be understood as a “being-in-the-world.” Crucially, “being-in” does not “designate a spatial ‘in one another’ of two things objectively present” (54), but rather signals an essential characteristic of Dasein. Heidegger tells us that the “in” of being-in comes from the Old German word innan, meaning “to live, habitate, to dwell.” For Dasein, then, to be always means to be-in—that is, to dwell in the World: “Ich bin’ means I dwell, I stay near . . . [sic] the world as something familiar in such and such a way” (55). Dasein can never transcend the World of phenomena because this World represents the site where Dasein is most essentially at home. Furthermore, it is precisely as a being-(at-home-)in-the-world that Dasein makes phenomenology—and hence ontology—possible.  

Although Being and Time quickly clarifies the fact of Dasein and World’s mutually constitutive relationship, the precise nature of this relationship remains elusive until Heidegger’s famous discussion of equipment or “useful things” in the third chapter of part one. At its most basic level,

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12 Heidegger grounds his analysis in Being and Time on the claim that “Ontology is possible only as phenomenology” (33). Tautologically, he later argues that as “the science of the being of beings,” phenomenology is ontology (35).
Heidegger’s analysis of “equipmental being” demonstrates that Dasein typically deals with things not by observing them as present-to-hand (vorhanden) in consciousness, but by quietly relying on them as ready-to-hand (zubanden). Useful things like hammers or spectacles are only present to us when they break, at which point they draw attention to themselves and the functions for which we unwittingly relied on them. Before becoming present in this way, useful things withdraw into obscurity, setting forth their usefulness without ever coming into appearance. In this way, Heidegger’s discussion of the Vorhandenheit and Zubandenheit of equipmental being inaugurates the conceptual dynamic of presence and absence that he will later formalize as the strife between World and Earth. Importantly, just as the terms World and Earth do not refer to specific types of beings, neither do Vorhandenheit and Zubandenheit signal particular types of entities. As Graham Harman points out, “ready-to-hand and present-to-hand do not give us a taxonomy of different kinds of objects. . . . Instead, tool and broken tool make up the whole of Heidegger’s universe. He recognizes these two basic modes of being, and only these two: entities withdraw into a silent underground while also exposing themselves to presence” (Quadruple Object 39).

Because of this dynamic, Heidegger insists that “there ‘is’ no such thing as a useful thing” (Being and Time 68). This is not to say that useful things do not have individual existences. On the contrary, Heidegger claims that, because useful things withdraw into an invisible realm, we cannot say that their usefulness or their use exhausts their essence as things. A useful thing’s use-value does not constitute its essential being. By the same token, however, insofar as useful things do come into appearance, they do so within a larger structure of relations that are manifest in their use. Hence, the hammer is useful for building, just as spectacles are useful for seeing. Heidegger rejects the idea of “a useful thing” because we do not experience phenomena as merely present and waiting us to assign them meaning. Instead, we only tend to notice phenomena that are already involved with our concerns, and therefore they always already have meaning for us. In other words, useful things can
only come into appearance as useful within a context that is already organized into a structure of meaningful relations:

In accordance with their character of utility, useful things always are in terms of their belonging to other useful things: writing utensils, pen, ink, paper, desk blotter, table, lamp, furniture, windows, doors, room. These ‘things’ never show themselves initially by themselves, in order then to fill out a room as a sum of real things. What we encounter as closest to us, although we do not grasp it thematically, is the room, not as what is ‘between the four walls’ in a geometrical, spatial sense, but rather as something useful for living. On the basis of this an ‘organization’ shows itself, and in this organization any ‘individual’ useful thing shows itself. A totality of useful things is always already discovered before the individual useful thing. (68)

As a system of equipment that allows individual useful things to come into appearance, the room becomes a figure for the World. World is thus a “contextual” phenomenon in that it refers foremost to “the context of the self-referral of Dasein” (85). Furthermore, as a context fashioned out of “referential relations” (85), World specifically becomes a signifying phenomenon, where Bedeutsamkeit, or “significance,” names the totality of such referential relations:

The for-the-sake-of-which signifies an in-order-to, the in-order-to signifies a what-for, the what-for signifies a what-in of letting something be relevant, and the latter a what-with of relevance. These relations are interlocked among themselves as a primordial totality. . . . We shall call this relational totality of signification significance [Bedeutsamkeit]. It is what constitutes the structure of the world, of that in which Dasein as such always already is. . . . As such, Dasein always means that a context of things at hand is already essentially discovered with its being. In that it is, Dasein has always already referred itself to an encounter with a “world.” (85–86)

The World in which Dasein dwells therefore designates a total context of reference, a network of meaningful relations that must exist prior to Dasein’s “worldly” concerns. Dasein is thus inextricably enmeshed in a World of meaning; it is a fundamentally hermeneutic creature. To be clear, World does not designate some sort of container for Dasein; recall that “being-in” does not signify a literally spatial location. Although earlier I characterized World as a totality of phenomena that appear for Dasein, totality must not be understood here as a kind of super-object that would collect all other objects into an organic unity. Instead, World names a phenomenon that enables entities to come into appearance through their relations to other entities, and Dasein stands at the center of
this context of relations. As Sean Gaston explains it, “World functions to give Dasein a relation to beings other than itself” (67). This explains once again why Dasein is most primordially at home in World.

What this means is that Heidegger’s eco-interpreters make a mistake when they characterize Earth as Dasein’s “natural home.” This position overlooks the complexity of World and its status as a figure for human finitude in Heidegger’s work from Being and Time onward. Although the introduction of Earth in the “Origin” essay posits a non-subject-oriented (and nontheological) vantage point that exists outside the World, my point is precisely that Dasein cannot inhabit this vantage. Nor is this vantage strictly relevant, as phenomenology (and hence ontology) remains involved with the World of appearances. Heidegger makes this point forcefully in Being and Time when he says that Nature is a distraction from the phenomenological project. Although ontology works to understand the thingliness of beings, this thingliness also leads ontology astray. Things have value, Heidegger claims, because of their naturalness; their thingliness is natural. Because of this, ontology’s focus tends to shift from thingliness to “the character of . . . natural things”—that is, to the question of “nature as such.” The shift presents a problem because an ontology of Nature does not help to uncover the phenomenon of World, and as such, Nature in itself proves phenomenologically irrelevant: “Ontologically and categorically understood, nature is a limit case of the being of possible innerworldly beings. Dasein can discover beings as nature in this sense only in a definite mode of its being-in-the-world” (65). In other words, Dasein only knows Nature insofar as it appears in the World. Far from ensuring a closer relation to Earth, a phenomenology of Nature is radically limited: even “the Romantic concept of nature,” Heidegger asserts, “is ontologically comprehensible only in terms of the concept of world; that is, in terms of an analytic of Dasein” (65).
World therefore marks an ontological limit, one that fundamentally restricts Dasein from any direct access to Earth *qua* Earth and hence curtails the straightforward development of a meaningful environmental ethics. Before we profess to know anything about Earth, we must first examine our own World-bound finitude.

**Landscape, not Ecology**

Dasein dwells in World, not Earth, and World marks an ontological horizon for Dasein, not an opening for environmental ethics. Following from these points, in this final section I argue that Heidegger proves less helpful in developing what Bruce Foltz calls a “genuine understanding” of ecology as a postmetaphysical figure for “earthy” dwelling. Instead, I claim that his work better positions us to develop a rigorous theory of *landscape* as a kind of “worlding” figure, one that furnishes an intrinsic metaphysics of home.

Before proceeding, I should clarify two points. First, what do I mean by “worlding” figure? Quite simply, a worlding figure functions to create a phenomenon that is *like* the World, even if it occurs within Dasein’s everyday existence and hence *within* the World. For Heidegger, World organizes the universe of things into the context of meaningful relations within which Dasein exists. Landscape does similar work by gathering elements of an environment into a unified, three-dimensional context or setting. However, one major difference is that, whereas World preexists Dasein, landscape is actively focalized through an individual consciousness and therefore represents a dynamic gathering that happens in time rather than being an a priori category. This gathering takes place—and indeed *makes place*—within the World. In this sense, landscape refers to an ontic or “innerworldly” manifestation of World.

Second, what is the status of “landscape” in Heidegger’s lexicon? This is an important question, because he uses the word very infrequently and nowhere defines it as a rigorous
philosophical concept. Because of this, making sense of its brief appearances proves tricky. For example, as early as *Being and Time* Heidegger uses the term landscape to refer to the mysterious way in which Nature could be said to hover between World and Earth:

As the “surrounding world” is discovered, “nature” thus discovered is encountered along with it. We can abstract from nature’s kind of being as handiness; we can discover and define it in its mere objective presence. But in this kind of discovery of nature, nature as what “stirs and strives,” what overcomes us, entrances us as landscape [*Landschaft*], remains hidden. (70)

In this passage, landscape appears to refer to something more primordial (and hence entrancing) than Nature as it appears ontically within the World. This is not quite the case, however. For Heidegger, it is not worldly knowledge of Nature that entrances, but rather the understanding that worldly knowledge does not exhaust the being of natural beings. To recognize that something else remains “hidden” behind Nature as it appears in the World is not the same thing as knowing what that something else actually is. In *Being and Time*, *Landschaft* names a mystery; it signals the gap between worldly perception and earthly essence, but only as this gap is perceived from within the World.

The word landscape also appears in Heidegger’s 1953 lecture, “The Question Concerning Technology,” where it occurs in his discussion of a hydroelectric plant set up on the Rhine. Clearly perturbed by “the monstrousness that reigns” in the hybridization of technology and Nature, Heidegger asks: “But . . . the Rhine is still a river in a landscape [*Landschaft*], is it not? Perhaps. But how? In no other way than as an object on call [*bestellbares Objekt*] for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry” (321). Here, “landscape” signals an attempt to recuperate an original sense of the riparian environment and to reverse the hydroelectric plant’s instrumentalization of the river as a power source. In other words, the concept of *Landschaft* resists the violence involved in transforming nature (*Natur*) into nature-power (*Naturmacht*). Once again the term appears with a positive connotation, but it remains unclear just what is implied by the original, more essential sense of the Rhine as “a river in a landscape.”
Turning to an essay written just two years before the technology lecture may help clarify this confusion. In 1951’s “Building Dwelling Thinking,” Heidegger again uses landscape to refer to a river scene. Instead of a hydroelectric plant, however, Heidegger focuses on a bridge and its surroundings. The bridge that crosses the stream “does not just connect banks that are already there,” he explains:

The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge expressly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge. Nor do the banks stretch along the stream as indifferent border strips of the dry land. With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape [Landschaft] lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream [Die Brücke versammelt die Erde als Landschaft um den Strom]. (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 354)

Landscape appears to have two different senses here. The first use of the word refers collectively to the various individual elements of the scene, which coexist without any apparent relation to one another. In this sense, landscape seems like an Earth concept. In the second instance, however, landscape names the unity into which the bridge actively “gathers” these surroundings. Here, by denoting what Earth becomes once the bridge gathers it into a meaningful unity, landscape seems like a World concept. How is it possible for Landschaft to signify both individual nonrelating entities and the network of relations into which they become unified?

Instead of simply hovering between these two poles or marking the gap between them, I argue that landscape names the mechanism by which World comes into appearance from out of Earth’s radical withdrawal. Landscape is this emergence. This interpretation deviates from Heidegger in the obvious sense that he never bothered to develop Landschaft into a philosophically significant concept. At the same time, this interpretation could also be seen as an attempt to name a process that Heidegger discusses in painstaking detail in his later essays yet never successfully articulates. Here, I am referring specifically to Heidegger’s endeavor to generate a theory of place-making—that is, a theory of how particular places of inhabitation can open up within the otherwise alienating
vacuum of pure, homogenous space. The concept of World represents an important stepping stone in explaining how the otherwise withdrawn universe of things becomes gathered into a meaningful context for Dasein. World does not, however, account for how Dasein consecrates particular beloved places and uses them as a way to orient itself within the World. In other words, although World is Dasein’s ontological home, it remains unclear how Dasein should dwell in the World in such a way as to secure a deeper connection with its primordial homeliness. Heidegger attempts to explain the place-making process in “Building Dwelling Thinking,” but his spatial terminology proliferates to such a degree that he fails to explain how particular places actually come into focus within the World (see my discussion below). Heidegger thus never explicitly names this place-making process. I believe that *Landschaft* serves this purpose better than any other term in his lexicon. I am suggesting, then, that landscape designates the gathering of Earth into World, a process that, in turn, clears space and enables the establishment of particular places for inhabitation.

If landscape denotes a process, then a full understanding of the concept depends on narrative. All of Heidegger’s landscapes come into focus through descriptive passages that gather individual entities that otherwise remain concealed from Dasein into a unified environment that brings them into appearance for it. Recall, for instance, the Greek temple in the “Origin” essay. In this example, Heidegger employs dialectical language to describe how the temple draws together a continuous environment around itself. As with the bridge scene in the later essay, the landscape is not simply a backdrop, but rather a phenomenon that emerges *in the relation* between the architectural structure and its setting. Vincent Scully highlights this relational emergence in his uncannily Heideggerian reading of Greek architecture:

The mountains and valleys of Greece were punctuated during antiquity by hard white forms, touched with bright colors, which stood in geometric contrast to the shapes of the earth. These were the temples of the gods. . . . [The] temples and the subsidiary buildings of their sanctuaries were so formed themselves and so placed in relation to the landscape and to each other as to enhance, develop, complement, and sometimes even to contradict, the basic meaning of what was felt in the land. (qtd. in Malpas 198)
Jeff Malpas notes that, for Heidegger as much as for Scully, “the temple brings into view a ‘sacred’ landscape, which is also a meaningful landscape, and it does so through the ways in which it works in relation to the landscape in which it is situated” (198). Just as Heidegger himself does in “Building Dwelling Thinking,” Malpas deploys landscape in two distinct senses that seem respectively linked to the concepts of Earth and World: merely extant surroundings on the one hand, and a relational totality of signification on the other. This slippage occurs for both Heidegger and Malpas because each foregrounds the dialectical process that precipitates the coming-into-appearance of landscape as a unified totality. In emphasizing process, both writers rely on narrative to describe how one sense of landscape (as concealed Earth) transmutes into another (as unconcealed World).

However, as Heidegger memorably puts it in Being and Time, description has a tendency of “get[ting] stuck in beings” (63). As a specifically narratological act that deals with phenomena as they initially appear to Dasein, the gathering of surroundings into landscape must therefore be understood as a descriptive and hence “ontic” process that takes the raw materials of the World and organizes them into a second-order World-like manifestation. This process plays out along a temporal as well as a spatial axis. Although in its ontologically significant sense, World does not emerge from Earth in time (it has always already “occurred” for Dasein), landscape must be understood as an innerworldly phenomenon that is organized by an individual human consciousness and thus requires time. In Heidegger’s landscape descriptions, the philosopher himself stands as the narrating subject, gathering mere space into meaningful place. If Dasein is ontologically “at home in the World,” then landscape occurs as an ontic mechanism that brings into focus precisely what is homely about the World in which Dasein dwells. By organizing unfamiliar surroundings into a context of meaning, landscape brings what is familiar “closer” to Dasein; it secures Dasein’s sense of being in and belonging to the World in which it always already dwells. In other words, if the World represents the Earth brought into appearance for Dasein, then landscape represents the
World brought into a more *personal* nearness—wrapped around the individual human being like a security blanket.

In order to clarify how landscape functions as a mechanism that brings the World into nearness for Dasein, I must turn to Heidegger's failed attempts to theorize how place-making works. Beginning with “The Origin of the Work of Art” and continuing with later essays such as “Building Dwelling Thinking” and “The Thing,” Heidegger develops a topological lexicon that endeavors to explain not only how the World comes into appearance, but also how places of inhabitation are set up within the World. Unfortunately, and despite recent monumental attempts to explicate Heidegger’s “topology,” Heidegger never manages a full-fledged spatial theory. I attribute this failure in part to Heidegger’s argumentative style, which characteristically unfolds through a series of concepts that emerge from one another like links in a chain. At times his terminological proliferation seems like philosophical wheel spinning. This is especially the case when Heidegger tries to move beyond the presence–absence polarity in order to explain what opens up between these two poles. Take, once again, the temple example from the “Origin” essay. After describing how World and Earth relate through a dynamic tension of strife that organizes a landscape around the temple, Heidegger goes on to suggest that this strife in turn opens up a “region” between World and Earth, which he subsequently calls a “rift.” But this rift does not represent an unbreachable gap so much as it manifests a kind of bridging that foreshadows his bridge analysis in “Building Dwelling Thinking.”

Indulging in his characteristic wordplay, Heidegger writes: “The rift [*Riss*] is the drawing together, into a unity, of sketch [*Aufriss*] and basic design [*Grundriss*], breach and outline [*Umriss*]” (188). The philosophical punning on *Riss* brings the notions of the rift as an abyss and the rift as a unifying design or ground plan into an intimacy; the rift becomes, paradoxically, a grounding abyss.13 In this

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13 In this sense, the rift prefigures what Heidegger calls the “event of appropriation [*Er-eignis*].” In *Identity and Difference*, Heidegger describes *Er-eignis* as a revision of what he had previously (in the “Letter on Humanism”) referred to as the “house of being [*Haus des Seins*].” He retains the architectural resonance of the earlier term when he describes *Er-
way, the primordial strife between World and Earth opens up a rift, and it is within this rift—a breach in the double sense of an opening and a bridging—that Dasein dwells.

This, however, is not the end of the story. Heidegger goes on to claim that the “open region” of the rift does not, in itself, establish a dwelling place for Dasein. By contrast, it marks a space that still needs to be gathered into a meaningful place. How, then, does this rift help constitute the place of human dwelling? Heidegger answers through another round of obscure wordplay, this time featuring variations on a theme of the verb *stellen* (to put, set, place): “The strife that is brought into the rift and thus set back [*zurückgestellt*] into the earth and thus fixed in place [*festgestellt*] is the figure [*Gestalt*]. . . . What is here called figure is always to be thought in terms of the particular placing [*Stellen*] and enframing [*Ge-stell*] as which the work occurs [*wesel*] when it sets itself up and sets itself forth [*auf- und herstellt*]” (189). This passage turns on the verb *feststellen*, meaning “to fix in place.” What, exactly, defines this fixing in place? At first, Heidegger characterizes this fixing as a figure, but then immediately recasts it as a mode of enframing. “Enframing”—and, sometimes, “frame”—is a common translation of Heidegger’s devilishly difficult neologism *Ge-stell*, which conceptually gathers into itself all of the ways in which *stellen* occurs, much in the same way the term *Gebirge* (mountain range) semantically gathers together all of the *Berge* (mountains) in a chain. As Joan Stambaugh defines it, *Ge-stell* represents “a unity (but not a unity in the sense of a general whole subsuming all particulars under it) of all the activities in which the verb ‘stellen’ (place, put, set) figures: *vor-stellen* (represent, think), *stellen* (challenge), *ent-stellen* (disfigure), *nach-stellen* (to be after someone, pursue him stealthily), *sicher-stellen* (to make certain of something)” (14). This list could include other examples, such as those appearing in the passage above: *fest-stellen*, *zurück-stellen* (set back), *auf-stellen* (set up), and *her-stellen* (set forth). What is at issue here, however, is not so much a

*agnis as a “self-suspended structure [in sich schwingenden Bau]” (Identity and Difference 38) that requires no ground outside itself. The house of being therefore exemplifies a bizarre kind of aerial architecture, paradoxically built upon the abyss that grounds it.

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precise definition of Ge-stell, which always remains elusive, but rather the way in which the term functions as a gathering-together of various, complex modes of place-making. It is in this sense that Heidegger says the work occurs essentially (wesen) as a mode of enframing—that is, as a setting-up, a setting-forth, a radical placing that establishes an open region for human being and “first [erst] affords the possibility of a somewhere [Irgendwo] and of sites [Stätten] filled by present beings” (“Origin” 186).  

Despite Heidegger’s proliferative punning, his language games remain but a prologue to the point he is actually trying to make. Maddeningly, and for all its conceptual complexity, Ge-stell still merely “affords the possibility” of place-making rather than elucidating this process directly. Heidegger therefore returns to the problem of place in “Building Dwelling Thinking,” where he deploys an even more dizzying array of spatial terms. In a series of especially dense passages, Heidegger plots a confusingly abstract map of how “the” space (“der” Raum) emerges from mere space (Raum) and how a locale (Ort) or site (Stätte) opens up within a place (Platz) or location (Stelle). Unfortunately, Heidegger’s explication obfuscates more than it clarifies the issue. In a strange way, however, it also seems as though, in the act of writing, Heidegger sensed the limitations of his own topology.

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14 It should be noted that Heidegger will later make the claim in “The Question Concerning Technology” that “enframing” is the essence of modern technology, and in this sense it appears at first to be a negative thing. But is the essence of technology itself technology? Or is it something that we humans, in fact, cannot help but do? As a form of the older Greek technê, technology is a mode of revealing that we cannot do without. But, as Heidegger asserts in his Discourse in Thinking, “We can say ‘yes’ to the unavoidable use of technological objects, and we can at the same time say ‘no,’ in so far as we do not permit them to claim us exclusively and thus to warp, confuse, and finally lay waste to our essence” (54). In this sense, “enframing” has something to do with what Heidegger elsewhere calls the “world picture.” As modern technology increasingly instrumentalizes the universe of things (human and nonhuman alike), “the world [becomes] grasped as picture,” which is to say that “beings as a whole are set in place as that for which man is prepared; that which, therefore, he correspondingly intends to bring before him, have before him, and, thereby, in a decisive sense, placed before him” (“Age of the World Picture” 67). In other words, the World as Picture represents a kind of subjective idealism that reduces objects to phenomena. Even though humans must necessarily interact with other entities as they appear “enframed” in the World, we must also remember that objects do not depend on one another for their ontological ground: objects are more than their appearances for others.

15 See footnote 5, above, for more on Heidegger’s topological lexicon.
This sense of limitation may explain why, when Heidegger returns to the question human dwelling in “Building Dwelling Thinking,” he ultimately moves away from theorizing the nature of place as such and instead focuses on the ethics of dwelling. Heidegger claims that the ontologically significant place in which humans dwell represents a realm in which even entities not immediately within our reach remain close, such that “we are always staying with the things themselves [bei den Dingen selbst]” (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 358). Here Heidegger offers a corrective to Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological call to arms: “we must go back to the things themselves [Wir wollen auf die ‘Sachen selbst’ zurückgeben]” (168). Husserlian phenomenology famously brackets or “suspends” the universe of real entities in order to focus on phenomenal appearances. Hence, when Husserl penned these words in the introduction to his Logical Investigations, the things (Sachen) to which he referred were precisely not external objects presented to consciousness but rather sensible intuitions (Anschauungen) given to us immediately in experience. Heidegger, however, replaces Sachen with Dinge. Contrary to Husserl, returning to things in themselves means staying with actual entities in the World—we must resist reducing them to mere objects for consciousness.

Strangely, Heidegger’s ethics of “staying with the things themselves” seems to require a conscious act of letting things be and a simultaneous disavowal of the mediating character of consciousness. Things exist prior to human perception, and, as if to address this fact, Heidegger stresses that proper dwelling entails a new form of thinking that keeps consciousness from creating distance between humans and things: “We do not represent distant things in our minds . . . so that only mental representations of distant things run through our minds and heads as substitutes for the things” (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 358). Here he presents an example of how thinking allows us to “persist through” distance:

If all of us now think, from where we are right here, of the old bridge in Heidelberg, this thinking toward that locale is not a mere experience inside the persons present here; rather, it belongs to the essence of our thinking of that bridge that in itself thinking persists through [durchstehl] the distance to that locale. . . . From right here we may even be much nearer to
that bridge and to what it makes room for than someone who uses it daily as an indifferent river crossing. (358–59)

According to Heidegger, in its close relation to dwelling, thinking closes the spatial and ontological gaps that are otherwise alienating. In this context, “persisting through” space means radically inhabiting what Heidegger elsewhere calls “nearness” (die Nähe). “Nearness,” he writes, “cannot be encountered directly. We succeed in reaching it rather by attending to what is near. Near to us are what we usually call things” (“The Thing” 164). Our potential for understanding nearness in this sense therefore depends on our ability to encounter the thing qua thing—to stay with the thing, as Heidegger puts it. Nearness therefore means to hold things close in attention, but simultaneously not to reduce them to their appearances.

Ironically, his concept of nearness enables him to articulate the topological nature of dwelling more clearly than his labored explication of how place erupts from pure space. In fact, nearness leads Heidegger to reverse his developmental narrative of place-making and instead make a claim for the ontological priority of dwelling over abstract space: “Spaces . . . are always provided for [eingeräumt] already within the stay of mortals” (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 359). This understanding of space as that which is always already “provided for” Dasein resonates with the concept of World. Persisting through worldly space therefore requires things to be drawn near to Dasein, and place opens up when Dasein’s thinking draws things near, allowing Dasein to “stay” with them:

[We] always go through spaces in such a way that we already sustain them by staying constantly with near and remote locales and things. When I go toward the door of the lecture hall, I am already there, and I could not go to it at all if I were not such that I am there. I am never here [hier] only, as this encapsulated body; rather, I am there [dort], that is, I pervade the space of the room, and thus only can I go through it. (359)

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16 Jeff Malpas comments: “‘Nearing’ is not just an overcoming of a purely objective spatial distance, but also a ‘picking out’ or a ‘bringing into salience’ that overcomes the distance of inattention or ‘not-seeing.’” (76). Nearing therefore depends on the World as a relational totality of signification, within which thinking can derive “salience.”
Once again, to persist through space in this way has little to do with a literally spatial notion of nearness articulated in terms of physical proximity, but rather connects to an ontologically significant sense of place that emerges when Dasein stays “near” other entities. Place arises here as an emergent, innerworldly phenomenon that coalesces when Dasein forsakes the mediating power of consciousness and subscribes to an ethics of “letting-be.”

I would argue, however, that Heidegger is mistaken in his desire for the human being to deny the mediating capacity of consciousness; like World, consciousness is not something from which we can escape. An ethics of letting-be may recognize that the human perception of an object does not exhaust that object’s being, but by no means does this ethics bridge the ontological gap between an entity’s “earthy” withdrawal and its “worldly” appearance for Dasein. Regardless of Heidegger’s own desire to decouple “thinking” from “consciousness,” the “nearing” that “persists through distance” does not generate a usable ethics so much as it describes the gathering of innerworldly objects into a meaningful and familiar proximity. So long as Dasein exists (i.e., barring death), it cannot transcend the World as a dwelling place that is gathered into nearness. Indeed, Dasein inhabits nearness like a house: “As a double space-making, the locale is a shelter [Hut] for [dwelling] or, by the same token, a house [ein Huis, ein Haus]. Things such as locales shelter or house [behausen] men’s lives. Things of this sort are housings [Behausungen], though not necessarily dwelling-houses [Wohnungen] in the narrower sense” (360). To dwell in the nearness of things and the place constituted through their gathering means quite simply to be at home in the house of being.

But if this homely dwelling place is not established by the ethics of letting-be that Heidegger’s eco-interpreters have linked to a “genuine understanding” of ecology, then we must understand it in terms of a metaphysics that dynamically draws the World near to Dasein—a “homely” metaphysics encapsulated in the concept of landscape. If World represents an ontological horizon for human being as such, then landscape represents an individual human being’s ownmost
horizon of being, his or her own particular beloved place. Landscape names the process by which a familiar environment gathers around Dasein as an (en)framed place; it manifests a home in the World. It is therefore landscape—and not ecology—that brings us home to ourselves.

Coda: Landscape, Ecology, and Narrative

I want to insist that, despite my lengthy excursus on Heidegger, I do not consider the concept of landscape or the homely metaphysics I associate with it to be Heideggerian in any strict sense. My intention in this chapter has been to take a “step back” from contemporary ecophilosophy and the ethical implications it has drawn from Heidegger’s work. Taking such a step back necessarily required me to engage closely with Heidegger in order to rethink his thought from within. In this sense, the understanding of landscape I have developed in this chapter represents an extension of Heidegger. While I have attempted to follow Heidegger more closely than other ecologically minded interpreters, the conclusions I have drawn are, I think, far from dogmatic. Indeed, in returning to Heidegger I have not merely aimed to secure a more philosophically robust concept of landscape; I have also aimed to foreshadow its central importance for literature. In this sense, my emphasis on landscape as an “ontic” manifestation of World—that is, a worlding figure—prepares the way for understanding how landscape takes place (and makes place) in time and hence depends on narrative in order to come into appearance at all. But Heidegger can only take a literary project so far. His work offers a rudimentary understanding of the narratological status of landscape, but any more nuanced development requires me to examine the particular challenges posed by literary rather than philosophical landscapes.

In turning to literary landscapes, the emphasis shifts from ontology to representation. As I have described it here, landscape brings the World near to Dasein. In subsequent chapters, however, landscape will appear in a less strictly philosophical sense, referring more generally to a descriptive
practice that renders Nature as it appears to a viewing subject. Landscape is therefore tied to a metaphysics that unfolds in narrative time.

Throughout this chapter, I have characterized Heidegger as primarily a philosopher of human finitude. I have attempted, however, not to ignore his importance as a theorist of concealment, and hence of that subterranean realm of being that is never exhausted by its appearance for others. In fact, it is precisely this subterranean realm that will return in the second part of this dissertation. If landscape (like World) denotes the horizon of the representable, ecology (like Earth) will name the unrepresentable universe of entities that exists “outside” the World. Uncontainable within landscape, ecology serves as the limit case for Nature’s innerworldly appearance. Rigorously thinking ecology therefore endangers landscape and reveals its phenomenal fragility. Heidegger himself recognized this fragility. True knowledge of Nature (i.e., ecological knowledge) “has the character,” he writes, “of a certain ‘de-worlding’ [Entweltlichung] of the world. As the categorial content of structures of being of a definite being encountered in the world, ‘nature’ can never render worldliness intelligible.” Rather, he adds in a marginal note, “the other way around” (65). Ecology unworlds the homely dwelling place that landscape builds. For this reason, as an invisible and hence unknowable force, ecology will always appear uncanny in relation to the comforting familiarity of landscape and its attendant aesthetics. But before I indulge in more talk of uncanny de-worlding, let me turn first to a discussion of Willa Cather’s literary landscapes.
Chapter 2

At Home in Landscape: Willa Cather’s Narrative Architecture

Narrative homemaking stands at the center of Willa Cather’s novelistic project. From the pioneer mythos that occupies her Prairie Trilogy¹ to Jean-Marie Latour’s imaginative act of homecoming in Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927), Cather fashions homely spaces where her protagonists may fully grow into their most vital selves. In this sense, Cather shares with Heidegger a deep interest in recovering something of a primordial home in which human being may properly “dwell.” As I argued in the previous chapter, the ultimate horizon for such dwelling (Wohnen) in Heidegger’s thought lies within World (Welt), and even more particularly within landscape (Landschaft). The present chapter extends this conceptual framework to the realm of fiction and develops a more nuanced understanding of the “homely metaphysics” of landscape description.

Landscape description proves crucial to the way Cather conjures her visions of home. This link between landscape and homemaking has inspired both praise and criticism. Whereas Cather’s earliest reviewers celebrated the aptitude of her painterly renderings of the Nebraska prairie, more recent critics have linked these landscapes to an inherently imperialist politics.² Although I do not

¹ The Prairie Trilogy includes O Pioneers! (1913), The Song of the Lark (1915), and My Ántonia (1918).
² One strain of this scholarship has adopted a comparative approach to demonstrate connections between Cather’s spatial imagination and the work contemporary philosophers and historians. Matthias Schubnell’s work (1993), for example, claims that Cather’s fiction—and The Professor’s House in particular—presents a vision of American decline reminiscent of German philosopher of history Oswald Spengler’s two-volume Der Untergang des Abendlandes (The Decline of the West, 1918 and 1923). In another comparative account, Marianne Davidson (1999) reads Cather’s fiction against American historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s imperially-inflected “frontier thesis,” in which he celebrates the positive influence the geography and habitude of pioneer life have had on American culture—particularly what he called “the courageous, creative American spirit” of individualism (Turner i). Joseph Urgo (2005), however, reverses Davidson’s reading, arguing that, in Cather’s fiction, “movement east, not west, is what strengthens the nation’s idea of itself” (41).
wish to ignore the significance of these debates, for my own purposes in this chapter, they must take a temporary backseat. While I shall return to these debates in Part Two, for now, rather than castigating Cather for the politics implicit in her imaginative homemaking, I wish to examine the complex role that narrative plays in constructing this politics in the first place. This requires first stepping back to observe the philosophical density of Cather’s novelistic art.

Cather and the Ontology of Home

What other critics have largely missed subjecting Cather to the scrutiny of postcolonial critique is the ontological significance of her investment in the discourse of home. Judith Fryer’s spatio-feminist approach to Cather’s fiction represents one important exception. In her 1986 study of feminine literary “imaginative structures,” Fryer characterizes Cather’s spatial imagination in terms of Gaston Bachelard’s concept of “felicitous space,” which, in its simplest sense, refers to any space that allows one “to be at home.” This four-word phrase encapsulates Bachelard’s thesis in *The Poetics of Space*. In this work, Bachelard develops a phenomenology of intimate places that is organized around the felicitous space of the home, the latter of which “concentrates being within limits that protect” (xxxvi). To *be at home*, then, means to stand more completely within being by

According to the “Cather thesis,” pioneers played an important role in colonizing the American West, but they did not affect those they left behind in the East “except as the idea of progress and empire” (39).

Other critics who take imperialism as their point of departure have proven less generous. Mike Fischer’s work (1990) offers an early example of a more critical, explicitly postcolonial strain of scholarship, taking Cather’s plains novels to task for their romanticization of the frontier, and he argues that this romanticism promotes a sentimental imperialist nostalgia. Louise H. Westling makes a similar claim in her 1998 volume, *The Green Breast of the New World*, though her work takes an explicitly gendered perspective that grounds Jim Burden’s masculine identity in an antagonistic and imperialistic relationship with the feminized earth. Elizabeth Ammons (1996) has also taken an ecofeminist perspective, this time focusing on Cather’s story “The Old Beauty,” the climax of which, she argues, “literally stages an essential part of the racist core of [the] standard, Western fantasy of colonial dominance and submission: the hypersexualization and bestializing of the colonized male” (261). Other scholars who draw attention to Cather’s imperialist imaginary of the American frontier, such as Guy Reynolds (1996) and Michael Gorman (2006), have analyzed Cather’s Nebraska novels—particularly *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*—as narratives of empire, bringing more attention to the power dynamics of race in the settlement of the central plains. Deborah Karush (2000) takes these readings of Cather’s imperialism further in her analysis of *The Professor’s House*, arguing that the novel displaces awareness of the United States as a global empire onto the internal settlement of the domestic frontier. What these scholars have repeatedly judged as Cather’s complicity with American imperialism weighs heavily on the interpretation of her fiction in terms of homecoming, radically question her celebration of settlement and the pioneering life.
inhabiting a space of radical belonging. For Fryer, whose notion of imaginative structures ranges across a spectrum of both physically and conceptually spatial entities (including but not limited to architectural, geographical, and social structures), felicitous space does not primarily refer to the home or to images thereof. This echoes Bachelard’s own desire to speak to a more essential understanding of the homely: “all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home. . . . [The] imagination functions in this direction whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter: we shall see the imagination build ‘walls’ of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection” (Bachelard 5). In this sense, for both Fryer and Bachelard, homemaking happens whenever space is gathered into a site where one feels centered and safe. Whether explicitly architectural or not, “home” fosters a sense of heightened ontological density—a “concentration of being.”

Fryer’s work has had a notable influence on Cather studies, inspiring a number of subsequent scholars to draw on Bachelard’s phenomenology. What none of these scholars has acknowledged, however, is that even though Bachelard speaks of a broader, seemingly more abstract notion of home, his analysis remains fundamentally tied to its narrow architectural sense. As I noted in the previous chapter, this stems from his literal (mis)understanding of the spatial resonance of the Da- in Heidegger’s Dasein. In reading The Poetics of Space it is sometimes challenging to determine whether Bachelard means to focus on “how we experience intimate places” as such (as the book’s subtitle tells us), or on the “phenomenology of the poetic image” (as he claims in the introduction). Bachelard insists that the poetic image is an “origin” in itself, one that comes before conscious

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3 For a similarly conceptual reading of Cather’s spatial imagination, see Françoise Paleau-Papin. Paleau-Papin focuses on the linguistic structuring of space, from the level of diegetic space inhabited by the characters (l’espace référentiel) to the level of the sentence and its syntactic structure (l’espace figural) and finally to the level of the individual descriptive image (l’espace imaginaire).

4 See, for instance, Oehlschlaeger, Moseley, and, more recently, Mezei and Briganti, Glotfelty (“A Guided Tour of Ecocriticism”), Russell, and Mutter.

5 For a discussion of how Bachelard’s phenomenology of intimate spaces develops from Heidegger’s hermeneutic project, see footnote 3 in chapter 1.
thought; therefore, “a phenomenology of the poetic imagination must concentrate on bringing out this quality of origin” (xxiv). Yet Bachelard also admits that these images require actual experiences with physical homes, and that these experiences are, by necessity, more primordial than the images themselves. Indeed, it is the house into which we are born that furnishes us with our most essential understanding of home; it “engrave[s] within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting. We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all other houses are but variations on a fundamental theme” (15; my emphasis). Notions of home and habitation require the foundational imprint of a house, which reverberates in the poetic image. Heidegger shares with Bachelard an interest in the architectural discourse of home. However, whereas Bachelard’s project requires the originary experience of a house to ground the essence of home, Heidegger’s ontology radically undermines this paradigm of grounding. As Mark Wigley has protested, Heidegger’s use of architectural language serves a primarily metaphorical purpose: “It is not that he simply theorizes

6 See, for example, the rhetoric of home Heidegger uses in his “Letter on Humanism,” in which he introduces the concept of the Haus des Seins, or house of being: “Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells” (217). In his later work, Identity and Difference, Heidegger reprises this concept only to replace it with his notion of the “event of appropriation” (Er-eignis): “In the event of appropriation vibrates the active nature of what speaks as language, which at one time was called the house of Being” (39). Although Heidegger alters the name, he does not dispense with the concept’s architectural resonance. He writes of Er-eignis:

The event of appropriation is that realm, vibrating within itself [in sich schwingende Bereich], through which man and Being reach each other in their nature, achieve their active nature by losing those qualities with which metaphysics has endowed them. To think of appropriating [Er-eignen] as the event of appropriation [Er-eignis], means to contribute to this self-vibrating realm [am Bau dieses in sich schwingenden Bereiches bauen]. Thinking receives the tools [Bauzeug] for this self-suspended structure [in sich schwingenden Bau] from language. (37–38)

Although not immediately apparent in the translation, this passage repeatedly invokes the notion of construction through various forms of the German verb bauen, to build, endowing the abyssal realm of Er-eignis with an uncanny sense of physicality. For instance, what Joan Stambaugh translates as “to contribute to this self-vibrating realm” conceals Heidegger’s somewhat redundant insistence on physical metaphor: “am Bau dieses in sich schwingenden Bereiches bauen” could also be translated as “to build on (or onto, on top of) the building of this self-vibrating realm.” Heidegger’s emphasis on the physical continues with his direct reference to the event of appropriation as Bau (building) rather than Bereich (realm), as well as his use of the rather strange word Bauzeug, which Stambaugh ably translates as “tools,” but more literally means “the elements of building (or construction).” The physicality of Bau and Bauzeug directly contrasts with the immateriality of thinking (Denken) and language (Sprache). And yet, even as Heidegger clearly retains the physicality of his earlier architectural metaphor—the house of Being—he also insists on the abyssal nature of Er-eignis, emphasizing its groundless suspension by describing it three times with the adverbial phrase “in sich schwingend.” Stambaugh renders this phrase variously as “vibrating within itself,” “self-vibrating,” and “self-suspended”—all of which adequately capture the aerial nature of this structure that we might otherwise say literally swings (schwingen) or even leaps or vaults (sich schwingen) within itself. Just like being itself is a groundless self-grounding, so, too, does the house of being survive in the event of appropriation as a suspended structure, paradoxically built upon the abyss that grounds it.
architecture as such, but that theorizing is itself understood in architectural terms” (7). In other words, Heidegger only invokes architecture in order to ground the structure of thinking.

In truth, I am less concerned than Wigley about Heidegger’s metaphorization of architectural discourse. I am also not particularly invested in critiquing Bachelard’s confusion of intimate spaces and poetic images. What does concern me is where to situate Cather’s own engagement with the homely, which occurs with regard to both concrete and abstract structures. Bachelard’s apparent emphasis on physical space offers a useful touchstone for thinking through Cather’s novelistic descriptions of houses, but it proves less helpful for articulating the more subtle ways in which she grounds her theory of fiction and her narrative practice on figurative architectures. Heidegger’s more abstract use (or abuse) of architecture does help account for Cather’s more nuanced ideas about the ontological implications of architecture, but it cannot re-ground these implications in actual (i.e., fictional) dwellings. It would seem, then, that neither Bachelard nor Heidegger is adequate for understanding the homely metaphysics particular to Cather’s art; neither helps fully to explain how she uses architecture to bring landscape into focus as a homely site of habitation.

Perhaps more important than these issues of concreteness and abstraction, however, is the fact that the axis of interpretation represented by Heidegger and Bachelard fails to address Cather’s first principle of art: vitality. Although Cather’s work frequently takes on an ontological density that brings it into conversation with these philosophical concerns, more crucial to her overall novelistic practice was her understanding of a vital life principle as the fundamental wellspring of creativity. According to the theory of art that Cather developed over the course of her long literary apprenticeship and throughout her mature period, it is vitality that endows the artist with a singular vision. This vitality also enables the artist to create richly drawn characters that exist within real-world circumstances and evolve dynamically over time. The vital artist marries an organic intuition with precise craftsmanship, and a depth of passion with imaginative breadth. So endowed, the vital
artist possesses an ability to create by subtlety and suggestion. This kind of subtlety proves crucial for the evocation of scene, which for Cather does not merely represent a backdrop for action, but rather provides a three-dimensional living world for her characters:

The “scene” in fiction is not a mere matter of construction, any more than it is in life. . . . When a writer has a strong or revelatory experience with his characters, he unconsciously creates a scene; gets a depth of picture, and writes, as it were, in three dimensions instead of two. The absence of these warm and satisfying moments in any work of fiction is final proof of the author’s poverty of emotion and lack of imagination. (Willa Cather on Writing 79–80)

Cather singles out Daniel Defoe as one writer who lacks the invention and imagination required to render such scenes: “There are no scenes in Roxanna’s narrative [The Fortunate Mistress], and there is no atmosphere. Her adventures in France are exactly like those in England; one is not conscious of the slightest change in her surroundings or way of living” (80). Defoe’s scenery was just as static as his characters. For Cather, by contrast, the vital artist must be able to conjure dynamic environments that match the aliveness of her characters.

In addition to the evocation of scene, Cather also places great emphasis on the organic liveliness of narrative form. Here, the vital artist’s ability to create atmosphere through subtlety and suggestion also enables her to allow narrative form to evolve from the emotional demands of the story. By contrast, the non-vital artist tends to create, as Cather says, by “mere construction.” In the case of narrative form, this often entails the imposition of an architectural design for the sake of cleverness. Too often, though, such structural rigidity exhibits a certain coldness and lack of feeling. As Cather herself wrote, “Too much symmetry kills things” (Willa Cather in Person 79). Thus, rather than manufacture lifeless novels for consumer escapism, Cather situated her novels firmly in the “real world.” This entailed intuitive experimentation with narrative form in ways that sought to reconcile the apparent opposition between art and life. As Tom Quirk notes, “Her imaginative forms had to remain pliable enough to preserve the spirit and vitality of the recollections that emerged in the process of composing” (167). This pliability finds expression in the apparent
formlessness of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*, both of which explore disjointed episodic structures that conjure the temporal spaciousness of legend. It is even on display in the highly structured narrative architecture of *The Professor's House*, which I discuss in detail below. Each of these works embodies a unique form that achieves a beauty more organic than rigid, more roughly hewn than cleanly polished. For Cather, such unburnished beauty signaled a creative vitality that sprang from a deep well of passion.

Cather’s emphasis on vitality therefore runs through all aspects of her novelistic practice, enlivening character, scene, and narrative alike. For this reason, in addition to the “ontological” axis of interpretation represented by Heidegger and Bachelard, I should like to suggest a second, “vitalist” axis of interpretation that considers Cather *vis-à-vis* two thinkers she herself read and admired deeply: John Ruskin and Henri Bergson. This axis unites notions of architecture and vitality, albeit in somewhat different ways. Ruskin, for instance, was critic of art and architecture who placed a premium on the vitality of form, yet he also represented the moral probity of Victorian society. The early-twentieth-century work of Henri Bergson, on the other hand, marked the emergence of a revivified “new reality” that dispensed with the dead-end thinking of mechanism. His notion of *élan vital*, or a vital impetus, as the creative force behind evolution situated a living force directly within the material, physiological structures of organisms. Although very different from one another, both Ruskin and Bergson contribute to Cather’s theory of art a sense of living structures that illuminates her interest in the vitality of narrative architecture and the scenes it brings into focus.

John Ruskin’s writing on painting and architecture qualified him, in Cather’s estimation, to be “perhaps the last of the great worshippers of beauty” (*Kingdom of Art* 400). Ruskin had a powerful influence on Cather during the early years of her literary apprenticeship, and particularly in the

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7 The phrase “new reality” comes from Tom Quirk’s intellectual history of Henri Bergson’s influence in America around the turn of the twentieth century. He argues that Bergson’s anti-mechanist and anti-teleological philosophy represented the height of a new mode of thinking that gained currency around 1910. This mode of thinking constituted a “new reality” that World War I would cause to wane just as rapidly as it had come into appearance.
period between 1893 and 1896, when she contributed frequently to the *Nebraska State Journal*. This was a time of great intellectual ferment for Cather, during which she began to develop and “set down those principles of art which she finally considered to be absolutes” (Slote 31). In a column dated 17 May 1896, near the end of this period, Cather praises Ruskin for his profound understanding of the truth of art: “he knew that to know is little and to feel is all” (*Kingdom of Art* 401).\(^8\) This emphasis on Ruskin’s preference for emotional intelligence over unfeeling erudition reflects Cather’s own insistence on vital intuition. It also recalls a passage from his influential volume, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, in which he claims that vital feeling plays a particularly important role in architecture. As he asserts, this is the case in architecture “more than in any other [art]; for it, being especially dependent . . . on the warmth of the true life, is also peculiarly sensible of the hemlock cold of the false: and I do not know anything more oppressive, when the mind is once awakened to its characteristics, than the aspect of a dead architecture” (151).

Ruskin understands architecture to be in dynamic relation to a life principle. Specifically, the vitality of architecture depends on the actions of its inhabitants: in order for architecture to remain “alive” it requires inhabitants to pass in and out of it—to cut through, re-orient, and re-imagine its spaces. In this sense, architecture is as much about human interaction as it is about engineering and design. As the twentieth-century architectural theorist Bernard Tschumi puts it, “there is no architecture without program, without action, without event” (3). For Ruskin, the vitality of architecture also depends on the interaction of form and event, though he adds a moral inflection (as well as a gender bias) when he articulates this in terms of the “true” and the “false” life. Principles of activity and passivity distinguish the true life from the false, respectively. Ruskin describes the true life as “the independent force by which [one] moulds and governs external things; it is a force of assimilation which converts everything around him into food, or into instruments;
and which . . . never forfeits its own authority as a judging principle, as a will capable either of obeying or rebelling” (*Seven Lamps* 149). The true life therefore represents a traditionally masculine principle. One achieves such a life by setting out to do something and by successfully completing the task—that is, by linking intention and mastery. By contrast, the false life takes on the traditionally feminine principle of passivity, and it emerges when one lacks the self-possession necessary to realize individual intention. In the false life, then,

we do what we have not purposed, and speak what we do not mean, and assent to what we do not understand; that life which is overlaid by the weight of things external to it, and is moulded by them, instead of assimilating them; that, which instead of growing and blossoming under any wholesome dew, is crystallised over with it, as with hoar-frost, and becomes to the true life what an arborescence is to a tree, a candied agglomeration of thoughts and habits foreign to it, brittle, obstinate, and icy, which can neither bend nor grow, but must be crushed and broken to bits, if it stand in our way. (150)

Whereas the true life harbors an imperialist sense of conquest, bending the external world to its will, Ruskin casts the false life in the role of the conquered, powerless in the face of assimilation. Lacking a stable relationship between intention and realization, the false life remains perpetually haunted by the specter of death. By consequence, without the vitality necessary to animate the “event” of architecture, an architectural entity itself falls out of sync with the life principle—it “dies.” Ruskin’s understanding of the relationship between architecture and vitality is therefore reciprocal: just as, in the false life, inhabitants no longer properly inhabit their own lives, dwellings cease properly to house their inhabitants. Despite Ruskin’s objection to “the troublesomeness of the metaphysicians,”⁹ the metaphysics that I have described as homely resonates at the heart of his understanding of architectural vitality. The true life infuses architecture with a transformative vitality such that a house

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⁹ In his discussion of the pathetic fallacy in *Modern Painters* (vol. III, ch. 12), Ruskin takes issue with the metaphysics of the subject–object relation, lamenting that “German dullness and English affectation, have of late much multiplied among us the use of two of the most objectionable words that were ever coined by the troublesomeness of metaphysicians,—namely, ‘Objective’ and ‘Subjective’” (156).
(a physical structure) becomes a home (ontological ground). Within this paradigm, the one who lives the true life feels more fully alive, more fully present in the world, and more fully in being.

Henri Bergson’s psychological approach to evolution has less of an ontological thrust than Ruskin’s architectural thinking, yet it retains a similar focus on life force. Throughout his writings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—including 1889’s *Time and Free Will*, 1896’s *Matter and Memory*, and especially 1907’s *Creative Evolution*—Bergson maintains the link Ruskin theorizes between vitality and form, but he softens the moral rigidity of this structural relationship in order to emphasize the importance of the past rather than the projection of the future. Whereas Ruskin’s yoking of intention and realization remained bound by teleological thinking, Bergson dispenses with the folly of “finalism” and its assumption that “things and beings merely realize a programme previously arranged” (*Creative Evolution* 39). Rejecting finalism’s orientation to the future, Bergson introduces his notion of *durée*, or duration. In the first place, duration expresses Bergson’s belief in the radical nature of change. Change is absolutely continuous, such that “there is no essential difference between passing from one state to another and persisting in the same state” (2). For Bergson, the absolute continuity of change does not enforce presentist thinking; instead, it indicates the ever-present significance of the past, of memory: “For our duration is not merely one instant replacing another; if it were, there would never be anything but the present—no prolonging of the past into the actual, no evolution, no concrete duration. Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances” (4). Change never reaches a state of completion or full self-expression. It continuously structures the development of the present.

Bergson gives the force behind this developmental impulse a name: *élan vital*, or “vital impetus” as Arthur Mitchell translates it. The *élan vital* indicates a “psychological” element that plays

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10 Each of these works became available in English within a short period. Bergson’s dissertation, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* was translated (as *Time and Free Will*) in 1910, followed by English versions of *Matière et mémoire* and *L’Évolution créatrice* in 1911.
an active role in organic evolution. Again resisting the teleological temptations of finalism, Bergson’s vital impetus represents less of a striving toward than an emerging from. In Creative Evolution, he describes *élan vital* as a “limited force” that is “always seeking to transcend itself” and which “always remains inadequate to the work it would fain produce” (126). Instead of realizing a set intention, then, the *élan vital* truly is an *impetus* in that it creates movement from the push of the past—“the great blast of life” (128). Anticipating Cather’s own interest in the emotional evolution of narrative form, Bergson argues that individual organisms (and especially humans) realize their vital impetus by establishing a conduct that allows them to “ripen” into themselves organically rather than to “counterfeit” alternative modes of being. This process continues “indefinitely . . . without ever reaching its goal. . . . Such is the character of our evolution; and such also, without doubt, that of the evolution of life” (47–48). For Bergson, then, the relationship between vitality and form is a temporal one. The vital impetus *endures* such that it is the past that structures present and future forms of life. The evolution of the self therefore depends less on setting specific intentions (as Ruskin argues) and more on a creative impulse that initiates movement “from behind,” as it were, and hence retains the radical openness of the future.

In his volume *Bergson and American Culture*, Tom Quirk claims that for Cather, as for Bergson, “The past . . . was life itself” (164). Quirk convincingly argues that, during the early years of her writing, Cather obsessed over the apparent disjunction between life and art. “Again and again in her early fiction, Cather was to explore the fate of art and the soul at odds with circumstance” (107). During these early years, she persisted “in the belief in a transcendent and perfect realm of beauty and truth, forever opposed to the world of fact and federation” (100). As she entered her mature period beginning with the 1913 publication of *O Pioneers!*, however, memory became Cather’s muse, and her thinking took on a Bergsonian cast: “she came to believe that artistic desire participated in a universal living principle that extended back to a prehistoric people and reached forward into the
future” (100). Cather expresses this sentiment powerfully in the Panther Canyon section of *The Song of the Lark*, in which Thea Kronborg encounters a deep history of human habitation in the American Southwest: “The Cliff-Dwellers had lengthened her past. She had older and higher obligations” (308). This episode extends Thea’s historical memory and enables her coming-of-age as a woman and an artist in the novel’s subsequent sections. Instead of reading *The Song of the Lark* as a *Bildungsroman* in which self-development becomes a “moral imperative” (Palmer 119), it is possible to interpret the novel as a Bergsonian narrative in which the influx of the past liberates Thea from the stagnancy of her life in Colorado: it opens her to the possibility of studying music in Germany and, eventually, of becoming an acclaimed opera singer. The past revivifies Thea by providing an impetus for self-renewal. Her story is not structured by the teleology of destiny, but rather by the continuous flow of vitality that swells into the present and beyond.11

Cather’s fiction retains the metaphysics of Ruskin’s architectural thinking while at the same time experimenting with Bergsonian concepts that allow the narrative architecture of her novels to evolve organically from the vital impetus of the story at hand. Her narratives dampen the moral imperative of Ruskin’s true life, yet they maintain his emphasis on living architecture by incorporating elements of Bergson’s theory of creative evolution. In other words, Cather invests Ruskin’s interest in vitality and structure with a Bergsonian sense of temporality.

These influences converge in Cather’s interest in landscape, an interest that most obviously connects her to Ruskin, who famously defended the integrity of landscape painting in the first volume of *Modern Painters*. Not only does he assert the aesthetic and moral superiority of modern landscape painters such as J. M. W. Turner and John Constable over the old masters of the

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11 Like Quirk, I see this Bergsonian reading as an alternative to the traditional (and dismissive) view of Cather as incorrigibly nostalgic. Indeed, the charge of nostalgia has haunted Cather and her work since its initial publication. Cather surely saw herself as decidedly un-modern, and she proudly declared this identity, for example, in the title of her essay collection *Not Under Forty*—that is, not meant to be read by anyone under forty. However, her interest in the past was not purely escapist; she sought to usher what she considered the greater vitality of the past into the present.
Renaissance, but he also advances the controversial argument that the moderns’ superiority rested on their preference for realist representation and “truth to nature” over subservience to pictorial convention. Modern painters demonstrate greater command over the “truth” of present reality, which lends their landscapes a liveliness that is fundamentally tied to Ruskin’s notion of the true life. As Joseph Murphy points out, however, “Ruskin did not view painters as slavish transcribers of nature’s iconography; according to his romantic typology, the landscape’s inherent meanings are discovered through the artist’s imagination and arrangement” (229–30). Like Ruskin, Cather places a premium on the artist’s ability to use imagination to craft a suitable structure for her art. In the case of *The Professor’s House*, which I investigate below, landscape proves crucial to the development of meaning and structure. And yet, in contrast to Murphy’s claim, Cather’s use of landscape is not entirely Ruskinian since it does not remain tied to “a set of transcendent ideas operating through a theological conception of history” that “suspends [its] inhabitants between type and fulfillment” (228–29; 236). As I argued above, Cather’s art is not so teleologically bound. Instead, following Bergson, Cather’s landscapes invoke history and memory in order to create the dynamic atmosphere she considered necessary for scene: “When we have a vivid experience in social intercourse, pleasant or unpleasant, it records itself in our memory in the form of a scene; and when it flashes back to us, all sorts of apparently unimportant details are flashed back with it” (*Willa Cather on Writing* 79–80). It is this swelling of the past that structures Cather’s landscapes, and these landscapes in turn structure the narrative.

It is admittedly difficult to track the elements of these intellectual influences in great detail. In the foregoing section my intention has only been to sketch the bare outlines of these influences in terms of Cather’s investment in narrative structure, scene, and life force. As I demonstrate in the next section, Cather’s work makes a much more direct connection between architecture, landscape, and vitality. This occurs in her fiction through a process by which architecture brings landscape into
focus and installs it within the domestic interior, thus making landscape into a dual figure for being and belonging—the very essence of homely metaphysics. Indeed, landscape description is fundamental to Cather’s imaginative acts of homemaking; in her fiction, to be at home inevitably means to be at home in landscape.

Landscape in the House of Fiction

Given the symbolic significance of the home in her novels, it comes as little surprise that Cather frames her theory of fiction in terms of a house. Cather’s well-known essay “The Novel Démeublé” takes part in a tradition of literary interpretation structured on architectural metaphor, from Ruskin’s *Seven Lamps of Architecture* to Walter Pater’s “literary architecture,”¹² Henry James’s “house of fiction,”¹³ and even, as others have argued, to Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth*.¹⁴ The commonplace interpretation of Cather’s attempt to “unfurnish” (démeubler) the novel views her domestic metaphor as a parable of novelistic selection. In this sense, the unfurnished novel at once repudiates the overstuffed realist narratives of the nineteenth century and reminds modern novelists that art finally resides, as Nikolai Gogol says, in the art of choosing (l’art de choisir). Rather than populating narrative with a catalog of meaningless objects, one must choose only “the eternal material of art” (*Willa Cather on Writing* 40) and toss out all the rest. For Cather, this means distilling

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¹² See, for example, Ellen Eve Frank’s account of Pater in *Literary Architecture: Essays Toward a Tradition*. Frank’s exquisite volume also includes chapters on the “literary architecture” of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Marcel Proust, and Henry James.

¹³ See James’s 1908 preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, reprinted in *The Art of the Novel*. He writes: “The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. . . . The spreading field, the human scene, is the ‘choice of subject’; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the ‘literary form’; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted.”

¹⁴ See Mezei and Briganti 838.
elemental passions in order to conjure the essence of a vital life force. The house of fiction must therefore remain uncluttered and open for the play of human emotions.

Despite the elegance of this essay and its notably “unfurnished” writing style, Cather’s housecleaning metaphor does not fully disclose by what means she actually intends to tidy up the novel. In an oft-cited passage she calls for novelists simply to “throw all the furniture out the window” (42), but this rhetoric of physical jettisoning proves misleading, even logically opposed to her emphasis on art as selection. As she suggests in her discussion of Leo Tolstoy, rather than defenestrating the literary “furniture,” the novelist must instead make strategic use of it to evoke the essence of character: “the clothes, the dishes, the haunting interiors of [Tolstoy’s] old Moscow houses, are always so much a part of the emotions of the people that they are perfectly synthesized; they seem to exist, not so much in the author’s mind, as in the emotional penumbra of the characters themselves” (39–40; my emphasis). In this sense, then, the proper method for unfurnishing the novel entails the radical absorption of mise-en-scène into subjectivity, fusing character and setting into an integral union. This method gathers a character’s environs into a context of significance and emotional resonance—not an “outward” projection as with the pathetic fallacy, but an “inward” synthesis of place into the shadowy realm of a person’s “emotional penumbra.” This proposes an alternative to Cather’s own frequently invoked metaphor of fiction as a stage completely purged of scenery and bereft of all but “one passion, and four walls” (43). Rather than allowing the setting to be a static backdrop against which the action takes place, the scene itself must manifest the play of emotional drama. Indeed, the imaginative space of the novel must be cleared of clutter in order to accommodate a landscape composed in broad strokes of intense, elemental passion, thereby conjuring the sense of vitality that stands as Cather’s first principle of art. As Bernice Slote puts it, not only did Cather consider life itself to be “earth-centered, physical, starred with sense, instincts, and passions” (47), but she also believed that in the novelistic expression of life force, “largeness,
intensity, strong feeling, and great effort counted far more towards greatness than did the perfection of prettier but colder forms” (52). Again, for Cather, setting must provide much more than mere background scenery; in John Stilgoe’s words, it must serve as “the armature around which the work revolves” (“Foreword” x).

Given these contrary readings—démeubler as the imaginative clearing of novelistic space and démeubler as radical absorption of environment into character—how are we to decide between them? I think it would be a mistake to read Cather’s essay as a blanket rejection of all novelistic description, and particularly of setting. Some interpreters have found this tack tempting and have argued that Cather makes such narrative digressions obsolete by relying on readers to conjure their own images.15 But Cather’s novels are full of celebrated passages of landscape description, many of which do important narrative work that remains largely under-analyzed. Rather than presenting any hard-and-fast rules for literary creation, this essay serves as a call to unfurnish the novel by gathering the necessary scenic elements into that which, for Cather, represented the living passion of human emotions. In other words, the novel démeublé interiorizes the external world as the expression of a character’s “emotional penumbra”—it brings “outland inland,” as Deborah Karush puts it in a different context.

It is precisely through this process of bringing the outside in that Cather fashions her literary landscapes. Importantly, this internalizing method is not limited to the rendering of scene through

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15 This reflects a tendency to take Cather too much at her word, typically emphasizing her powerful idea that only what is felt but not named can be considered “created” as such. One example of a critic who does this is Elaine Sargent Apthorp. Apthorp sees Cather’s essay as a call for an alternative practice of art that invites a sort of intersubjective collaboration between text and reader. To this end, she emphasizes that “this poignantly present absence, this painful blank and gap [is] to be filled by the sensitive reader” (3). Blanche H. Gelfant advocates a similar reading, underscoring Cather’s desire to make “the effect of language depend upon the sensitivity of a reader who must respond to what was not on the page and yet in its absence, by its absence, was there to be felt” (123). These examples, among many comparable ones, are not wrong in their point of emphasis. Indeed, Cather repeats such sentiments in her essay “On the Art of Fiction,” where she once again stresses that art should simplify: “Any first-rate novel or story must have in it the strength of a dozen fairly good stories that have been sacrificed to it” (Willa Cather on Writing 103). Furthermore, this reading has the advantage of bringing Cather’s theory into conversation with other modernists such as Ernest Hemingway, whose so-called iceberg theory of omission privilege a similar philosophy of the unwritten. (See Death in the Afternoon.) However, such an interpretation privileges readerly practices rather than asking how Cather meant to actualize such absent presences in her art and hence neglects to engage in close readings that might suggest an answer.
character. As suggested by her use of a domestic metaphor, Cather’s fiction also employs architecture to organize mere surroundings into meaningful landscapes. In her novels, then, Cather frames landscape in two distinct senses: first, by rendering it as an elemental aspect of a character’s emotional constitution, and second, by ushering landscape imagery directly into the domestic interior. Landscape becomes a constitutive part of both physical structures and the characters who inhabit them.

Cather illustrates this architectural framing of landscape in a letter from 1938, in which she characterizes the experimental narrative structure of *The Professor’s House* in terms of literary, musical, and painterly analogues. She begins by describing a literary device commonly employed in early French and Spanish novels, where the authors insert a *nouvelle* into the middle of a *roman*. This is precisely what Cather has done in her own novel: the independent novella “Tom Outland’s Story” constitutes the centerpiece of a three-part narrative, framed on either side by the story of an aging Midwestern professor of history. In spite of this literary precedent, however, Cather admits that “the experiment which interested me was something a little more vague, and was very much akin to the arrangement followed in sonatas” (31). Curiously, Cather refrains from developing the musical example and proceeds directly to a discussion of painting that in turn elaborates an architectural metaphor:

Just before I began the book I had seen, in Paris, an exhibition of old and modern Dutch paintings. In many of them the scene presented was a living-room warmly furnished, or a kitchen full of food and coppers. But in most of the interiors, whether drawing-room or kitchen, there was a square window, open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a stretch of grey sea. The feeling of the sea that one got through those square windows was remarkable, and gave me a sense of the fleets of Dutch ships that ply quietly on all the waters of the globe—to Java, etc. (31)

Cather does not invoke Dutch painting here in a moment of art-historical curiosity. Rather, she emphasizes the way in which these paintings dramatize an intimacy between inside and outside. The
“warmly furnished” interiors domesticate the exterior world by organizing it into a view—a seascape—bringing the distant dangers beyond the windowpane (as well as the unsavory realities of trade and imperialism; more on that later) into harmless proximity, where their aesthetic and symbolic qualities may be contemplated in comfort. The outside world comes into focus as interior decoration.

The intimate relationship Cather conjures between architecture and landscape recalls a similar image furnished by Edith Wharton in her authoritative 1897 manual on interior decoration, *The Decoration of Houses*, written in collaboration with architect Ogden Codman.¹⁶ In a chapter explaining how windows “form the basis of architectural harmony” and “serve to increase the dignity and beauty” of the domestic interior, Wharton emphasizes the way in which they “establish the relation between the inside of the house and the landscape, making the latter what, as seen from a room, it logically ought to be: a part of the wall-decoration” (65, 67). As Cather puts it in *The Professor’s House*, “the seasons” of the external world often “gain by being brought into the house, just as they gain by being brought into painting, and into poetry” (61). For Cather and Wharton both, then, landscape seems most “at home” when showcased within the house.

However, whereas Wharton keeps the window shut,¹⁷ Cather opens it to the world: “In my book I tried to make Professor St. Peter’s house rather overcrowded and stuffy with new things . . . until one got rather stifled. Then I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa, and the fine disregard of trivialities which was in Tom Outland’s face and in his behaviour” (*Willa Cather on Writing* 31–32). Cather translates the logic of the Dutch paintings into the narrative architecture of her novel—namely by allowing the fictional window in the Professor’s

¹⁶ Very much in line with Cather’s own desire for an unfurnished novel, Wharton and Codman’s *The Decoration of Houses* attacked the stuffy aesthetic of Victorian design, which was characterized by heavy curtains, the clutter of *bric-à-brac*, and excessively plush furniture.

¹⁷ “The effect of a perpetually open window, produced by a large sheet of plate glass, while it gives a sense of coolness and the impression of being out of doors, becomes for these very reasons a disadvantage in cold weather” (Wharton and Codman 67; my emphasis).
house to double as a narratological window in *The Professor’s House*. Thus, the landscape brought into the fictional home simultaneously becomes a fixture in the house of fiction itself. Furthermore, leaving these fictional and narratological windows open will invite an enlivening breeze to permeate both imaginative spaces. For Cather, whose theory of art places central importance on notions of energy and passion, the figurative “fresh air” ushered in along with the landscape vision (in this case, the landscape of the Blue Mesa) helps to charge her fictional spaces and the characters who inhabit them with an enhanced sense of vitality.

**At Home in Landscape**

Cather’s protagonist in *The Professor’s House* is Godfrey St. Peter, a 52-year-old history professor who feels permanently exiled from the present. As a historian, it is the past that enlivens him rather than the commercial frontiers of the modern world; he trades in intellectual artifacts rather than the material commodities preferred by his own family. Even his name places him in the company of historical pioneers, linking, as it does, Godfrey of Boulogne (conqueror of Jerusalem) and St. Peter (founder of the Roman Church). The Professor has also enjoyed a successful career as a scholarly pioneer, spending his academic life chronicling early-American imperialism in his multi-volume masterwork, *Spanish Adventures in North America*. With the publication of the history’s final volume and the impending conclusion of his career, however, St. Peter faces the closing of an intellectual frontier; his connection to the past dwindles. The pain of this transition is exacerbated by his family’s move into a new house, which, for St. Peter, means abandoning the old house and hence the last-remaining ties to his own personal history. The novel opens in the midst of these changes: “The moving was over and done. Professor St. Peter was alone in the dismantled house where he had lived ever since his marriage, where he had worked out his career and brought up his two daughters” (*Professor’s House* 3). The pondering length of the second sentence gives the lie to the
blunt brevity of the first. The move may be complete, but St. Peter is far from renouncing his own past. He holds fast to a secret vitality.

My insistence on the Professor’s “secret vitality” may at first seem strange, especially given that critics tend to emphasize his existential desuetude. Many scholars see Godfrey as a stuffy academic whose occasional patriarchal and even imperialist tendencies have left him a lonely exile, alienated from his own family within a deteriorating old house. For such critics, Godfrey appears little more than an old-fashioned historian who inexplicably clings to a dying architecture as he faces the closing of his career, the slow dissolution of his family, and the sense of his own impending death. My own reading focuses on a source of vitality that has largely remained unacknowledged by these critics: the vitality of art creation. In contrast to other critics’ treatment of Godfrey as a desiccated and vestigial figure, I argue that, despite being in a funk, the Professor is an artist in the Catherian sense—that is, an individual of singular vision who is animated by grand passion. Godfrey’s attic study therefore serves a secondary function as an artist’s studio. At first glance, this study–studio appears continuous with the rest of the “dismantled house” that “was almost as ugly as it is possible for a house to be” and contained only “empty, echoing rooms” (Professor’s House 3). Just as the house contains none of the comforts one expects of a home, the attic study—described as a “dark den” with low ceilings, rough floors, and a single window for light and air—does not seem conducive to scholarly production. And yet, despite the shared sense of dilapidation, Godfrey considers his attic separate from the rest of the structure, so much so that he had to “get used to the feeling that under his workroom there was a dead, empty house” (7). Included among the “dead”

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18 Much of this discussion has focused on St. Peter’s attic office. Deborah Karush, for example, has described the Professor’s office as a stagnant death trap kept barely alive only by the machinations of St. Peter’s “narrow intellectualism.” Other critics have taken a less extreme tack. Sarah Mahurin Mutter, for instance, initially reads the Professor’s cramped abode as being “hostile to his presence” and rendering him immobile (56), though this state of affairs does not finally close off the possibility of intellectual adventure: “Even if the body’s ‘moving is over and done with’ the mind still has places to go; as such St. Peter can always return to the Blue Mesa” (65–66).

19 The sense of a studio is also suggested by the fact that Godfrey shares the attic with the family seamstress, Augusta, who uses the space to design and construct new clothing.
and “empty” rooms below is the Professor’s “show study,” located more attractively on the main floor and complete with “roomy shelves where his library was housed, and a proper desk at which he wrote letters” (8). This study may appear more appropriate for the prestige of intellectual work, but it is little more than an attractive sham, as hollow and dead as the rest of the all-but-abandoned house. By contrast, and despite its architectural informality, the worn “cuddy” he shares with August and her sewing forms serves as his real center of creative production.

More than just the site of his scholarly writing, the attic study acts as the Professor’s main hub for intellectual adventure and creative ferment: “There had been delightful excursions and digressions; the two Sabbatical years when he was in Spain studying records, two summers in the South-west on the trail of his adventurers, another in Old Mexico, dashes to France to see his foster-brothers. But the notes and records and the ideas always came back to this room. It was here they were digested and sorted, and woven into their proper place in his history” (16; my emphasis). If, as Bernice Slote has suggested, Cather’s thinking about the creation of art finally comes to “bear on [the] ways by which an artist might bring disparate elements into a whole” (Kingdom of Art 79), then as a scholar who has spent years organizing decades of research into his history of the Spanish explorers in the Southwest, St. Peter undoubtedly qualifies as an artist. His attic study–studio is the site where the real work of gathering disparate elements into a unified whole has taken place; as such, it bears the traces of the vitality and energy required for the sustained commitment to his massive, multi-volume history. St. Peter also embodies this vigor quite literally in his physical structure: “Anything that clung to his body showed it to be built upon extremely good bones, with the slender hips and springy shoulders of a tireless swimmer” (Professor’s House 4). If, in spite of his physical prowess, the Professor also seems existentially exhausted, this fatigue reflects another trait that Cather attributes to the true artist. That “he had burned his candle at both ends” only secures his status as an artist; it signals his faith in the idea that “A man can do anything if he wishes to enough. . . . Desire is
creation, is the magical element in that process” (19). With his belief in the individual’s power to manifest his own vision, St. Peter joins the ranks of the Ruskinian true life. For Cather, this endows the Professor with the creative spirit of the artist—one who understands that “Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had” (55).

In addition to St. Peter’s status as an artist-like figure, there is another way in which his study–studio embodies the vitality of art creation: namely the window that provides “the sole opening for light and air” (7). Aside from its functional purpose as a release valve that keeps the attic from filling up with noxious gas, this window also provides a view of Lake Michigan, a picturesque vision of “the inland sea of his childhood” that had dazzled him as a child:

[T]he great fact in life, the always possible escape from dullness, was the lake. The sun rose out of it, the day began there; it was like an open door than nobody could shut... You had only to look at the lake, and you knew you would soon be free. . . . [It] ran through the days like the weather, not a thing thought about, but a part of consciousness itself. . . . [As a boy] he didn’t observe the details or know what it was that made him happy; but now, forty years later, he could recall all its aspects perfectly. They had made pictures in him when he was unwilling and unconscious, when his eyes were merely wide open. (20–21)

This description evokes a youthful state of being that exists solely in an unreflective present, a life lived rather than “a thing thought about.” Yet the “unconscious” process elaborated here, in which environmental forces silently impress images on his “unwilling” consciousness, also bespeaks an attachment to this landscape that was forged as a boy and traumatically ruptured before he came of age: “When he was eight years old, his parents sold the lakeside farm and dragged him and his brothers and sisters out to the wheat lands of central Kansas. St. Peter nearly died of it” (21). This trauma haunted him throughout his youth, so that even during his idyllic student years in France, “that stretch of blue water was the one thing he was home-sick for” (21).

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20 St. Peter’s masterwork, *Spanish Adventures in North America*, was completed according to just such a vision. He recalls staying with Charles Thierault “in his oleander-buried house in the Prado,” from whence he departed on a sailing trip with his friend along the southern coast of Spain. Looking up from the boat at the sun-splashed Sierra Nevada range, “the design of his book unfolded in the air above him, just as definitely as the mountain ranges themselves. And the design was sound. He had accepted it as inevitable, had never meddled with it, and it had seen him through” (89).
The deeply imprinted “pictures” of Lake Michigan eventually lead him to accept a faculty position at Hamilton, a moderately prestigious but well-situated university: “it seemed to him that any place near the lake was a place where one could live” (22). After many years of study and travel, St. Peter subordinates his scholarly ambitions to his desire for homecoming. This return restores to him the long-lost vitality he had enjoyed as a boy, particularly through the view of the lake furnished by his attic window: “The sight of [Lake Michigan] from his study window these many years had been of more assistance than all the convenient things he had done without would have been” (22). More than simply “increas[ing] the dignity and beauty” of the Professor’s attic, as Wharton claimed, the window enlivens the room with a generative energy vital to the quasi-artistic creation of his scholarly masterpiece. The landscape of St. Peter’s childhood home enters the attic interior and infuses it with the essence of dwelling, fashioning a home in landscape.

And yet, twenty years after his homecoming to the lake, the Professor still feels like a refugee here. The sense of homesickness he had carried with him from the time of his premature departure from the shores of Lake Michigan remains etched in his consciousness, leaving him with a perennial “homesickness for other lands” (6). Despite the importance of the attic as what Judith Fryer, using Bachelard’s phrase, refers to as a “felicitous space” of retreat (“Cather’s Felicitous Space” 190–91), the line separating the comfort of a refuge from the refugee’s unrest remains fuzzy for St. Peter. In the face of this enduring estrangement, the Professor requires a more fundamental homecoming.

If the view from his study window cannot completely satisfy St. Peter’s desire for homecoming, the novella installed within the novel presents an opportunity for a more profound return. “Tom Outland’s Story” opens up a narratological picture window that frames a vista of the American Southwest, ushering this landscape into the larger narrative architecture. The landscape of

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21 Fryer additionally connects the Professor’s attic to Cather’s own writing space in the cramped sewing room in her beloved friend Isabelle McClung’s house in Pittsburgh. See also E. K. Brown’s *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (completed by Leon Edel) for a similar biographical reading of St. Peter’s study.
this “outland” is home to St. Peter’s creative spirit. Not only is it the region on which his historical research focused, but it also serves as the imaginative site of his connection with Tom Outland, a former student who had also been a surrogate son and heir before his premature death in World War I. Tom is a metonymically multivalent figure for St. Peter. Not only does he stand in for the Southwestern landscape and for the Professor’s own lost youth, but he also represents the ideal of an artist-like figure who remains untouched by modern commercialism. Tom is a consignment from St. Peter’s past who, as Henri Bergson would say, “swells” into and innervates the present. In order to tap into this revitalizing swell, St. Peter turns to Tom’s diary and its account of his youthful adventures. While the rest of his family vacations in Europe, St. Peter installs himself in his attic and begins transforming the diary into a publishable manuscript. Hence, the shift to the second section of the novel at once enables the Professor’s homecoming to a nostalgic landscape, and it also fosters a return to a former self, a more “authentic” way of being.

Tom’s account of his Southwestern adventures begins in earnest with his work as a cattle rancher in Pardee, New Mexico. Together with a man named Roddy Blake, Tom maintains a lively sense of well-being, mainly by feeding on the adventure tales of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver’s Travels*, the latter of which Roddy “never tired” of reading (167). Forging a close companionship in an otherwise lonely line of work, Tom and Roddy become a pair of intellectual adventurers who endow all that they survey with a kind of narrative significance. Thus, from the vantage of their cabin, situated near the Cruzados River, Tom and Roddy come into something of a personal relationship with the Blue Mesa: “The Blue Mesa was one of the landmarks we always saw from Pardee—*landmarks mean so much* in a flat country” (165; my emphasis). Striking geological features that dramatically jut out from an otherwise flat horizon certainly make a visual impression, but in this case the sense of “meaning” also derives from the shifts in light that capture Tom and Roddy’s attention and instigate the play of imagination: “The mesa was our only neighbour, and the closer
we got to it, the more tantalizing it was. It was no longer a blue, featureless lump, as it had been from a distance. Its sky-line was like the profile of a big beast lying down; the head to the north, higher than the flanks around which the river curved” (170). Unlike the lake view from the Professor’s attic window that “ran through the days” (20) without consciously announcing itself, the mesa demands attention as it changes with the sun and constantly alters the length and shape of their days.

Although Tom and Roddy fill the Mesa landscape with meaning, they also insist on its emptiness. When Tom initially happens upon deposits of pottery shards, arrow-heads, and other evidence of former habitation along irrigation ditches coming from the Mesa, he hypothesizes: “There must have been a colony of pueblo Indians here in ancient times: fixed residents, like the Taos Indians and the Hopis, not wanderers like the Navajos” (173). Even as he acknowledges the traces of an earlier occupation, Tom immediately goes on to ponder the personal significance of his discovery: “To people off alone, as we were, there is something stirring about finding evidence of human labour and care in the soil of an empty country. It comes to you as a sort of message, makes you feel differently about the ground you walk over every day” (173; my emphasis). Although Tom expresses delight at the discovery that the soil was only apparently empty—that in fact it harbors stories of its own that are yet to be unearthed—this passage reveals an almost imperceptible shift in which Tom imaginatively repossesses these yet-to-be-unearthed stories for himself. After all, it is not the discovery of Native American relics that excites him, but rather his own shift in perspective that endows the ground he walks on with a meaning known only to him. For all intents and purposes, then, despite his discovery that the land indicates a rich history of inhabitation, it is this apparent emptiness that he will rely on in order to justify his exploration of the Blue Mesa and, eventually, his personal claim to its historical legacy.
The remainder of “Tom Outland’s Story” sketches out a fuller outline of this imaginative repossession. When Tom initially makes his way into the Mesa where he discovers the Cliff City, his initial impulse is to keep it to himself. When Tom finally lets Roddy in on the secret, he does so hoping that his companion will share his preservationist impulse: “We were reluctant to expose those silent and beautiful places to vulgar curiosity” (183). From an archaeological standpoint, Tom’s preservationist impulse seems justified; the Cliff City stands as an architectural marvel and an exemplar of the Ruskinian true life—the achievement of true artistic vision. When Tom first comes upon the “little city of stone, asleep,” his first impression is of sculptural balance:

It all hung together, seemed to have a kind of composition: pale little houses of stone nestling close to one another, perched on top of each other, with flat roofs, narrow windows, straight walls, and in the middle of the group, a round tower. It was beautifully proportioned, that tower, swelling out to a larger girth a little above the base, then growing slender again. There was something symmetrical and powerful about the swell of masonry. The tower was the fine thing that held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something. (180; my emphasis)

The shift in possessive pronoun that takes place in this passage quietly announces an encroaching sense of ownership. The shift in pronoun also discloses a shift in point of reference. As long as Tom and Roddy focus on specific architectural features, Cliff City remains “their town” and belongs to the original, historical inhabitants. Following the initial expression of reverence for the quality of construction, the ellipsis in the passage above conceals a substantial list of architectural elements, including “cedar joints,” “poles . . . that held up the clay floor,” “door lintels,” and “clay dressing . . . frescoed in geometrical patterns” (190). However, once the point of reference shifts from architecture to the more-than-physical splendor of “the setting,” “their town” miraculously transmutes into “our city,” which “hung like a bird’s nest in the cliff, looking off into the box canyon below, and beyond into the wide valley we called Cow Canyon, facing an ocean of clear air” (190–91). This shift from architecture to setting signals a more significant change than the pronominal substitution at first indicates. It marks a move from the admiration of design sense and
technical ability—the artist’s skill—to the admiration of constitution and spirit—the artist’s vitality. Although Tom and Roddy admire the virtues of the “fine people” who “lived day after day looking down upon such grandeur,” the possessive desire that shows itself here subtly undermines what initially comes across as reverence. They wish to make this vitality their own.  

The slipperiness between reverence and possessiveness becomes clearer following Tom’s trip to Washington D.C., where he attempts to persuade the Smithsonian to underwrite his excavation. Due to the poor quality of his photos, Tom fails to convince the museum curators of “the beauty and vastness of the setting” (204), and he returns to the Mesa only to find that Roddy has sold the excavated objects to a foreign businessman. Tom’s reaction finally illuminates the full extent of his possessiveness. At first, he charges Roddy with having liquidated a national inheritance: “They belonged to this country, to the State, and to all people. . . . You’ve gone and sold your country’s secrets” (219; my emphasis). More importantly, however, Tom experiences Roddy’s actions as a personal betrayal: “I cared more about [the excavation] than about anything else in the world” (216).

Tom has come to see the Cliff City as his own historical and cultural inheritance. He explains to Roddy that the artifacts “belonged to boys like you and me, that have no other ancestors to inherit from” (219), and he marvels at the idea that these objects “had been preserved through the ages by a miracle, and handed on to you and me, two poor cow-punchers, rough and ignorant” (220–21).

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22 Glen Love misses this point in his attempt to absolve Cather of the political sins that attracted negative attention during what Joan Acocella calls the “revenge of the ‘liberal humanism’ of the fifties and sixties” (qtd. in Love 12). When he discusses “Tom’s sins as an excavator,” Love points out that these sins “doubtless qualify today as cultural appropriation, and it is useful to have these aspects of his story pointed out to us. But we also need to keep in mind that they are consistent with Tom’s deep sense of his own human bonds with the lost inhabitants of the Cliff City” (12). Love goes on to substantiate this bond with the claim that “Tom’s universalist sentiments are now verified by the DNA in our Darwinian bodies” (13). Unfortunately, Love’s desire for interdisciplinary research leads him down a dangerous road. I’m not sure how the universality of DNA and of genetic evolution absolves Tom of anything, particularly as he is by no means a descendent of the Cliff Dwellers. Scientific research might reveal, say, that the genetic basis for race is a fiction, but it does little to confront the historico-materialist reality of race (and racism) as it continues to exist in today’s world. In other words, science cannot absolve the sins of cultural appropriation so easily. Such is the false promise of Love’s interdisciplinary perspective.
Despite his “Fourth of July” talk, then, what Tom truly mourns is the loss of the only inheritance to which he, as an orphan, has any claim.

Tom feels this loss with a sense of ontological gravitas. When he goes to bed on the night of his fateful return to the Mesa, the very source of his being seems evacuated: “I went to sleep that night hoping I would never waken” (224). Tom’s nihilistic drive fades by the following night, when, left alone on the Mesa after Roddy’s covert departure, he has a transformative experience. He realizes that this “was the first night I was ever really on the mesa at all—the first night that all of me was there”:

This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole. It all came together in my understanding, as a series of experiments do when you begin to see where they are leading. Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. It was possession. The excitement of my first discovery was a very pale feeling compared to this one. For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion. I had read of filial piety in the Latin poets, and I knew that was what I felt for this place. (227; my emphasis)

In this moment, the slow process of Tom’s imaginative repossessing of the Mesa landscape comes to completion as he frames it in a religious idiom. As he stands atop the Mesa overlooking Cliff City, the landscape converges around him, organizing and “co-ordinating” itself into a miraculous “whole.” The magnificence of this unification inspires in him what he calls a “religious emotion,” a deep-rooted sense of responsibility to and for that particular place that resembles a bond of kinship. The sense of filial belonging serves as a kind of ontological recompense for the loss of a material inheritance. The coalescence of the landscape around him into a unified whole mirrors the complete emergence of his essential self—“all of me was there.” The Mesa has become the place where Tom may thrive in the fullness of his being and where he feels he most essentially belongs.

As if in response to Tom’s almost mythical coming-of-age tale, part three of The Professor’s House opens with St. Peter reassessing his own life. “All the most important things in his life,” he reflects, “had been determined by chance” (233). A melancholy tone permeates the Professor's
admission to having a circumstantial life, a “false life” that, according to Ruskin's moralism, has failed to master its own momentum. The appearance of Tom Outland in his life, however, represented “a stroke of chance he couldn’t possibly have imagined” (233), a fortuitous event bearing transformative potential. Just as his original encounter with Tom proved expansive for the Professor, in the present moment he once again embraces the youthful spirit of his old companion. Over the course of the summer, as he works on the slow but satisfying task of editing Tom’s diary, St. Peter’s memories of Tom kindle recollections of his own childhood self: “the boy the Professor had long ago left behind him in Kansas, in the Solomon Valley—the original, unmodified Godfrey St. Peter” (239). With the return of this “vivid consciousness of an earlier state,” St. Peter at once recognizes the promise of his own youth and mourns the fact that what had been “the realest of his lives” had inevitably been extinguished by the responsibilities of adulthood: “the design of his life” (240) had been restructured, transforming him into a social being.

What the Professor had not known, however, and what he discovers through his encounter with Tom’s diary, is that, “at a given time, that first nature could return to a man, unchanged by all the pursuits and passions and experiences of his life” (242). And so, as he reconnects with Tom’s memory, the Professor returns to that “original, unmodified” self, negating his social ego and returning to his primordial mode of being:

[The] boy who had come back to St. Peter this summer was not a scholar. He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water. Wherever the sun sunned and the rain rained and snow snowed, wherever life sprouted and decayed, places were alike to him. He was not nearly so cultivated as Tom’s cliff-dwellers must have been—and yet he was terribly wise. He seemed to be at the root of the matter, Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths. He seemed to know, among other things, that he was solitary and must always be so; he had never married, never been a father. He was earth, and would return to earth. (241)

If St. Peter has lapsed into the Ruskinian false life, he finds some renewal in Bergsonian duration, the swelling of the past into the present. Here, Tom’s boyish vitality resurges in the Professor’s life.
through the art of the diary, which returns him to an earlier, more “primitive” self. As Tom Quirk notes, Bergson similarly considered art capable of “return[ing] us to the active presence of [a] primary self” (146). Great art sponsors such a return through the play of memory, and memory, as I outlined above, is crucial for the durational phenomenon that Bergson defines as “the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances” (Creative Evolution 4). Memory, and memory of youth in particular, furnishes art with its vital power. Summarizing Bergson’s position, Quirk writes:

[A]rt derives its power from the consolidated memories of youth before the necessity of deliberate action coordinates and subordinates past experiences to the practical interests of meaningful activity. Often . . . the ordinary uses of life restrict the free play of perception and memory and solidify them; habit unceasingly dethrones the authority of freedom. Thus, a second socialized self preempts the urges of a primary self, a moi fondamentale. Ordinarily we are content with this “shadow self” because it is better adapted to the requirements of social life, but a primary self is ever with us and blazes up from time to time, notably in childhood, in dreams, and in aesthetic feelings. (145–46)

St. Peter experiences the vital resurgence of this primary self as his memories of Tom swell into his present, offering the possibility for a homecoming to himself and the landscape of his youth.

And yet, although the “aesthetic feelings” produced by Tom’s diary inspire the Professor, they are not enough; his desire for a renewed being and a stable sense of belonging remains hampered as long as “the matter of domicile” has yet to be finally decided. The longer he stays in his attic studio, the more “doggedly anchored in the old house” he feels. Indeed, as he admits to Scott McGregor, “I can’t leave my study. . . . That’s flat.” By the same token, “He couldn’t make himself believe that he was ever going to live in the new house again. He didn’t belong there” (247; my emphasis).

From this plain statement of his own alienation, St. Peter immediately shifts to a thought of death and the radical sense of return this final rite imparts. He recalls four lines from Longfellow’s translation of an Anglo-Saxon poem: “For thee a house was built / Ere thou was born; / For thee a
mould was made / Ere thou of woman came” (248). The domestic imagery conjured here refers to the final place of rest: the grave. In these lines, the threat of the tomb transforms into the welcoming warmth of the home, a womb/tomb—as much a house of being as a house of death. This is where the Professor sees himself as belonging: “Lying on his old couch, he could almost believe himself in that house already” (248; my emphasis). In this sense, it would seem that death provides the best way, finally, to decide “the matter of domicile”—hence, St. Peter’s passive suicide attempt. By ushering him closer to the tomb, his near-death experience brings the horizon of his own being more clearly into focus. Following Heidegger, being and death belong together, such that to be a mortal is to be able to die: “As the shrine of Nothing, death harbors within itself the presencing of Being. As the shrine of Nothing, death is the shelter of Being” (“The Thing” 176). Thus, while the novel’s third section manifests a narratological homecoming (the return to the Professor’s house), and just as “Tom Outland’s Story” made possible his more radical homecoming to a sense of his primary self (the return to an “unmodified Godfrey St. Peter”), the Professor’s near-death experience plots out his final homecoming to the nearness to being we all find in the tomb—what I might call the Haus des Todseins, the House of Being-in-Death.

**Landscape’s Homely Metaphysics**

In *The Professor’s House*, it is landscape that enables a radical sense of homecoming for Tom and, in a more complex sense, for St. Peter. With respect to Tom in particular, his imaginative gathering of his surroundings into a sacred dwelling place has something to do with the metaphysical process of consecration that Mircea Eliade describes in *The Sacred and the Profane*. According to Eliade, from the perspective of someone settling in a new land, unknown and apparently “unoccupied” territory takes on the chaos of homogenous nonreality and must be worlded through rituals of taking possession. Such rituals “always repeat the cosmogony” (32). Thus, any act of
settling a territory doubles as an act of consecration, a symbolic re-founding and re-“cosmicizing” of the world. Tom’s particular rituals of taking possession (e.g., survey, excavation) facilitate the rebirth of the Mesa as a landscape that organizes and orients the world into specific configurations of personal (and national) significance. Through this process, Tom consolidates a meaningful landscape; profane space becomes a sacred place of radical belonging.

This act of consecration is also an act of settler colonialism. Settlement demands a vanishing indigene, and in the case of “Tom Outland’s Story,” it also demands the disavowal of history. As an orphan, Tom’s imaginative claim to the Blue Mesa landscape is also a claim to an inheritance. For St. Peter, who sees Tom as a pioneer and whose own desire for the New Mexican landscape amplifies this vision, Tom’s inheritance takes on a national(ist) significance that places its own origins under erasure. Hence, having made a home in landscape, Tom comes to emblematize the Native American spirit of individualism that characterizes the quintessential national spirit of American pioneers and artists alike. As my reference to Eliade suggests, settlement is as much a metaphysical act of taking possession as a physical one. The metaphysical thrust of colonization goes back at least as far as Plato, whose *Phaedrus* dialogue “refers to the relationship between body and soul as ‘colonisation’: *katoikizein* (specifically: the act of settling a colony)” (Veracini 93). Just like the soul inhabits an inanimate body, settlers locate their ontological seat in (the myth of) empty land.

Settler colonial narratives like Tom’s thus showcase what I have called landscape metaphysics. I mean two things by this term: first, a general sense in which the real environment becomes abstracted and hence subject to the kind of imaginative transformation that the Blue Mesa undergoes via the double framing of Tom and St. Peter’s narratives; and second, a more specific sense in which this transmuted reality frames a “homely” space that secures a sense of being and belonging—an ontologically significant space that Bachelard would describe as “felicitous.” Landscape is at once ideological and philosophical; its significance is both political and ontological.
Although recent postcolonial critics have made important critiques of Cather for her landscapes and their imperialist politics,\(^{23}\) it should be clear by now that I am primarily interested in the role that narrative architecture plays in bringing this politics into focus. For this reason, my emphasis on landscape metaphysics works against a tendency in Cather criticism—and ecocriticism more generally—to cast landscape as something inherently bad or “imperialist” and environment as something inherently good or “indigenous.”

This problem emerges clearly in Carol Steinhagen’s essay, “Dangerous Crossings.” In this essay, she warns against equating landscape with Nature: landscape is, rather, “‘the land’s shape as it is seen from a particular and defined perspective,’ both physical and psychic. Landscape is a seen scene” (64). This initial definition prefigures Lawrence Buell’s sensible articulation of the term in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, where, despite being a “polysemic” term, landscape “implies the totality of what a gaze can comprehend from its vantage point” (143). For Steinhagen, however, landscape signifies more than distanced perspective; it represents a boundary marker that psychically and physically separates the self (Ego) from the environment (Nature). “Beyond” this boundary there exists what she calls “unlandscaped environment” (79), and transgressing this boundary—making a “dangerous crossing”—involves dissolving the ego into what Herman Melville calls the “‘all’ feeling” of Nature. Throughout her essay, Steinhagen champions such dangerous crossings beyond landscape: it is tragic that in *My Ántonia* Jim Burden loses this self-dispersive ability, just as it is worth celebrating when St. Peter apparently discovers it.\(^{24}\) Landscape becomes an impediment to more profound experience; it stymies us from casting our egos to the winds and ascending to a higher plane of being.

If Steinhagen sees landscape as a bad thing, it is only in part due to how it curbs higher experience; it is also because she associates landscape—and the process of landscaping—solely with

\(^{23}\) For a fuller account of this point, see footnote 2 in the present chapter.

\(^{24}\) As my argument above should suggest, St. Peter in fact becomes more firmly entrenched in landscape.
Western imperialism, a species of psychic possession that appropriates the environment (which otherwise exists in and for itself) to the ego. Landscape therefore represents an imperialistic betrayal of environmental autonomy. Although I sympathize with this claim, and although my own reading of *The Professor’s House* would seem to confirm it, Steinhagen’s argument proceeds from a problematic assumption that goes unacknowledged in her essay: namely, it hinges on racist distinctions that she mistakes for essential differences. Early in the essay, she writes: “For most westerners this experience of unity must remain temporary, if it is achieved at all, because their sense of nature is shaped by the historical forces that have given rise to the concept of landscape” (65). Ostensibly, Steinhagen only wishes to comment on Western culture here, but this passage silently affirms the commonplace image of non-Western peoples in harmony (“at one”) with Nature.25 This affirmation returns more explicitly near the essay’s end, when she speaks of the “respectful view of the Native American oneness with the natural environment, contrasted with the white man’s way of ‘assert[ing] himself in any landscape’ ” (77). According to this reading, Westerners remain psychically stymied in landscape, while non-Westerners (here: Native Americans) enjoy a liberated existence within the environmental expanse.

Again, I do not dispute the link Steinhagen makes between landscape and psychic possession, but she is mistaken in her claim that this link inheres primarily in “westerners.” Take her example from *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, where Jacinto, a Navajo guide, “is reluctant and defensive when he reveals to the Bishop the Laguna name for a mountain: Snow-Bird Mountain. Perhaps he knows that Europeans have already Christianized the land with names like Sangre De Christo. They have landscaped his home with language and he and his people must maintain in

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25 This image has been variously contested. See, for example, Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian*. Sarah Jacquette Ray has also written incisively of the problem of the “ecological Indian”: “Ecological subjects seek to emulate the Indian body’s connection to nature, obscuring the ways that those very bodies have been drawn into environmentally exploitative colonial, capitalist, and military projects, and how both Indian bodies and those environments have been sacrificed” (9–10).
silence their sense of the surroundings” (78). Christianization threatens local ways of being, and the introduction of new place names reinforces this process linguistically. But does this religious and linguistic imposition necessarily imply that the Southwest had not already been “landscaped” before the Spanish conquest? Did Native American tribes not have their own religious associations and toponyms? Are these not elements of an indigenous “psychic possession?” What fundamentally separates “Snow-Bird Mountain” from “Sangre De Christo?” The point here is that psychic possession—the process of imaginatively fashioning a home in landscape—is a trait of the human animal rather than just the Western subspecies. This, of course, does not justify the Spanish conquest of the Southwest, or, indeed, any people’s conquest of another people. What it does do, however, is insist that the metaphysical process of landscaping is a product of human being.

Steinhagen’s confusion about the real difference between landscape and environment inaugurates many of the fundamental problems that survive in what we could call the “ecocritical turn” in Cather scholarship. This turn began in 2003 with a special issue of Cather Studies that brought together several of the most prominent Cather scholars (Susan Rosowski, Janis Stout, Guy Reynolds) as well as some preeminent ecocritics (Cheryll Glotfelty, Joseph Meeker, Glen Love). Glotfelty’s contribution to this special issue makes the claim that Cather studies had already long been ecocritical, offering “a strikingly variegated palette of green readings” (30). Among the scholarly work Glotfelty selects for her survey is Steinhagen’s essay, which she praises without questioning its problematic distinction between landscape and environment. If Glotfelty demonstrates no interest in emphasizing distinctions, it is in part because she prefers to promote a salutary openness, as when, in her introduction to The Ecocriticism Reader, she defined ecocriticism simply as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii) without reflecting on the vast number of complex variables (social, political, historical, phenomenological, etc.) that mediate such a relationship. In the later essay, Glotfelty downplays
landscape because she sees it as so foundational to ecocriticism that it requires no further consideration. Of the five areas of ecocritical activity listed by Lawrence Buell in his essay “The Ecocritical Insurgency,” she claims that the one pertaining to landscape has already received ample attention in Cather studies, and hence ecocritics should redirect themselves to other areas of inquiry, such as animals and “literary ecosystems.” Yet Glotfelty’s recommendation makes us liable to pass over the complex status of landscape in Cather—and elsewhere—without another thought.

If my argument about the complexities of Cather’s vision does not yet convince the reader to rethink the place of landscape in narrative fiction—and particularly its homely status—then the remainder of this dissertation hopefully will. Whereas the first two chapters have attempted to rethink the status of landscape in narrative fiction, the following chapters read landscape aesthetics against the emergent force of the ecological uncanny. I begin this work by turning to D. H. Lawrence’s unhomely New Mexican landscapes.
Chapter 3

“Weird Anima”: D. H. Lawrence and the Ecological Uncanny

*Do you feel strange when you go home?*  
D. H. Lawrence, *St. Maur*

When D. H. Lawrence first arrived in Taos, New Mexico in 1921, he did not know that his host, Mabel Dodge Luhan, had already tasked him with a strange challenge. Luhan had written a letter of invitation to Lawrence earlier that year while he and his wife, Frieda, were living in Taormina, Sicily. She had just finished reading his travel memoir, *Sea and Sardinia*, which had struck her as “one of the most actual of travel books.” In her own memoir of Lawrence’s time in New Mexico, Luhan explains how his writing captured her imagination—how, “in that queer way of his, he gives the feel and touch and smell of places so that their reality and their essence are open to one, and one can step right into them” (4).

Luhan’s emphasis on Lawrence’s unique ability to capture the “reality” of the “actual” place may seem odd for a reader familiar with *Sea and Sardinia*. For one thing, as Jill Franks comments, Lawrence’s memoir principally functions to “[disclose] its author, giving him an unexpected and at times comical precedence over the matter of the place itself” (xiii; my emphasis). For another, when he does focus on the matter of place, his descriptions are often tinged with the occult. Whereas the first point typifies travel memoir generally, the second point gestures to something more characteristically Lawrentian. This characteristic is on full display in the opening pages of *Sea and Sardinia*, in which Lawrence envisions Mount Etna as simultaneously apparent and concealed: “Remote under heaven, aloof, so near, yet never with us” (7). He explains that, although painters and photographers have ceaselessly attempted to reproduce Mount Etna’s “magical” and “witch-like” allure, they only ever manage to capture those elements that are “with us” in “our own world,” such as the “near ridges, with their olives and white houses” (7). The reason for this is that Mount Etna—
the real Mount Etna—retreats “beyond a crystal wall” and remains locked within the “strange chamber of the empyrean” (7), hidden from the eyes of those who would seek to capture it.

Lawrence claims that, in order to approach the volcano in “her” hidden actuality, “You must cross the invisible border. Between the foreground, which is our own, and Etna, pivot of winds in lower heaven, there is a dividing line. You must change your state of mind. A metempsychosis” (8). Lawrence implies the traditional rhetoric of landscape painting (i.e., foreground, middle ground, background) only to abandon the visual frame of reference altogether. Indeed, crossing the “invisible border” that separates observer from volcano, subject from object, is not merely a matter of focusing the eye differently; the imaginative transmigration described here also (and primarily) requires a shift in one’s way of being. According to Lawrence, such a shift enables one to tap into the concealed actuality, though without ever directly encountering the real. Even though hidden behind a “crystal wall,” Mount Etna’s “witch-like” allure radiates through that wall, paradoxically making the volcano’s utter unknowability known. Lawrence goes so far as to suggest that the wanderlust he describes in the book’s opening sentences was caused by the volcano’s “strange, remote communications,” which affect him physiologically as well as psychologically: “one can feel a new current of her demon magnetism seize one’s living tissue, and change the peaceful lie of one’s active cells. She makes a storm in the living plasm, and a new adjustment. And sometimes it is like a madness” (8).

When Luhan invited Lawrence to visit her in New Mexico, she did so with this “metempsychosis” in mind. Captivated by his “queer” talent to open himself to otherwise hidden actualities, Luhan wanted Lawrence to do for Taos what he had done for Mount Etna. As she recalls in Lorenzo in Taos, immediately upon reading Lawrence’s Italian memoir she thought, “Here is the only one who can really see this Taos country and the Indians, and who can describe it so that it is as much alive between the covers of a book as it is in reality” (3; original emphasis). And so she invited

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the Lawrences to visit the American Southwest. Along with her letter of invitation, Luhan enclosed a copy of *The Land of Poco Tiempo*, a study of New Mexico’s history and peoples written by Charles Lummis in 1893.¹ On the book’s title page she penned the following inscription: “Lawrence!—this is the best that has been done yet—And yet if you knew what lies untouched behind these externals, unreached by the illuminating vision of a simple soul yet! Oh, come!” (qtd. in Merrild 28). Once again, Luhan appeals to Lawrence’s ability to express the inexpressible.

Unbeknownst to Lawrence, however, Luhan’s desire for a unique individual who could “see” the hidden reality of Taos and its indigenous peoples emerged from political as well as personal motivations. By the time of the Lawrences’ visit in the early 1920s, the people of the nearby Taos Pueblo were in the midst of a struggle to retain cultural autonomy in the face of Anglo-American economic and political encroachments. The most significant issue at the time concerned competing entitlement claims on lands surrounding Indian pueblos throughout New Mexico. Debates on this issue reached a boiling point in 1922 with the introduction of the Bursum Bill, which attempted (and ultimately failed) to legalize the majority of non-Indian claims to Indian lands. I will have cause to return to this political scene later in this chapter. For now, I should only like to emphasize that Luhan’s appeal to Lawrence and his “queer talent” came at a particularly delicate moment—one that proved doubly delicate for Luhan, as her husband, Antonio Lujan, was himself a member of the Taos Pueblo. Hence, as she often claimed, the fate of “her” Indians hung in the balance.

In the midst of these cultural and political challenges, Luhan and her husband organized a massive effort in defense of the New Mexican pueblos. The groundwork for this effort was laid by the American sociologist and activist John Collier, who would eventually serve as Commissioner for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Luhan had invited Collier to Taos in 1920 and introduced him to the

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¹ In addition to the book, Luhan sent several gifts for Frieda that had been imbued with “Indian magic” meant to “draw them to Taos” (5). These gifts included an “Indian necklace” as well as “a few leaves of *desachey*, the perfume the Indians say makes the heart light, along with a little *osha*, the root that is a strong medicine” (5).
people of Taos Pueblo. After nearly a year of ethnographic research, Collier concluded that, ever since the closing of the American frontier at the end of the nineteenth century, the Taos Indians had come under severe threat from emerging social, political, and economic pressures aimed at their assimilation to Western modernity.

It was in the context of Collier’s findings that Luhan extended her initial invitation to Lawrence. With this in mind, the appeal in her letter to Lawrence to “what lies untouched behind these externals, unreached by the illuminating vision of a simple soul yet” seems less innocent and rhetorical than it does at first glance. Although he did not know it, Lawrence’s future host had already committed him to the cause of helping to save the Indians by revealing their hidden essence to the world at large.2

Although Lawrence had little if any knowledge of the contemporary political context when he traveled to Taos, he quickly realized that Luhan’s invitation implicated him in it. Soon after his arrival he found himself ensconced in debates about the survival of the pueblos. These debates placed Lawrence in an awkward situation. When faced with a complex situation that he did not fully comprehend, he quickly grew to resent Luhan and her expectations for his participation. In his early New Mexican writing, this resentment emerges through a recurring trope in which he repeatedly expresses doubt and lack of expertise. This comes through prominently in the first essay he wrote in the region, “Certain Americans and an Englishman” (1922). Published in the New York Times shortly after his arrival in the Southwest, this “political” article drew attention to the various threats faced by the pueblo peoples, most notably the Bursum Bill. But before he even begins to discuss the bill,

2 Even after Lawrence’s death, Luhan continued to consider Lawrence a perceiver and communicator of the unknown. In an appreciation published in New Mexico Magazine in February 1936, she describes him as a man who “was always aware of significances. He seemed to be conscious of the meaning beneath the appearances in nature and in people, and the beauty and the terror of the life that he perceived communicated itself to whomever he was with, so they too became aware of a deeper, more intrinsic, more startling reality than they were accustomed to” (9). In his own memoir of his experience with Lawrence, the Danish painter Knud Merrild conjures a similar image of the man as someone who illuminated unknown realities for his companions: “Whether we agreed with him or not, or fought, or whether Lawrence had infected us with his bitterness on the rottenness of the world, there was always an undercurrent of something I cannot explain” (84–85).
Lawrence spends six paragraphs narrating how he first had to “hypnotize” himself in order to “adjust” to this new milieu. An adjustment was necessary because, as he explains, “I arrived in New Mexico at a moment of crisis,” and he hastens to add: “I wouldn’t know a thing about it if I needn’t” (3). In the breathless incantation that follows, Lawrence communicates his frustration with the all-consuming political crisis into which Luhan had thrust him:

But it’s Bursum, Bursum, Bursum! the Bill, the Bill, the Bill! . . . O Mr. Secretary Fall, you bad man, you good man, you Fall, you Rise, you Fall! The Joy Survey, Oh, Joy, No Joy, Once Joy, Now Woe! Woe! Woe! Whoa! Whoa, Bursum! Whoa, Bill! Whoa-a-a!—like a Vachel Lindsay Boom-Boom bellowing, it goes on in my unwonted ears, till I have to take heed. . . . Imagine me, lamblike and bewildered, muttering softly to myself, between soft groans, trying to make head or tail of myself in my present situation. (3)

Adopting a parodic style reminiscent of Gertrude Stein, Lawrence clearly communicates his resistance to the political action in which he’d found himself. In doing so, Lawrence also forcefully draws attention to his own lack of expertise, preferring to cast himself as a mere “actor” in the “Wild West show” unfolding around him (3).

As Julianna Newmark has argued, before he could even begin to grasp this overwhelming situation, Lawrence first had to struggle “to assimilate his preconceptions about ‘aboriginal’ America” that he had developed from reading various works of history, anthropology, and literature. This entailed grappling with unexpected realities, such as the interracial relationship between Mabel and Tony, the sight of supposedly “primitive” Indians participating in the “modern” world of machines, and the fact that the Pueblo no longer lived “in idyllic independence from ‘modern’ America but rather under its gross political sway” (158). Lawrence clearly expresses his confusion in the midst of this scene in his 1923 essay “Indians and an Englishman,” where he describes the “incongruous” New Mexican mixture of “wildness and wooliness and westernity and

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3 Most formative in Lawrence’s preconceptions about Indian life were James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales, about which he had recently written a chapter for his Studies in Classic American Literature. It is likely not a coincidence that Lawrence would rewrite this book—drafted before he had ever set foot in America—while spending the winter of 1921–1922 at Del Monte Ranch in New Mexico.
motor-cars and art and sage and savage” as a “farce” (Phoenix 92). As if in response to Luhan's expectations for him to capture “the truth under the camouflage” (Luhan, “Lawrence” 9), Lawrence expresses his ambivalence in this essay by rejecting all claims to expertise and by painting a somewhat insulting portrait of the region. Many readers have interpreted this ambivalence as disinterestedness, or worse, disgust. Newmark argues, on the contrary, that these early writings implicitly reject the “political place” in which he found himself embroiled, and instead strive to establish a “textual place” in which “the binaries of the colonial paradigm could be imaginatively disabled” (160). She goes on to claim that, between his two periods of residence in New Mexico, Lawrence’s literary representations of himself, the Indians, and New Mexico shifted dramatically. This shift was made possible by Lawrence’s wider travels in the region, which allowed him to familiarize himself with the geographical, cultural, and political lay of the land. This shift also enabled him to develop awareness of his initial misperceptions of New Mexico. Lawrence exemplifies such a change in attitude in the nostalgic tone of his 1925 essay “A Little Moonshine with Lemon,” penned in Italy shortly after his final departure from the Southwest and included as the final essay in Mornings in Mexico. Emphasizing his longing for his ranch near Taos, Newmark concludes that the overall change in Lawrence’s attitude toward New Mexico entailed a transformation that “was not only physical, taking him to a great many places to look for a home for his soul, as it were, but . . . was also deeply internal in his sense of what it means to be at home in a place” (161; original emphasis).

Thus, Lawrence’s initial ambivalence about New Mexico progressively yields to a growing sense of familiarity and, eventually, of home. But what, exactly, is the nature of this home?

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4 His first trip lasted from September 1922 to March 1923. In this period, the Bursum Bill debate took center stage. The second trip lasted from March 1924 to September 1925, though he spent the period between October and April traveling in Mexico. After this trip, Lawrence would never return to Taos.

5 Lobo Ranch, which the Lawrences acquired from Mabel Dodge Luhan in 1924 and renamed Kiowa Ranch. This 160-acre property perches at an altitude of 8,600 feet on Lobo Mountain, near San Cristobal in Taos County. The ranch has been preserved and remains open to the public under the name D. H. Lawrence Ranch.
Newmark’s reading of Lawrence’s imaginative “re-placement” of New Mexico stresses a shift from an initial sense of estrangement, resentment, and discomfort to a more homely sense of familiarity, enjoyment, and comfort. Neil Roberts, by contrast, rejects the nostalgic vision Lawrence advances in later recollections of the region (“A Little Moonshine with Lemon” included), warning that they are “extremely misleading” in their wistful and laudatory tone (75). Roberts cannot see past Lawrence’s initial ambivalence. To my mind, neither of these readings quite hits the target: if Newmark places too much faith in Lawrence’s nostalgia, Roberts places too little. Yet each of these opposed readings rests on the same assumptions about “home” as a protective and comforting space that allows one to let one’s guard down and simply be. Newmark believes that Lawrence achieved this level of familiarity and comfort in New Mexico; Roberts does not.

In evaluating the degree to which Lawrence felt “at home” in the American Southwest, both critics neglect to notice a constitutive strangeness that always haunts his depictions of New Mexico, even in the later essays where it appears more homely. I read this strangeness as the sign of another, deeper aspect of Lawrence’s ambivalence that never quite subsided, even after living in and traveling throughout the region. No matter how well adjusted he became, there remained an elusive je ne sais quoi that escaped his grasp. Thus, despite his growing familiarity with New Mexico, at no point during his Southwestern sojourn did he ever claim truly to “know” the region or its peoples. He often argued, for instance, that the Indians were fundamentally unknowable to Anglo-Americans, existing on the other side of an unbridgeable abyss that will forever remain between the two peoples. Nor did he claim a deep knowledge of or even love for the New Mexican landscape. As in the Mount Etna episode, piercing through to what is “magical” about a people or a place requires

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6 I use “strange” in the sense of foreign or alien: belonging to something other than to oneself or one’s language, culture, or geographical place.

7 Knud Merrild explains: “Strangely, Lawrence generally revolted against the scenery. I cannot recall one single instance where he heartily commended the beauty and grandeur of the landscape. On the contrary, he was very much against it as a whole. ‘It is so heavy and empty, it sort of hangs over one. It is very depressing,’ he would say” (105).
more than perceptual acuity, if indeed it is possible at all. Rather than claiming to “know” the American Southwest, then, Lawrence consistently points to something about it that makes it fundamentally unknowable to him.

This gap of (un)knowability also begets a crisis of representation. More than any other period in his career, Lawrence’s Southwestern sojourn presented an opportunity to explore not just the problem of difference, but also the question of how to represent people, places, and things that are fundamentally alien to him. This representational crisis deeply haunts Lawrence’s New Mexican œuvre, comprising essays and fiction that persistently communicate an inability to capture something essential about the Southwest’s indigenous people and the landscape they inhabit.

Lawrence elaborates such a representational crisis in “Indians and an Englishman” (1923), where he reflects at length on an Apache chant and attempts to discern what it is about the chant that moves him so deeply. He first tries to capture the essence of the chant through close observation, giving both onomatopoeic transcriptions (“Hie! Hie! Hie! Hie away-away!” [Phoenix 95]) as well as ethnographic descriptions (“Almost a pre-animal sound, full of triumph in life, and devilment against other life, and mockery, and humorousness, and the pàt-pat, pàt-pat of the rhythm” [95]). Following this, Lawrence confesses that his failure to capture the vital power animating the chant: “I am no ethnologist.” But the problem goes beyond mere technical training; it is the failure of the sociological mode itself. Indeed, what these descriptions fail to capture is not the sound of the chant, but rather the nature of the exchange that occurs when he listens to it:

The point is, what is the feeling that passes from an Indian to me, when we meet? We are both men, but how do we feel together? I shall never forget that first evening when I first came into contact with Red Men, away in the Apache country. It was not what I had thought it would be. It was something of a shock. Again something in my soul broke down, letting in a bitterer dark, a pungent awakening to the lost past, old darkness, a new terror, new root-griefs, old root-richesses. (95)
Lawrence figures this gap between himself and the Apache singer as a “shock,” a “darkness,” and a “terror,” and the Apache man’s chant induces simultaneous attraction and repulsion. He clearly feels moved by the experience, and yet the reason for this remains inexplicable; the source of the chant’s power remains withdrawn in metaphysical darkness. Despite the visceral effect it has on him, Lawrence sees the chant as a kind of metalinguistic form of communication to which he no longer has access: “The voice out of the far-off time was not for my ears. . . . It was enough to hear the sound issuing plangent from the bristling darkness of the far past, to see the bronze mask of the face lifted, the white, small, close-packed teeth showing all the time. It was not for me, and I knew it. Nor had I any curiosity to understand” (99).

Although the significance of the experience seems to remain on the level of phenomena (“It was enough to hear the sound”), Lawrence ultimately locates its real power in unconscious intuition. This is not, however, the unconscious as understood by Freud. Although he shares with Freud the basic idea that there exist processes that effect our thoughts, feelings, and motivations and yet remain unavailable to introspection, for Lawrence, the unconscious is not primarily an aspect of mind, nor is it burdened with sexual complexes and hidden phobias. Rather, the Lawrentian unconscious is a fully embodied, physiological system. When Lawrence announces his lack of “curiosity to understand” the nature of the exchange between the Apache singer and himself, he refers to a lack of curiosity in the “conscious me.” Yet there exists another aspect of his self—the “unconscious me”—which participates physically and spiritually in this invisible exchange, communicating in a language utterly lost to his conscious awareness. This is how Lawrence can have a visceral reaction without understanding why: the chant quickens a physical aspect of his living

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8 Critics have alternately criticized and celebrated Lawrence for his primitivist predilections that so clearly engage in what Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other* has called the “denial of coevalness.” However, as with Cather, I am less interested in castigating Lawrence for his racialist rhetoric than I am in baring the logic behind it.

9 See Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, chapter 3.

10 For Lawrence, the physical and the spiritual are intimately linked through the concept of vitality, though in ways quite different from Willa Cather. I explore this link in my discussion of the materiality of being in the next section of this chapter.
being that necessarily remains hidden from his conscious self. What is at stake in “Indians and an
Englishman” is not, therefore, the achievement of ethnographic realism; rather, the essay draws
attention to a gap of difference, though, as I discuss in the next section, this is not about
“difference” in the sense of racist essentialism. And as I shall continue to demonstrate throughout
this chapter, this gap persists for Lawrence in every encounter with an alien other—even one’s own
self remains fundamentally unknowable and hence unrepresentable.

In his 1928 essay “New Mexico,” written five years after “Indians and an Englishman” and
three after his final departure from the Southwest, Lawrence shifts the locus of this representational
crisis from the region’s indigenous inhabitants to their landscape. Although often cited for its
rapturous praise of the Southwestern landscape and its beauty, I do not read this essay as merely or
even primarily laudatory. Although Lawrence certainly does praise the New Mexican wilderness in
this piece, its main thrust has little to do with beauty. Instead, the essay advances a claim about a
hidden (and therefore dangerous) wellspring of vitality—the last trace of it to survive in a world
almost universally corrupted by Euro-American modernity. For this reason, the Southwest stands as
the last remaining source of a life force that could reverse the spiritual decay of America and,
perhaps, the rest of Western civilization. Lawrence frames this problem in the essay’s opening
paragraph, in which he gestures to the apparently diminished mystery of a world trampled by
globetrotters. He insists that the world’s essential mystery is only apparently diminished because, like
the ocean, everything important about it remains undiscovered. There exist “terrifying under-deeps”
in the land as much as in the sea: “Poor creatures that we are, we crave for experience, yet we are like
flies that crawl on the pure and transparent mucous-paper in which the world like a bon-bon is

11 Nor is it about individualism, as some critics have understood it. In his book D. H. Lawrence and “Difference,”
Amit Chaudhuri argues against this claim: “Lawrence’s continual insistence that the ‘other’ cannot be ‘known’ suggests
the necessity of reimagining knowledge in terms of context and ‘difference.’ This imagining of the ‘other’s’
unknowability, then, is not so much anti-romantic, as a revision and inversion of the romantic, for it still presupposes
the presence of the imagination, but has it operating in new ways. Imagination now becomes the perception of infinitely
varying contexts and disruptions, rather than an overarching, sympathetic ‘one great mind’ which organizes and unites
perception” (176).
wrapped so carefully that we can never get at it, though we see it there all the time as we move about it, apparently in contact, yet actually as far removed as if it were the moon” (125). He concludes: “Underneath is everything we don’t know and are afraid of knowing” (126).

Given such a strange (though characteristically Lawrentian) opening, it seems odd only to emphasize his descriptions of the landscape’s “greatness of beauty” and the vast “splendour of it all.” For one thing, as Lawrence’s original emphasis suggests, it was not so much the “beauty” of the landscape that inspired him but its startling “greatness.” He reinforces this sentiment when he frames his intimation of “splendour” as a kind of “terror”: “Leo Stein once wrote to me: It is the most aesthetically-satisfying landscape I know. To me it was much more than that. It had a splendid silent terror, and a vast far-and-wide magnificence which made it way beyond mere aesthetic appreciation” (127; my emphasis). As he describes later in the essay, this “splendid kind of terror” reveals New Mexico as a unique site where, as in the indigenous religions, “man was to get his life into direct contact with the elemental life of the cosmos, mountain-life, cloud-life, thunder-life, air-life, earth-life, sun-life. To come into immediate felt contact, and so derive energy, power, and a dark sort of joy” (131–32). By the end of the essay, this regional wellspring of vitality and the “dark sort of joy” it inspires takes on a world-historical importance: it signals the final collapse of democracy and the rise of the “old religion” as a source primal life power that will “scatter” the relics of industrialized modernity and constitute a new beginning for a “genuine America.” Far from a simple appreciation of the region, “New Mexico” describes the concealed power of a place that could renew a life-centered ethos in an otherwise spiritually rotten world.

Two implications follow from these readings of “Indians and an Englishman” and “New Mexico.” First, Mabel Dodge Luhan made a mistake in her evaluation of Lawrence. His gift was not to reveal “the actuality behind the veil” (“Lawrence” 9), as she continued to insist long after his death; rather, it was to acknowledge the otherwise unknowable and allow it to remain unknown. Her
expectations for him to unveil the hidden mysteries of Taos and “her” Indians were unfounded and sparked an ambivalent reaction in Lawrence that remains evident throughout his writings about New Mexico. What I am suggesting here is that, even though this ambivalence stems from the political crisis in which Lawrence initially found himself embroiled, it also has deeper roots in a representational crisis that surfaces in light of Luhan’s impossible expectations.

The second implication has to do with how this crisis of representation impacts the sense of home that Lawrence develops in New Mexico—the only place he ever owned property, and one of few places he ever reflected on nostalgically. In contrast to the homely metaphysics I have explored in the work of Martin Heidegger and Willa Cather, which defines “home” as a protective space that revitalized being and secures belonging, for Lawrence, living in Taos may have stimulated his sense of being, but this increased vitality was not accompanied by a parallel sense of belonging. In fact, Lawrence more often expressed the sentiment that living in Taos had an estranging quality, though this estrangement proved qualitatively different from the kind of alienation generated within industrialized civilization. With regard to what I previously called the alienation paradigm of modernity, “alienation” implies a radical separation, such as between humans and Nature. In this sense, alienation compromises one’s being-in-the-world; one does not feel at home anywhere. For Lawrence, however, the New Mexican landscape doesn’t exactly alienate one; rather, it turns one into an alien. In contrast to the state of “being alienated,” which implies negativity and passivity (not unlike the Ruskinian false life), “being an alien” is a positive ontological state. Even if by definition an alien cannot claim to “belong” in a particular place, an alien still exists: it is. This is precisely the nature of Lawrentian estrangement: being without belonging.

Aldous Huxley captures this sense of revitalizing estrangement perfectly when he announces, “The New Mexican is an inhuman landscape. Man is either absent . . . or, if present, seems oddly irrelevant” (“Preface” xvii). According to Huxley, whom Lawrence had befriended
around the time of his first travels in America, and who himself lived in Taos for a brief spell in the 1930s, the “irrelevance” of humans in an otherwise “inhuman” landscape proves as liberating as it is dangerous. In his preface to Knud Merrild’s memoir, Huxley describes the site of Lawrence’s ranch on Lobo Mountain as a place where

   a new kind of inhuman alienness envelops you. Behind and below you lies the desert; but above is a world that at moments seems positively Nordic. . . . Between this sentimental Teutonic inhumanity [of the mountain valleys] and the ferocious American inhumanity of the desert below, there is no middle term. And in this fact consists, precisely, the charm of the New Mexican landscape—its charm and also its horror. (xvii–xviii)

Without a “middle term” to organize foreground and background, the whole landscape takes on a radically different reality; its effects are no longer primarily visual. Similar to Lawrence’s description of Mount Etna in Sea and Sardinia, the visual frame of reference must be abandoned in New Mexico in order to give way a new mode of thinking and being that allows one to “cross the invisible border” and tap into a hidden actuality. Although Huxley’s description of Lobo Mountain as a charming yet horrifying hodgepodge of American and European geographies seems strange, it is appropriately strange; that is, it helps explain “Lawrence’s ambivalent attitude towards the country—the dislike that mingled with the love, the dread that accompanied his homesickness” (six; my emphasis). For Lawrence, dread and homeliness go together; home should be a place of revitalizing estrangement.

In the sections that follow I wish to explore how this unsettling conception of home as essentially strange and estranging emerges out of the crisis of representation that I have thus far only suggested. I begin in the next section by reframing Lawrence’s well-known notion of “the spirit of place” in terms of what he elsewhere calls the “weird anima” of landscape. I demonstrate how this weird anima is conceptually linked to Lawrence’s earlier explorations of the self as an intrinsically multiplicitous entity. This leads to a posthuman understanding of the spirit of place that enables me

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more fully to develop the problem of representation as it figures in Lawrence's writings of the American Southwest. Finally, in an effort to gather the various threads of this chapter, I conclude with a reading of Lawrence's 1925 novella, *St. Mawr*. This reading explores how the uncanny warping of landscape generates an unhomely vision of home. I call the unrepresentable and hence unhomely source of this warping “ecology,” which is figured in Lawrence's writings as a ghost or *daimon* that haunts places from within. This forms the basis of the ecological uncanny.

**Lawrence’s Posthuman “Spirit of Place”**

In the last two decades, ecocriticism has kindled a renewed interest in Lawrence. Given the significant challenges to his reputation since the 1970s, the ecocritical literature offers a surprisingly positive take on Lawrence. Unfortunately, this literature also has yet to offer a great deal of new insight into his work. Thus far, ecocritical perspectives have often proven either too obvious (e.g., Lawrence felt connected to Nature), too concerned with conventional categorization (e.g., Lawrence should be considered part of the British nature writing tradition), or too insistent on forging a link between “ecology” and “the primitive” that I consider racist and essentialist (e.g., Western modernity can save itself by emulating the life-ways of indigenous peoples in order to

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13 Lawrence’s literary legacy remains more intensely ambivalent than that of any other modernist, with the possible exception of Wyndham Lewis. Following an initial downturn in his reputation in the 1930s and 1940s, the postwar decades saw a renewed interest in his work. However, with the rise of poststructuralism in the 1970s and the modes of social, political, and historical critique it enabled, Lawrence quickly came under fire on a number of fronts. Socialist criticism not only lambasted Lawrence for his (proto-)fascist politics, but also emphasized a contradiction in his later work, in which he seemed to turn against his own working-class origins. Poststructuralist critiques took Lawrence to task for the supposed naïveté of his “occult” interests in intuition and “the blood.” With the rise of critical race studies as well as postcolonial critique, Lawrence came under yet more fire for his racist essentialism and his imperialist ideology. However, the most significant blow came from the feminist camp; specifically, Kate Millett's landmark 1970s work, *Sexual Politics*, which attacked Lawrence on charges of misogyny and phallocentrism. Millett's critique wielded a great deal of power, particularly as it appeared at the height of the sexual revolution, when Lawrence figured prominently as a “priest of love.” Perhaps more than any other work, Millett’s devastating critique has kept Lawrence in the shadows of the literary establishment; it dealt a nearly fatal blow from which his reputation has never quite recovered.

14 This seems to be the general argument running through most ecocritical studies of Lawrence. Dolores LaChapelle writes of this relationship at length in *Future Primitive*.

15 See, for example, John Alcorn's *The Nature Novel from Hardy to Lawrence* and Roger Ebbatson's *Lawrence and the Nature Tradition*. 
attain a species of “future primitivism” and revitalize a decaying techno-industrial civilization).\textsuperscript{16} In another way, this literature has shown itself too eager to harness Lawrence’s complex and challenging work to support preestablished values mandated by deep ecology and other modalities of environmental ethics.\textsuperscript{17} Perhaps most lamentable of all, however, is the rather nebulous treatment that Lawrence’s concept of “the spirit of place” has received in this literature. Although frequently cited as the key concept animating his ecological vision, very rarely have ecologically minded critics interpreted this concept as anything more nuanced than a basic dialectic or “polarity” between humans and their environment.\textsuperscript{18} Most of these critics emphasize a fundamental difference between Lawrence’s ecological vision and more picturesque description, yet they fail (as Mabel Dodge Luhan did) to go beyond Lawrence’s apparent ability to capture what is unique about place.

If ecocritical explorations of the Lawrentian spirit of place have proven rather bland, this is in part due to Lawrence’s own vagueness on the subject. He introduces this well-known concept in the opening chapter of his 1923 work of criticism, \textit{Studies in Classic American Literature}. In this chapter, he offers one brief passage of explanation: “Every continent has its own great spirit of place. Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland. Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: \textit{call it what you like}. But the spirit of place is a great reality” (12; my emphasis). Every place is different, and this difference may emerge from any number of factors. We can give this differentiating factor any name we want, Lawrence suggests, but any name we come up with will only gesture to the \textit{fact} of this difference rather than name its \textit{source}. Hence the neglect to elaborate further. Lawrence’s vague definition of the spirit of place is

\textsuperscript{16} See, for example, Dolores LaChapelle’s \textit{D. H. Lawrence: Future Primitive}.

\textsuperscript{17} See, for example, Paul Delany’s “D. H. Lawrence and Deep Ecology.” See chapter 1 of the present work for a similar critique of deep ecological readings of Martin Heidegger.

\textsuperscript{18} For example, this is the basic claim explored in Stefania Michelucci’s “Space and Place in the Works of D. H. Lawrence” and in Anna Odenbring Ehler’s \textit{Ecological Vision in the Fiction of D. H. Lawrence}.

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unfortunate, particularly considering the great importance of place in his work more generally. This vagueness has also made it very easy for Lawrence’s readers to misunderstand his point and take his generalized formulation at face value. Most often, critics characterize the spirit of place as a concept indicating the existence of a mutually constitutive relationship between peoples and places. But if read closely, one finds that Lawrence does not elaborate anything like a simple dialectic between people and place. He does write that people are polarized in a place, but he immediately goes on to suggest that place is more readily constituted by something beyond its relationship to human inhabitants. The “great reality” of the spirit of place therefore does not emerge along a single axis between humans and their “nonhuman” environment.

Considering Lawrence’s vagueness regarding the spirit of place, we must look elsewhere to develop a more nuanced understanding of its significance in his work. In one important reconsideration, Eunyoung Oh frames the spirit of place as a postcolonial concept that offers an opening in Lawrence’s work—especially his travel writing and his so-called “leadership” novels—that resists imperialist ideology. She argues that his “concern with the ‘local’ and ‘indigenous’ spirit of a place needs to be understood as part of anti-colonial discourse. For Lawrence’s travel books are, beneath his sensuous descriptions of the places he visited, based on his fierce criticism of the industrial and colonialis expansion of the West” (3). Oh explains that postcolonial scholars have had a difficult time recognizing Lawrence’s point that both Anglo-American colonizers and their colonized are victims of Western civilization. Lawrence’s understanding of imperialism does not privilege social or political struggles; it has to do, rather, with the menacing effects of mechanical industrialism on daily life. Thus, if it seems like a leap for postcolonial scholars to see Lawrence as

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19 This is also the basic thesis of ethnographic studies of the region, such as Vincent Scully’s Pueblo Mountain, Village, Dance.

20 The “leadership” novels include, in particular, Aaron’s Rod, Kangaroo, and The Plumed Serpent.

21 This dynamic plays out most clearly in Lady Chatterley’s Lover, where the reverberations of techno-capitalism literally infiltrate the bedroom.
an anti-colonial figure, it has to do with the absence of the usual social and political codes. Instead, he “transcodes the issue of colonialism as a matter of ‘being’ or a matter of the modern ‘soul’” (9; my emphasis). For Lawrence, then, “the racial, geographical difference is something to be respected and valued, not to be subsumed by . . . the homogenizing machines of Western industrialism and imperialism. To restore the indigenous spirit of a place, marginalized by the order of the capitalist world system, means for Lawrence not only decolonizing the colonized but also avoiding the dead end of modern Western civilization” (161).

Eunyoung Oh’s postcolonial rereading of the Lawrentian spirit of place is an important intervention. However, like other critics with less trenchant takes on the concept, Oh’s postcolonial perspective continues to focus entirely on the spirit of place as a reflection of human experiences, expectations, and desires. In the process, she provides little insight into what, exactly, the “indigenous spirit of a place” really is. If, as Oh argues, Lawrence “transcodes” colonialism into a matter of being, he does so because colonialism poses an ontological threat even more than a social or political one. But this ontological threat extends beyond the limits of human being; colonialism’s detrimental effects place nonhuman entities in danger as well.23

22 Oh goes on to reject the typical criticism of Lawrence for his ultimate emphasis on Western civilization, selfhood, and being. According to this critique, Lawrence’s Eurocentrism cancels out any erstwhile engagement with cultural and racial others. But “how could it be otherwise?,” asks Oh (13). Although this does not defend Lawrence against his frequent use of descriptions that are sometimes colonialist and anti-colonialist at the same time, it also does not entirely compromise the anti-colonial thrust of the spirit of place. The central tenet of this concept—that different places have different spirits—still remains connected to Lawrence’s apocalyptic vision, which seeks a new mode for Western society, a new ontology that, through his experience of different places, “makes him keep challenging the established hierarchy between metropolis and colony” (160).

23 I return to this point more forcefully in the final chapter, where I present a reading of J. M. Coetzee’s In the Heart of the Country. Colonialism’s negative effects on the nonhuman environment have only recently received scholarly attention in the humanities, largely due to postcolonial theory’s privileging of human subjects. As postcolonial critique enters the mainstream, however, literary studies have opened up to considering the environmental implications of imperialism. In this respect, Lawrence proved himself ahead of the curve. For a landmark collection of postcolonial ecocriticism, see Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley’s edited volume, Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment. The discipline of environmental history boasts an extensive catalogue of research on this subject as well. Useful touchstones for the geographical areas studied in this dissertation include William Cronon’s Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England and Melissa Leach and Robins Mearns’s edited volume The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment. For a unique study of the subject that combines literary and historical research, see Jill Casid’s fascinating volume Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization.
If, as I have suggested, the spirit of place draws attention to the limits of human knowledge and thus to human finitude, then admittedly it continues to do so for humans. As such, my argument would seem to operate within the same human–environment polarity assumed by Lawrence’s critics. How, then, does the spirit of place open space for a posthuman-ism that rethinks human being as such? In response to this question, I would argue that, for Lawrence, the human is always already posthuman. That is, as long as the word “human” designates a rigidly defined entity produced by various social, political, and scientific institutions, then according to Lawrence human being fundamentally exists in a state beyond being human. No such definitions can confine the being of any individual entity, human or otherwise: being expresses itself as a manifold.

By the time of his New Mexican writings of the 1920s, Lawrence had already experimented with this notion of the self as multiple, particularly in his postwar novels The Rainbow (1915) and Women in Love (1920). In contrast to his more conventional novel of 1913, Sons and Lovers, these later novels entailed significant experimentations with character. Lawrence explained the nature of this experiment in a letter to his editor, Edward Garnett, concerning The Rainbow. Instead of seeking “the old stable ego of the character,” Lawrence insists that when reading his new novel one must look for “another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognisable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any we’ve been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same radically unchanged element” (Letters 183). Like a chemical element that occurs in multiple forms with different structural and physical properties, the “allotropic” ego manifests multiply.

Instead of the traditional sense of character as something written or engraved and hence indelible, Lawrence’s allotropic ego does not exist in a singular or stable way. Extending his chemical

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24 Elsewhere Lawrence expresses the strange multiplicity of the human in different terms. In “Introduction to Pictures,” for instance, he puts it thusly: “Man is anything from a forked radish to an immortal spirit. He is pretty well everything that ever was or will be, absolutely human and absolutely inhuman. If we did but know it, we have every imaginable and unimaginable feeling streaking somewhere through us” (Phoenix 765).
metaphor, Lawrence characterizes *The Rainbow* as an exercise in conjuring the essence of a basic element rather than describing one of the various physical manifestations that element might take: “Like as diamond and coal are the same pure element of carbon. The ordinary novel would trace the history of the diamond—but I say, ‘Diamond, what! This is carbon.’ And my diamond might be coal or soot, and my theme is carbon” (*Letters* 183). Less interested in the “history” of appearances, Lawrence fashions a narrative that passes through the ego’s plenitude of allotropic states and gropes blindly for the “radically unchanged element” from which they emanate. It is this rejection of the singular, stable ego that defines Lawrence’s postwar novels. It also contributes to the peculiar way in which these novels cut straight through the “outer shell” of character to reveal the unchanged yet unstable “center.” Throughout these novels, Lawrence frequently diverts away from dialogue in order to narrate how individuals’ unconscious selves come into direct relation: “They had looked at each other, and seen each other strange, yet near, very near, like a hawk stooping, swooping, dropping into a flame of darkness” (*The Rainbow* 111). Even as Lawrence attempts to bring forth his characters’ unconscious selves, his metaphors proliferate once again and refigure the human as plural and fundamentally other than human: at once like a “hawk” and like a “flame.” As with Walt Whitman, Lawrence’s “I” contains multitudes, and the multitudinous self is inherently a posthuman self.

According to Lawrence, more than any other literary form, it is the novel that holds the greatest potential for developing the posthuman narration he initially explored in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. He develops this thesis in a series of provocative theoretical essays on the novel, all written in the mid-1920s, both during and after his two New Mexican sojourns. Despite differences in focus and theme, what links these essays is a shared sense of the novel as an inherently multiplicitous literary form that allows for instability and relativity to persist within an otherwise interconnected whole; the novel establishes a world within which dynamic polarities can play out. In
“The Novel” (1925), for instance, Lawrence argues that the “novel is the highest form of human expression so far attained” because “it is so incapable of the absolute” and instead privileges relativity (Selection 161). Because of this, the novel takes on a life of its own apart from authorial intentions. “You can fool pretty nearly every other medium,” Lawrence writes, but the novel “won’t let you tell didactic lies, and put them over” (162). The novel therefore also instructs the discerning reader to tell the difference between what is “quick” and what is “dead.” Lawrence returns to this difference between the quick and the dead in “Morality and the Novel” (1925), where he defines the novel as a literary form that forges new relations rather than attempting to “pin” things down. In this way, the novel fosters a living and hence imbalanced dynamic that he associates with morality: “Morality in the novel is the trembling instability of the balance” (Selection 177). By contrast, immorality emerges the instant “the novelist puts his thumb in the scale, to pull down the balance to his own predilection” (177). Forcing a “stable equilibrium” in this way is tantamount to murder: “it kills the novel” (177). What is “moral” in the novel therefore has to do with how narrative constantly mediates a “subtle” and “changing” relationship between humans and their “circumambient universe.” Navigating this vital dynamic entails danger, fear, and pain, hence Lawrence’s proviso: “to read a really new novel will always hurt, to some extent” (180). In “Why the Novel Matters” (ca. 1925) Lawrence expands on the novel as a form that fosters interrelation by claiming that novels attempt to conjure the “wholeness” of life. In this sense, the novel is not an instrumental or didactic form. Rather, it should stimulate the whole being along various paths, much like the multidirectionality of botanical growth.25 Lawrence also emphasizes this point in “Surgery for the Novel—or a Bomb” (1923), in which he describes the novel as the multifaceted unification of fiction and philosophy. Here, the novel’s manifold nature introduces newness that will at first seem

25 For example: “The Bible—but all the Bible—and Homer, and Shakespeare: these are the supreme old novels... They set the whole tree trembling with a new access of life, they do not just stimulate growth in one direction” (Selection 186).
horrifying. The modern novel is, he claims, a “monster with many faces” (*Selection* 189) that will tear a hole through the ideological walls that imprison and suffocate us.

More than just a general sense of the form’s plurality and the “truth” this plurality expresses, what makes the novel unique for Lawrence lies in its horizons for representing the intrinsically posthuman nature of human being. This is the subject of a remarkable essay of the same period, “The Novel and the Feelings” (ca. 1920), in which Lawrence describes the essential nature of the human individual as an “aboriginal jungle,” a dense thicket that grows deep in the heart of “the dark continent of myself.” According to Lawrence, all of our “feelings” live within this internal wilderness, where they remain largely invisible to our conscious selves. In contrast to the wildness of feelings, Lawrence introduces “emotion” as the name for those “convenient” affects (especially love) that civilized society likes to “domesticate” and turn into “our pet favourite[s]” (*Selection* 462). The problem with privileging emotions over feelings is that it reduces the self, exhibiting only a carefully curated selection of affects that drastically simplifies the individual into a socially acceptable form.

Try as we might to tame feelings into emotions, Lawrence insists that we cannot escape the wild multiplicity of our primary selves:

What am I, when I am at home? I’m supposed to be a sensible human being . . . [Yet] I have a whole stormy chaos of “feelings.” And with some of these self-same feelings I simply don’t get a chance. Some of them roar like lions, some twist like snakes, some bleat like snow-white lambs, some warble like linnets, some are absolutely dumb, but swift as slippery fishes, some are oysters that open on occasion . . . The wild creatures are coming forth from the darkest Africa inside us. In the night you can hear them bellowing . . . But since the forest is inside all of us, and in every forest there’s a whole assortment of big game and dangerous creatures, it’s one against a thousand. (461–62)

The strange bestiary of the self Lawrence produces here emphasizes how coming home to ourselves entails the acknowledgement of two unsettling facts: first, that we are constituted by a vastly unknowably multiplicity, and second, that we are fundamentally nondomesticable. Avoidance of these facts has obscured the truth of our own inner “darkness.” He continues: “Till now, in sheer terror of ourselves, we have turned our backs on the jungle, fenced it in with an enormous
entanglement of barbed wire, and declared it did not exist. But alas! we ourselves only exist because of the life that bounds and leaps into our limbs and our consciousness, from out of the original dark forest within us” (463).

Although Lawrence advocates a “return” to our wild selves, he cautions that such a return cannot occur quickly, nor can it proceed along an intuitive route. Moving away from his zoological discourse (and the unfortunate racist rhetoric of “darkest Africa,” which likely comes from Joseph Conrad), Lawrence develops an agricultural metaphor that demonstrates how becoming civilized requires us to reimagine what it means to “cultivate” ourselves. This entails a rejection of the self-cultivation Lawrence calls “taming,” which amounts to little more than a crude form of slash-and-burn agriculture: “Tameness is not civilization. It is only burning down the brush and ploughing the land. Our civilization has hardly realized yet the necessity for ploughing the soul. . . . The landscape of our souls is a charred wilderness of burnt-off stumps, with a green bit of water here, and in a tin shanty with a little iron stove. Now we have to sow wild seeds again. We have to cultivate our feelings” (464). This requires “listening-in to the voices of the honourable beasts that call in the dark paths of the veins of our body, from the God in our heart” (465). At essay’s end, Lawrence finally comes to his point. In order to (re-)learn how to cultivate our feelings rather than domesticating them into emotions, we must relinquish social, political, and moral mandates and read novels—“real novels”—instead. “Real” novels privilege relativity over the absolute, and they embody living disequilibrium in the way Lawrence outlined in his other essays of this period. Such novels alone can showcase the individual as a strange compendium of competing forces, “a whole assortment of big game and dangerous creatures.” Close reading of “real” novels—no doubt the kind that Lawrence attempted to write in The Rainbow and Women in Love—reveals to attentive readers “the low, calling cries of the characters, as they wander in the dark woods of their destiny” (465). That is, it reveals the sheer multidimensionality—and radical nonhumanity—at the heart of the human individual,
which literary convention otherwise reduces to the apparent singularity of “character.” The allotropic egocentrism at the heart of Lawrence's novelistic practice therefore pluralizes the ego's center in a way that explodes the very notion of human consciousness.

Lawrence returns to these concerns in *Studies in Classic American Literature*. In its broadest strokes, Lawrence’s study of American literature seeks to uncover an emerging spirit of place in the United States as it sloughs off the post-Renaissance humanism of the Old World and, like a caterpillar in its chrysalis, secretly forges a radically new spirit. Lawrence tracks the gestation of this emergent New World spirit through several generations of American writers. He begins with the most quintessentially American of them all: Benjamin Franklin. Always one to reject popular opinion, Lawrence opens his study by communicating a deep disgust for Franklin as the chief intellectual architect of American freedom and democracy. He casts Franklin as an idealist whose tendency to moralize stifles his otherwise trite celebration of “liberty” and “the perfectability of man.” To Lawrence, these represent incompatible desires: individuals cannot be liberated if they remain concerned with their own perfection—particularly when that perfection is contingent on an arbitrary list of virtues and a capitalist formulation of the American citizen-subject. Lawrence links this notion of perfectibility to Franklin’s famous decree—“Henceforth be masterless!”—which is really a call for his fellow Americans to master themselves. The danger of this decree lies in its attempt to singularize, to “tame,” the self. Franklin’s creed entails a reduction of “man” to mere parts of himself, and specifically the “cultivated” and “known” parts:

The *wholeness* of a man is his soul. Not merely that nice little comfortable bit which Benjamin marks out. . . . Why, the soul of man is a vast forest, and all Benjamin intended was a neat back garden. And we’ve all got to fit into his kitchen garden scheme of things. Hail

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26 Lawrence quotes the list of thirteen virtues Franklin elaborates in his *Autobiography*: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility. At the end of the chapter Lawrence comically revises the meanings of these virtues.

27 Lambasting Franklin’s certainty of receiving rewards from God for his virtue, Lawrence writes: “Now if Mr Andrew Carnegie, or any other millionaire, had wished to invent a God to suit his ends, he could not have done better. Benjamin did it for him in the eighteenth century. God is the supreme servant of men who want to get on, to produce. Providence. The provider. The heavenly storekeeper” (16).
Columbia! . . . Who knows what will come out of the soul of man? The soul of man is a dark vast forest, with wild life in it. Think of Benjamin fencing it off! (16–17)

Once again, Lawrence advocates here for the inherent wildness of the human soul. Revising Franklin’s credo, Lawrence claims that we can attain freedom only by relinquishing the desire for self-mastery and by allowing ourselves “Henceforth [to] be mastered!” But mastered by what? If we are not, as Lawrence claims, “the marvellous choosers and deciders we think we are” (13), then who—or what—is? His answer is as intriguing as it is unsatisfying: “IT chooses for us, and decides for us” (13), though he quickly replaces “IT” with his preferred term, “the Holy Ghost.” This Ghost—which is not the Holy Ghost of Christian theology—serves as the source of the self’s “deepest promptings;” it is a multiplicitous and unknowable “master” that inhabits us and “drives” us without our direct awareness. “I am absolutely a servant of my Holy Ghost” (25), Lawrence claims, and he likewise implores his readers to obey only “the man in whom you recognize the Holy Ghost” (24).

These digressions through the posthuman possibilities of the novel and the “Ghost” that “masters” the self at last allow me to return to the concept at the center of this section and to make the following claim: Lawrence’s notion of the “spirit of place” conceptually externalizes what he describes in the “The Novel and the Feelings” as the “dark continent” of the self. Just as the individual self becomes a “jungle” populated by thousands of species of nondomesticable “feelings,” the spirit of place names the totality of entities within a specific locale. Whereas the self represents an “internal” plurality, the spirit of place multiplies this exponentially. It therefore comes to name not just the totality of entities in a place, but the extraordinarily complex interrelations that occur among them. It is notable that Lawrence’s ideas of selfhood and place both employ a spectral rhetoric. A hidden “Ghost” haunts the human individual and invisibly drives it, just as the “spirit” of place indicates something more-than-physical that emanates from the totality of human and other-than-human relations. In both cases, Lawrence invokes spectral figures to indicate the strange way in
which some hidden complexity reveals itself in its essential hiddenness—that is, makes its inaccessibility hauntingly present.

If this rhetoric of haunting seems needlessly obscure, I should emphasize that, for Lawrence, being is simultaneously physical and metaphysical. In his 1925 essay “Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine,” for instance, Lawrence makes an argument for the materiality of being: “The clue to all existence is being. But you can’t have being without existence, any more than you can have the dandelion flower without the leaves and the long tap root” (Selection 454). Later in the essay he continues: “Being . . . is a transcendent form of existence, and as much material as existence is. Only the matter suddenly enters the fourth dimension. All existence is dual, and surging towards a consummation into being” (455; my emphasis). Being at once manifests itself to conscious experience and “transcends” that experience, entering “the fourth dimension” that Lawrence elsewhere associates with the unconscious. Even the unconscious, however, has a material seat. Lawrence elaborates this claim in his 1922 work, Fantasia of the Unconscious, where he argues that the unconscious “mind” is not a consolidated thing, but rather emerges from a complex physiological system of “plexuses and planes.”

Like the “Holy Ghost,” “IT,” the “fourth dimension,” and a host of other terms, the “unconscious” serves as a shorthand that refers to an irreducible complexity at the heart of things that is at once present and absent, material and immaterial. This complexity haunts all living things, and not just humans. As Lawrence writes in “Reflections”: “Any creature that attains to its own fulness of being, its own living self, becomes unique, a nonpareil. It has its place in the fourth dimension, the heaven of existence, and there it is perfect, it is beyond comparison” (Selection 453–54). Thus, an individual dandelion is as capable of achieving a full expression of being as a human

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28 Throughout Studies in Classic American Literature and other writing of the same period, Lawrence employs many different names to describe a similar thing: “IT,” the “Holy Ghost,” the “hidden god,” the “fourth dimension,” the “unconscious,” the “invisible rider,” and so on. As with Heidegger, the proliferation of terms can prove confounding and, occasionally, maddening.
or a hawk. The dandelion contains multiple competing forces within itself, just like any other vibrant being; it is “mastered” by its own invisible “Ghost.” Thus, Lawrence claims that within a single dandelion seed “sits the Holy Ghost[,] . . . which holds the light and the dark, the day and the night, the wet and the sunny, united in one little clue” (455). A single seed contains “the sun” and “the earth” within itself, and these forces wrestle with one another. Through this perpetual, Heraclitean contest, the plant grows into a full expression of itself.29

The example of the dandelion demonstrates that, for Lawrence, all living things, and not just humans, are defined by an essential complexity or multiplicity. This does not, however, make all entities “equal” in a democratic sense. Elsewhere in “Reflections” Lawrence insists on a hierarchy of vitality among living entities, where “higher” beings are simply “more alive”: “As far as existence goes, that life-species is the highest which can devour, or destroy, or subjugate every other life-species against which it is pitted in contest” (453). By the same token, however, this hierarchy does not relativize being in the same way it relativizes vitality. What this means is that Lawrence advocates something similar to Ian Bogost’s “flat ontology,” in which “all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally” (11).30 If entities do not “exist equally” in Lawrence’s universe, it is because they do not find themselves in equal relationships with other entities. For instance, the reality of the food chain undermines equivalence. When a chicken finds itself in relationship with a fox, the most likely scenario finds the latter killing and consuming the former. The flow of energy “up” the food chain concentrates vitality among the “higher” species, not unlike how primitive accumulation concentrates wealth among economic elites. Due to the hierarchy of vitality, there can be no “pure”

29 "So sun-in-the-seed and the death-returner, who is earthy, dance faster and faster and the leaves rising greener begin to dance in a ring above-ground, fiercely overwhelming any outsider, in a whirl of swords and lions' teeth. And the earthy one wrestles, wrestles with the sun-in-the-seed, so the long roots reach down like arms of a fighter gripping the power of earth, and strangles all intruders, strangling any intruder mercilessly. Till the two fall in one strange embrace, and from the centre the long flower-stem lifts like a phallus, budded with a bud" (Selection 455). Notably, Lawrence’s illustration of this contest is reminiscent of his descriptions of Indian dances in Mornings in Mexico.

30 In contrast to Bogost, however, Lawrence’s concern with vitality limits his interest to “living creatures,” whereas Bogost extends the horizons of flat ontology indefinitely to include all “objects,” animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, real and ideal.
relationships between individual entities. Hence, “There is no such thing as equality” (458). That said, this does not prevent individual entities from achieving a full expression of being through their “pure” participation in the vital flow of the universe at large: “No creature is fully itself till it is, like the dandelion, opened in the bloom of pure relationship to . . . the entire living cosmos” (454). The absoluteness of being (everything exists) paired with the relativity of vitality (things do not exist equally) results in a “living cosmos” that is sustained by a vital flow of energy, yet is simultaneously characterized by a vast complexity that that transpires both within and between individual entities. For lack of a better term, Lawrence encompasses this overwhelming complexity with an underwhelming name: the spirit of place.

Animism versus “Weird Anima”

For many of Lawrence’s critics, all of this talk about a “living cosmos” sounds an awful lot like animism.31 But just as I cautioned against reducing the spirit of place to a vague relationship between “people” and “the environment,” so would I warn against generalizing Lawrence’s posthuman interest in vitality as a pseudo-primitivist celebration of animism. The problem with this stance is twofold. First, the typical understanding of animism does not align with Lawrence’s theoretical emphasis on non-anthropocentrism and the materiality of being. David Skrbina summarizes:

Animism . . . is the belief that everything in the universe has a soul or a spirit. . . . These spirits typically have a human-like nature or personality that exhibit all the properties of a rational person, including intelligence, belief, memory, and agency. Furthermore, such spirits usually are not bound to the physical realm; they are immaterial and supernatural beings. (19)

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31 William York Tindall was perhaps the first critic to approach Lawrence’s work through the lens of primitivism. See his monograph D. H. Lawrence and Susan His Cow as well as his article “D. H. Lawrence and the Primitive.” I discuss other “primitivist” critics such as Donald Gutierrez and Dolores LaChapelle below.
Though Lawrence is clearly invested in a wider sense of being, he neither projects human-like qualities onto nonhuman agents, nor does he consider spirit to be solely immaterial. Any generalized claim for “souls” or “supernatural” powers that permeate the universe runs the risk of effacing Lawrence’s subtle distinction between the absoluteness of being and the relativity of vitality. Nor does it help much to situate Lawrence’s thinking within more specific though equally conventional categories, as Donald Gutierrez does when he describes Lawrence’s vision of the living cosmos as a form of “hylozoism.” Gutierrez admirably rejects the rhetoric of animism as connoting “something either clinically archaeological or irresponsibly savage” (179). The concept of hylozoism dispenses with anthropocentric notions of life and the emphasis on immaterial spirits. Instead, it “refers to the archaic, pre-Socratic conception that all matter is alive, or that life and matter are indivisible” (178).

In contrast to animism, the religious and philosophical aspects of hylozoism express a “character of interrelatedness or even interchangeability between the animate and the inanimate” that is otherwise “not conveyed in the meanings of animism” (178). This represents an improvement on “primitivist” interpretations, but Gutierrez’s need to situate Lawrence’s thinking within a specific philosophical tradition does an injustice to the writer’s sometimes wildly syncretic understanding of life. Whereas hylozoism does reflect Lawrence’s belief in the intrinsic liveliness of all matter, its blanket insistence on interrelation neglects his important caveat that difference mediates all relations.

This brings me to the second problem with animism as an interpretive frame: the way in which animism universalizes vital essence threatens to neutralize Lawrence’s insistence on difference in favor of a more romanticized notion of intimacy with the natural world. Here I have in mind the work of Dolores LaChapelle, whose interdisciplinary study of Lawrence, subtitled *Future Primitive*, argues that he looked to the cultures and religions of “primitive peoples” in order to reforge a sense of “harmony” and “balance” with the natural world. LaChapelle’s insistence on harmony (of which we should already be suspect, given what I’ve argued above) depends on a notion of intimacy. At
times she makes this sense of closeness and intimacy explicit, as when she discusses Lawrence’s interest in trees: “In all of nature, Lawrence’s most intimate relationships were with trees” (34; my emphasis). She goes on to cite several biographical examples of important relationships Lawrence had with trees, including an apocryphal childhood experience in which the scent of pine trees purportedly healed his pneumonia. Her chief literary example, however, comes from *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, much of which Lawrence wrote in Ebersteinburg, Germany, near the Black Forest. LaChapelle draws from a strange digression Lawrence makes at the beginning of the fourth chapter, titled “Trees and Babies and Papas and Mamas.” After quoting a long passage out of context, she foregoes close reading and instead concludes by reducing the passage to a generic, primitivist sentiment: “Here, in this passage written among the trees, Lawrence mirrors the deep relationship between tree and human, so ancient that it goes back to the pre-human” (36). LaChapelle proves more interested in the scene of writing than in the writing itself.

Indeed, had she attended more closely to Lawrence’s text, LaChapelle would have found that, far from a simple “mirroring” of an ancient (and therefore positive) relationship with Nature, this section of the *Fantasia* finds Lawrence profoundly unsettled. Escaping the crying baby inside the house, Lawrence takes a pencil and a notebook out to the chair he has set up at the foot of some fir trees. Instead of finding a salubrious retreat, however, something about the trees feels menacing: “I think there are too many trees. They seem to crowd round and stare at me, and I feel as if they nudged one another when I’m not looking. . . . I seem to feel them moving and thinking and prowling, and they overwhelm me” (42). In contrast to LaChapelle’s insistence on a sense of intimacy, Lawrence emphasizes the sheer power of the trees and their silent terror in order to indicate the impossibility of relating to them in any familiar sense: “Suppose you want to look a tree in the face? You can’t. It hasn’t got a face. . . . you can’t meet its gaze” (43). In this moment, Lawrence both acknowledges and ridicules the instinctive human desire to see nature as a mirror that reflects
us back to ourselves. Yet he also underscores the strangeness of his own proposition. Lawrence’s bizarre, faceless tree poses a problem for the implicit link LaChapelle makes between aesthetics and ethics. The tree with(out) a face isn’t beautiful in any conventional aesthetic sense, nor is it stately or noble in the way, say, the American Redwoods are often said to be. Instead, the tree with(out) a face is creepy, and thus does not inspire in Lawrence the feelings of love, care, or even empathy that would enable the kind of “intimacy” LaChapelle imagines. For Lawrence, the faceless tree inspires another affect, a weird feeling that arises from the ontological gap that renders the fir’s “tree being” permanently unknowable to him.

The sense of profound unknowability produces an almost pathological need for Lawrence to reiterate the facelessness of the tree in his attempt to find a way of relating to the multidimensionality of arboreal space and time: “he has no eyes. But he turns two ways: he thrusts himself tremendously down to the middle earth, where dead men sink in darkness, in the damp, dense undersoil; and he turns himself about in high air: whereas we have eyes on one side of our head only, and grow upwards” (44). This compulsion to reiterate has the character of the Freudian uncanny—“that class of frightening that leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (“The Uncanny” 220). As Freud famously argues, das Unheimliche operates via a process of repression and return that creates an unsettling suspension of (un)certainty. The uncanny thus inspires a simultaneous sense of familiarity and mystery. What LaChapelle ignores in Lawrence’s discourse on the trees is that these senses of intimacy and distance cannot be decoupled. He may “sit among the roots [of a tree] and nestle against its strong trunk” (Fantasia 43), but proximity does not translate into a comforting sense of intimacy as she suggests it does. As Lawrence writes in his essay “Pan in America,” all that can be said definitively about the relationship between himself and the tree is that “Our two lives meet and cross one another, unknowingly: the tree’s life penetrates my

32 Note that Freud’s notion of what is “old and long familiar” is rather different from LaChapelle’s notion of ancient mirroring.
life, and my life the tree’s” (Phoenix 25). Beyond the fact of some indefinable interchange, however, there is only an unsettling sense of the tree’s faceless yet vast vitality: “They have no skulls, no minds nor faces, they can’t make eyes of love at you. Their vast life dispenses with all this. But they will live you down” (Fantasia 46). The tree’s sheer power commands respect, but it also inspires fear; its hidden mystery is somehow made hauntingly manifest in its presence. In this sense, Lawrence’s tree emblematizes an ecological variant on the uncanny: it defamiliarizes the natural world in a way that conjures an unsettling awareness of what lies beyond the horizon of human knowledge.  

For all of these reasons, Lawrence’s interest in vitality cannot be generalized as a form of animism representing harmony between humans and Nature. Animism has the tendency to idealize Nature, a folly against which Lawrence repeatedly cautions: “What happens when you idealize the soil, the mother-earth, and really go back to it? Then with overwhelming conviction it is borne in upon you . . . that the whole schema of things is against you. The whole massive rolling of natural fate is coming down on you like a slow glacier, to crush you to extinction” (Studies 119). Idealism kills.  

Interestingly, and as if further to prove the importance of trees to Lawrence, at the end of Future Primitive LaChapelle includes an appendix listing the various works that he wrote while sitting under trees. Once again, this celebration of the scene of writing should not indicate a similarly simple celebration in the writing itself. I have already alluded to the uncanny presence of trees in Fantasia of the Unconscious and “Pan in America,” but trees appear in menacing guises throughout Lawrence’s œuvre. In his novella The Fox, for instance, a tree becomes an accomplice in Henry’s murder of March: “the tree was absolutely severed, turning slowly, spinning strangely in the air and coming down like a sudden darkness on the earth” (Fox 65).  

Or, at the very least, idealism is dangerous. In one memorable example, he chastises Hector St. John de Crévecœur for his idealizing tendencies in Letters from an American Farmer. Lawrence highlights the biographical irony of Letters, which Crévecœur wrote after fleeing to Paris upon the destruction of his American farm. “H. St. J. de C. tried to put Nature-Sweet-and-Pure in his pocket,” Lawrence writes: “But nature wasn’t having any, she poked her head out and baa-ed” (31). An amusing yet strangely upsetting image.
It is precisely this complex, chaotic, even menacing universe of discordant harmonies\textsuperscript{35} that Lawrence attempts to conjure when he invokes the spirit of place. In contrast to animism's invocation of supernatural, human-like spirits, Lawrence's spectral rhetoric emphasizes the materiality of being, while still insisting on the absent presence of an unrepresentable complexity. Lawrentian spectrality marks a limit of knowledge. Instead of animism, then, Lawrence's work is better characterized by what, in his essay “Introduction to Pictures,” he calls “weird anima.” Although written as a preface for the 1929 edition of his own paintings, much of this essay focuses on the work of Paul Cézanne. Lawrence greatly admired Cézanne's ability to exhibit the tensions between the bourgeois conventions of nineteenth-century painting and his own frustrated attempts to grasp and represent the true nature of physical reality. According to Lawrence, Cézanne's apples are the first “real” physical objects in modern painting. Lawrence championed the French painter's ability to produce this reality effect without recourse to the “cliché” of conventional realism or to the kind of hyperrealism of \textit{trompe l'œil}. Instead of privileging the traditionally spatial aspects of painting (e.g., perspective), Cézanne conjured a sense of time by painting a visual field that “slips” around the work's subject. Lawrence describes this dynamic as it appears in Cézanne's portraits of his wife and favorite model, Hortense Fiquet:

> When he makes Madame Cézanne most \textit{still}, most appley, he starts making the universe slip uneasily around her. It was part of his desire: to make the human form, the \textit{life} form, come to rest. Not static—on the contrary. Mobile but come to rest. And at the same time he set the unmoving material world into motion. Walls twitch and slide, chairs bend or rear up a little, cloths curl like burning paper. . . . In his fight with the cliché he denied that walls are still and chairs are static. In his intuitive self he \textit{fell} for their changes. (\textit{Phoenix} 580)

According to Lawrence, Cézanne attempts to represent not just the object itself, but also the peculiar way in which all things—animate and inanimate alike—persistently undergo some form of flux. This requires a new way of painting that captures a deeper reality than conventional realism can

\textsuperscript{35} I take this term from the title of Daniel B. Botkin's influential volume, \textit{Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-first Century}. 

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manage; that is, an “uneasy” reality that slips, slides, twitches, and curls under our very eyes. But Cézanne did more in his painting than apply his intuitive consciousness to individual objects; he also used it to animate whole landscapes. If his still lifes make apparently static objects come strangely alive in their “thingliness,” then, according to Lawrence, his landscape paintings conjure complete panoramas that demonstrate how the whole world around us seethes beneath our gaze: “In [Cézanne’s] best landscapes we are fascinated by the mysterious shiftiness of the scene under our eyes; it shifts about as we watch it. And we realize, with a sort of transport, how intuitively true this is of landscape. It is not still. It has its own weird anima, and to our wide-eyed perception it changes like a living animal under our gaze” (580–81).

This idea of a weird anima proves very suggestive for a posthuman reconsideration of Lawrence’s spirit of place. Just as Cézanne relies on a strange representational strategy to visualize the imperceptible yet immanent flux of material reality, Lawrence relies on a “weird” rhetoric of spectrality—where weird has the added advantage of referring both to what is “unaccountably or uncomfortably strange [and] uncanny” and to that which “[has] the power to control the fate or destiny of human beings” (OED). The weird anima of landscape, then, not only indicates the vast array of individual entities (human and nonhuman) that collectively constitute a particular place; it also indicates that, taken together as a spirit of place, this anima has the potential to be profoundly unsettling, even “uncanny” as in the case of the menacing trees of the Fantasia and the “inhuman” landscapes of New Mexico.

In underscoring the uncanny implications of Lawrence’s spectral rhetoric (“Ghost,” “spirit of place,” “weird anima”), I am attempting to suggest how these terms work as a placeholder to express something otherwise inexpressible—a hidden reality that at once exceeds perceptual abilities

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36 See Del Ivan Janik on how Cézanne and Lawrence shared an “intuitive consciousness” that allowed both artists to represent this flux in their respective media. With respect to Lawrence, Janik is interested in his poetry, but I think this also applies to his prose, which is often highly rhythmic and patterned.

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and recedes from the phenomenal world, and yet is not just supersensible or metaphysical. As I have suggested, we cannot equate Lawrence's eccentric thinking on this matter to animism. Nor can we call it a form of pantheism in the Spinozan sense of God as immanent in the material universe. Indeed, what distinguishes Lawrence's thinking from each of these modalities is his hesitance to commit to any positive and singular formulation of that which remains imperceptible. When it comes to the vital source that differentiates individual entities or places from one another, Lawrence is very straightforward in his sense of the actuality of difference—“the spirit of place is a great reality”—but the precise nature of this spirit exceeds the limits of knowability. In the next section, I return to the Lawrentian figure of the Ghost as it appears in his New Mexican writings of the early 1920s in order to demonstrate how this figure emblematizes the crisis of representation that becomes central to his intellectual and novelistic projects of that period.

Lawrence’s “Ghost” and the Problem of Representation Revisited

This section engages closely with the brilliant work of Benjamin Conisbee Baer, which also considers how Lawrence’s “Ghost” interfaces with the problem of representation. Baer’s work specifically concerns Lawrence’s writings on the Ghost Dance at the Hopi Third Mesa in New Mexico. Considering the similarity of our subject matter, I have taken the liberty of reviewing Baer’s complex argument at length. Not only will this help clarify the nuances of my final parting with Baer’s reading, but it will also allow for a smooth return to the New Mexican scene following the theoretical digression of the previous two sections.

Baer’s work on Lawrence begins by illuminating how his writings in and about the American Southwest participate in various social, historical, and political debates in the region. In particular, he frames this in terms of Lawrence’s broader concern about the plight of Native American tribes threatened by the encroachment of capitalist enterprises—especially the expanding railway system
and the burgeoning tourist industry. The most immediate concern for Lawrence and the community of artists and intellectuals he joined in Taos was a crisis spawned by the Bursum Bill, which New Mexico senator H. O. Bursum had proposed just prior to the Lawrences’ arrival in 1922. The Bursum Bill addressed the problem of competing entitlement claims on lands surrounding Indian pueblos. During the previous colonial period under Mexican rule, land grants had allocated nearly 700,000 acres to southwestern Indians. Since 1848, however, a widespread pattern of enclosure had developed. These lands were slowly bought up, encroached upon, or otherwise appropriated, often by monopolistic landowners seeking to secure the best-irrigated portions of the original Pueblo land grants. A 1913 ruling challenged many of the claims that non-Indians (mostly whites) had made on Indian lands over the previous 65 years. When the Lawrences arrived in New Mexico, however, the newly introduced Bursum Bill sought to reverse the 1913 ruling by (re)confirming nearly all non-Indian claims.

At the center of artistic and intellectual life in Taos stood Lawrence’s patron, Mabel Dodge Luhan, who, along with her husband, Antonio Lujan, galvanized a well-networked community into a massive effort to defeat the Bursum Bill. Perhaps her most notable recruit to the cause of the Taos Pueblo Indians was the American activist and reformer John Collier, who came to Taos on Mabel’s invitation in 1920. Although Collier left New Mexico for a brief lectureship at California State College, he had returned to Taos by the time the Lawrences arrived. During the Lawrences’ stay they lived near Collier, and Collier became one of Lawrence’s primary interlocutors on the subject of the Indians’ plight.

As Baer demonstrates at length, Lawrence’s own participation in the fight against the Bursum Bill developed in relation to—and largely against—the efforts of his “quasi-socialist”
American counterpart. Before coming to Taos, John Collier had gained prominence for inaugurating the Pageant and Festival of Nations in New York City’s Lower East Side. The Pageant encapsulated Collier’s particular form of sociopolitical experimentation, which emphasized “the cultural performance of a determinate (and traditional) collective identity” in order to “engender a new structure of collective feeling” (Baer 148). For Collier, the pageant form did not simply generate a collective sense of identity; it also sought to reawaken a sense of collectivity that had dwindled into obscurity among many poor European immigrant communities of the Lower East Side. Theatrical representation became, in Collier’s hands, a sociopolitical strategy for revitalization that stands as one of the first attempts to construct an American multicultural imaginary. As Baer explains, Collier’s theatricalized brand of multiculturalism strived to establish a “general equivalent” by way of its dual function: “First, to consolidate and generalize a kind of collective (moral) feeling whose origin and structural model finally remains familial or fraternalist; second, to turn this collective feeling into a political force that would renew a full sense of community by humanizing and naturalizing social relations which have become mechanistic, rationalized, disconnected, and self-interested” (149). In other words, shared aesthetic performance stabilized a collective identity and endowed the newly revitalized community with greater solidarity and agency vis-à-vis other cultural groups.

When Collier arrived in the Southwest in 1920 to study the Taos Pueblo Indians, he brought with him many of the lessons he’d learned in the Lower East Side. Collier was quick to observe the dangers posed to contemporary tribes. By the time he left Taos to lecture in California some months later, he had concluded that the Taos Pueblo was under severe threat from the encroachment of

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37 For an alternative take on the relationship between Lawrence and John Collier, see Julianna Newmark, “Sensing Re-Placement in New Mexico: Lawrence, Collier, and (Post)Colonial Textual Geographies.”

38 A contemporary analogue to this method can be found in so-called applied theater. For a landmark text, see Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*, but also see Tim Prentki and Shiela Preston’s *Applied Theatre Reader* and Zakes Mda’s *When People Play People: Development Communication through Theatre.*
social, political, and economic pressures aimed at their assimilation to Euro-American modernity. Collier returned to Taos in 1922 at the time of the Bursum Bill's introduction, which inspired him to continue his study of the Indians’ situation and eventually to intervene on their behalf. In October of that year Collier published his influential essay “The Red Atlantis” in a prominent reformist periodical, The Survey. The essay advocates for the preservation of Pueblo cultures. In his reading of this article, Baer underscores how Collier’s analysis of the Indian situation bears the traces of insights initially gleaned from his multiculturalist pageant in New York. In particular, Baer emphasizes how Collier draws attention to the insularity of the pueblo as “a space of homogenous collectivity” (157). The “inward-looking” disposition of the pueblo society prevented its citizens from establishing institutional foundations for something like a public sphere that would extend beyond the pueblo’s own “porous but delimited” borders (158–59). Collier had adapted the pageant form to solve precisely this problem. Theatrical representation consolidated the community “inside” so that it may participate with the “outside” world more fully and with a greater sense of solidarity.

And yet, although the lack of a “public sphere” represents a problem for the political representation of the Pueblo Indians, Collier also saw their “inward-looking” disposition as something that could benefit American society at large. As Baer points out, in addition to his concern for their future, “Collier also regarded the Pueblo Indians as the source of a possible revitalization of American culture and social life” (148). As he puts it in “The Red Atlantis,” Collier believed the Indians could help America to “be reborn in her ancientness and in the same act . . . help to create a post modern world” (qtd. in Baer 159).

For Lawrence, Collier’s writings inaugurated a split in the mainstream representation of the Taos Pueblo Indians, trapping them between two conflicting pressures: to remain themselves and to assimilate into American life and culture. In response to this aporia, Lawrence’s interpretation of the Ghost Dance of the Hopi Third Mesa rejects representation altogether. Baer brilliantly
demonstrates how he does this by comparing Lawrence’s critique of Western entertainment and his celebration of Indian ritual. Lawrence’s most sustained critique of entertainment appears in his essay “Democracy,” where he rejects entertainment as “a little democracy of the ideal consciousness” (Mornings 53). He imagines a scene in a movie theater, in which a crowd of individual viewers enters into a shared illusion and enjoys a series of abstracted images projected onto a single screen. Such a collective illusion represents the “apotheosis of ‘pure consciousness, pure spirit’”; it inaugurates a “Universal Mind” that obliterates all sense of individuality. Like democracy itself—as well as the strange, democratizing power of capital’s value-form—entertainment creates “an average [that] is abstracted from the different individuals and then reapplied to them all as a representational sign, substituting for what they actually are. The representative (here, what represents the possibility of commensurability) is elevated to being a principle in itself” (Baer 163).

As a thinker who champions the individual’s complex, embodied vitality above all else, Lawrence views this homogenizing and idealizing system of representation and substitution as a malevolent threat to being. The social abstraction of entertainment “does a violence to the indefinable, indivisible, individuality of the ‘spontaneous self’” (Baer 162). In response to the violence of the representational average, Lawrence attempts to abolish representation as such. He does this by turning to Indian ritual, which he believes exemplifies the possibility of nonrepresentation. Here Baer turns to the travel essay, Mornings in Mexico, where Lawrence engages in pseudo-ethnographic description of numerous Indian songs and dances. As opposed to cinematic abstraction, Indian ritual does not gesture to any sort of universal mind or meaning:

[The ritual] means nothing at all. There is no spectacle, no spectator. . . . There is none of the hardness of representation. They are not representing something. . . . It is a soft, subtle, being something. . . . There is no division between actor and audience. . . . There is no God. There is no Onlooker. There is no Mind. There is no dominant idea. And finally, there is no judgment. . . . It can’t be judged because there is nothing outside it to judge it. (qtd. in Baer 164)

39 This quote actually comes from “Indians and Entertainment” in Mornings in Mexico, which makes a similar.
Among these Indians, no concept of “entertainment” exists. Lawrence develops this thesis through his analysis of the Ghost Dance of the Hopi Third Mesa. According to his interpretation, the Ghost Dance neither operates by some system of representation and substitution (which requires a division between seer and seen), nor does it offer a second-order re-presentation of cosmic meaning. Instead, the Ghost Dance emphasizes the direct embodiment of ritual rhythms, what Lawrence often terms “the rhythm of the blood.” As Baer explains: “It is through participation in the rhythms of song and dance that the opposition between representation and action comes undone and ‘the shimmer of creation’—as active process—is entered into. It is a fantasy of collectivity unmediated by (abstract) representative parts” (167).

Ironically, despite his rejection of Collier’s contradictory expectations of Indian tribes, Lawrence’s argument about nonrepresentation also produces a bifurcated image of his subject. Although less explicitly “political” than Collier’s vision, Lawrence shares his rival’s commitment to the idea that the Indians hold possibilities for transforming contemporary American life and culture. In order to demonstrate how Lawrence’s “optimistic” view of Indian life illuminates his own competing demands on the Taos Pueblo Indians, Baer turns to Studies in Classic American Literature. This work includes a chapter on James Fenimore Cooper in which Lawrence celebrates the author’s vision, in The Last of the Mohicans, of the “inception of a new race” that emerges from a rapprochement between Indians and Europeans. However, even as he celebrates this vision, Lawrence abruptly parts ways with it. Whereas Cooper stages a dream that moves “beyond democracy” and realizes a “new soul” for America, Lawrence eventually retreats from this idealized projection of friendship. In its stead, he imagines the death of the Indians as being necessary for the emergence of a new future. Baer argues compellingly that this bifurcated vision stems from Lawrence’s attempt “to realign the dream of the beyond to the ‘reality’ of American’s ‘grinning, unappeased aboriginal demons’ which at once paradoxically become both the acme of literality . . . [and] mediating figures enabling the
white present to make the transition to a radically new future” (134). This realignment depends on the conflicting figuration of the Indians as simultaneously alive and dead, as “reality” and “ghosts.”

Baer highlights this paradox by describing how in Lawrence’s text the (ghostly) Indians become sublated into the land itself:

As the essay’s argument moves, it is the “landscape” itself that becomes threatening. Its original inhabitants, having first become demons or ghosts, are finally identified with the earth to the point that it is “the American landscape” that has “never been at one with the white man,” and the landscape itself that is “grinning.” Indeed, the frightening image of a grinning landscape is the image of an inanimate object to which a face has been given. Giving face is the meaning of the fundamental fictional trope prosopopoeia, the trope that is also constitutive for the epitaph. . . . Lawrence elaborates a little on his ghost motif, making of the Indians something which haunts the modernized world. (134–35)

Baer’s reading of this landscape pivots on Lawrence’s figuration of the Indians as ghostly presences. More specifically, he reads Lawrence’s ghostly rhetoric within the framework of Derridean spectrality, such that the Indians operate in the text both as a historical haunting of modernity and as a linguistic haunting of the “trace” more generally. For Baer, this Derridean reading radically undoes Lawrence’s claims about the nonrepresentationality of ritual. Indeed, the trace-like haunting (re-)opens the possibility of representation in the text. Baer argues that this includes the possibility of Lawrence’s bifurcated representation of the Indians as a ghostly reality, as well as the self-representation of the Indians of the Hopi Third Mesa, whose own social and political attempts to represent themselves in the negotiation of their precarious future are otherwise eschewed in Lawrence’s vision. In spite of Lawrence’s absolute insistence on nonrepresentation, “the figure of the ghost, as ‘them’ and as also inside ‘him,’ is a moment where the motif of the trace (the most general condition of possibility of representation and mediation) powerfully remains in the text” (186). In the end, then, Lawrence never finally manages “to escape the mediating force of metaphor” (129).

Baer’s reading of Lawrence’s Ghost and its interface with the problem of representation is as forceful as it is brilliant. That said, my own understanding parts ways with Baer’s on one crucial
issue. Rather than pointing toward the possibility of either representation or nonrepresentation, I read Lawrence’s Ghost as a figure for the *impossibility* of representation. Baer’s argument circles around positive and negative possibilities of representation. Even when Lawrence attempts to define a negative horizon (i.e., nonrepresentation), Baer claims that, through a radical reopening, a positive possibility reemerges; the mediating force of metaphor always reasserts itself. Though it is true that Lawrence himself cannot escape this mediating force (which would entail escaping language altogether), this does not mean that he cannot use metaphor to gesture indirectly at something that does escape it. Language describes the world as it manifests “for us,” but this does not negate the reality of a “world-in-itself” that recedes beyond the horizon of human finitude. No amount of “direct” experience and no amount of literary or phenomenological description can exhaust what an object is; there always exists a remainder that retains its essential mystery. Curiously, although we may lack “worldly” access to this mystery, the world-in-itself still makes itself known to us, even as a hidden reality. As Eugene Thacker argues in *In the Dust of This Planet*, it is genre horror that best renders this darkness visible, precisely because it deals in “the enigmatic thought of the unknown” (8–9). Horror and its fearful fascination with the unknown highlights the possibility of the unrepresentable as such. In this sense, horror operates by way of a strange, positive negation. Thacker goes on to claim that “The world-for-itself presents itself to us, but without simply becoming the world-for-us; it is, to borrow from Schopenhauer, ‘the world-in-itself-for-us’ ” (53). That is, the world-in-itself positively manifests its own unknowability “for us,” and it does so through the invocation of horror.

Although not a marker of “horror” in the traditional sense meant by Thacker, I argue that, like horror, Lawrence’s Ghost offers an expression of the inexpressible. As I have already addressed

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40 Graham Harman makes an analogous argument in *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*. In his object-oriented reading, Harman argues that H. P. Lovecraft’s greatest stylistic accomplishment resided in his ability to create gaps between language and the objects that language attempts—yet obviously fails—to describe. It is this gap that endows Lovecraft’s fiction with its characteristic weirdness.
at length above, over and over in his work Lawrence emphasizes that something about the vital exchange that transpires within and between all entities always evades capture. In a sense, one could argue that Lawrence’s writing exhibits an almost pathological attempt to capture this fundamentally elusive energy, whether in terms of the human individual, the (hetero)sexual relationship, or the spirit of place. Of Lawrence’s many names for this elusive spirit that haunts all entities at their cores and determines all interrelation, the most prominent is the “(Holy) Ghost.” Lawrence uses this term most liberally in his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, but it appears throughout his later writings. It is therefore surprising that Baer expresses confusion when he encounters the term in a passage from the essay “Indians and Entertainment.” In large part, this essay concerns the impossibility of bridging the gap between Indian and European consciousnesses, and it begins by foregrounding difference. Lawrence warns against responding to this difference with sentimentalism, suggesting that such a response conceals the challenge of acknowledging the reality of difference:

> And let not this [fact of difference] be turned into another sentimentalism. Because the same paradox exists between the consciousness of white men and Hindoos or Polynesians or Bantus. It is the eternal paradox of human consciousness. To pretend that all is one stream is to cause chaos and nullity. To pretend to express one stream in terms of another, so as to identify the two, is false and sentimental. The only thing you can do is to have a little Ghost inside you which sees both ways, or even many ways. But a man cannot belong to both ways, or to many ways. One man can belong to one great way of consciousness only. (Mornings 55–56)

Baer responds to this passage with confusion and tentatively connects Lawrence’s use of the word “Ghost” with the Ghost Dance, a topic that is otherwise absent from the essay:

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41 Lawrence argues that there is an unavoidable difference between Europeans and Indians, and that this different causes Europeans either to get sentimental or to express dislike. “Both reactions are due to the same feeling in the white man. The Indian is not in line with us. He’s not coming our way. His whole being is going a different way from ours” (Mornings 54–55). Upon recognizing that this difference is inescapable, Lawrence describes two possible reactions among Europeans, demonization or idealization: “You can detest the insidious devil for having an utterly different way from our own great way. Or you can perform the mental trick, and fool yourself and others into believing that the befeathered and bedaubed darling is nearer to the true ideal gods than we are” (55). The “tolerant repulsion” of the former is “instinctive” and hence understandable; the latter response, by contrast, “is just bunk, and a lie” that “saves our appearances” (55). In the end, then, neither response is productive; the reality of difference does not provide an excuse for demonizing or idealizing the other.
The apparent reference to the Ghost Dance (why is Lawrence’s Ghost capitalized at this point?) in Lawrence’s text at least permits us to make the comparison. The Ghost Dance is precisely the homeopathic deployment of the specter: its critical use to produce new effects, events and actions—an insurgency no less—that are far from being immaterial. The figure of the ghost with its multiple viewpoints appears to critically pre-empt the later rigid specularity staged by Lawrence in his encounter with the Hopi. The figure of the ghostly representative at least leaves open the (undeveloped) possibility of another kind of encounter, an exposure to the Indians that does not have the character of a foregone conclusion. (178–79; original emphasis)

Once again Baer underscores how the ghostly figure opens up an otherwise foreclosed possibility in Lawrence’s text: in this case, it opens the possibility for an encounter that bridges the gap of alterity between Indian and European consciousnesses. In reading this passage, Baer’s theoretical apparatus leads him somewhat astray, encouraging him to make too much of the link between the Lawrentian figure and its Derridean resonance. In doing so, this reading uses the “Ghost” as a lever to reassert the haunting of the trace, while neglecting to register the erstwhile status of the figure in Lawrence’s admittedly eclectic critical vocabulary. The passage from “Indians and Entertainment” does not serve as a “homeopathic deployment of the specter,” for such an alleviatory gesture leads to the very sentimentalism that Lawrence guards against so fervently. Rather than reestablishing the trace to help bridge the gap of difference, Lawrence introduces a spectral figure as a way of staying with the difficulty of this gap. The Ghost marks the paradox of the multiplicitous individual—hence Lawrence’s reference to the “man” who “belong[s] to one great way of consciousness only” despite having “a little Ghost inside” that sees “many ways.”

Instead of an attempt to escape representation of which the figure of the Ghost at once marks an attempt and a failure, Lawrence’s spectral rhetoric is a sign of the unrepresentable as such. Thus, even as he argues that the Indians have no concept of entertainment because their ritual does not “mean” anything, his more basic point is not that the Indians indeed escape representation, but rather that their ritual is concerned with connecting to something that fundamentally cannot be represented. Confoundingly, what this means is that Lawrence rejects the possibility of
representation, but without making the further claim that there is nothing to represent in the first place. From a poststructuralist standpoint, it is easy to cast Lawrence’s argument aside and reassert the nonexistence of anything outside of language (il n’ y a pas de hors-texte). But rather than naively failing to see the importance of language and mediation, Lawrence knowingly argues for language’s limits. His implicit claim is that something escapes language, even if we still require language to indicate its existence. Throughout “Indians and Entertainment,” for instance, Lawrence describes Indian song and dance as “an experience of the human bloodstream, not of the mind or spirit” (Mornings 56–57). His repeated emphasis on the rhythm of the blood gestures to something profound and profoundly “basic” to human life that nevertheless tends to escape conscious experience. Indian ritual attempts to connect with this “blood-consciousness” (i.e., unconscious experience) through the physical embodiment of its rhythms. This embodiment strives for a direct connection with a vital source; it does not attempt to represent any hidden meanings to a group of spectators. For this reason, Lawrence describes Indian ritual as “practice as well as mystery” (59). Here “practice” indicates the habitual doing or carrying on of a particular method of action rather than a goal-oriented action meant to improve an ability or actualize an idea. In this sense, practice does not presume a goal or a final perfectability; it is action performed for its own sake. Hence, if ritual is practice as well as mystery, then no amount of ritual participation can fully unveil the mystery—nor is such unveiling the point. Indeed, the practice itself is the mystery. Far more than just an example of how Indian ritual dispenses with representation, Lawrence strives to think ritual as a practical engagement with the unrepresentable qua the unrepresentable. This, in turn, reflects Lawrence’s understanding of Indian religion: “Creation is a great flood, for ever flowing, in lovely and terrible waves. In everything, the shimmer of creation, and never the finality of the created” (61). Creation “shimmers” into appearance without ever revealing itself as “the finality of the created.” It retains
its mystery while indicating its hidden reality. “Practice” names the ongoing process of connecting to this shimmering flow, without the promise of ever grasping its deeper complexity.

The notion of reality as a shimmering flow returns us to the “weird anima” of landscape. It also returns us to Baer’s earlier point (quoted above) regarding Lawrence’s ghostly landscape descriptions. Baer argues that Lawrence renders the American landscape threatening through his “demonic” use of personification, in which he sublates the ghostly Indians into the “grinning” landscape: “Indeed, the frightening image of a grinning landscape is the image of an inanimate object to which [an Indian] face has been given” (Baer 134). I do not think, however, that Lawrence’s frightening landscape emerges from such straightforward conflation. For one thing, in “Indians and Entertainment” Lawrence rejects this kind of conflation as the unproductive idealism of sentimental Europeans (Mornings 54–55). For another, in the same essay he explicitly links the immanent threat of landscape to his understanding of the indigenous conception of creation: “Creation contains the unspeakably terrifying enemy, the unspeakably lovely friend, as the maiden who brings us our food in dead of winter, by her passion of tender wistfulness. Yet even this tender wistfulness is the fearful danger of the wild creatures, deer and bear and buffalo, which find their death in it” (61). Creation is woven through with the unspeakable. In contrast to Baer’s reading, then, Lawrence does not see the American landscape as threatening due to the ghostly presence of the Indians themselves. Rather, it is the spectral mystery acknowledged by Indian religions and embodied in Indian rituals that endows this landscape with its immanent terror. Seeing this as the product of Indian difference alone bespeaks a failure to regard the radical alterity that extends far beyond the human. It is this latter alterity—the “unspeakable” itself—that constitutes the posthuman spirit of place and contributes to the weird anima that haunts the landscape, rendering even the Indian homeland “unhomely.”

In the final section, I attempt to collect the various threads of this chapter through a reading of Lawrence’s 1925 novella, St. Mawr. This reading ties together several of the concerns that have
preoccupied me thus far—posthumanism, the allotropic ego, the spirit of place, the weird anima of landscape, the Lawrentian Ghost, and the problem of representation—and directs them toward understanding the radical redefinition of “home” that Lawrence develops in New Mexico. In particular, I explore the emergence of a weird anima that haunts landscape from within. In contrast to the homely metaphysics of landscape, which erects protective barriers that enable the consolidation of the ego, Lawrence’s unhomely ecology exposes the radically “allotropic” nature of all being; no individual entity (whether human or nonhuman) can be consolidated into a singular “I.” According to Lawrence, we must acknowledge the inherent multiplicity of all things as the hidden source of their vitality. By the same token, however, we must also abandon the belief that we can ever understand this hidden source; our terror may be the closest we ever get to positive knowledge of it. *St. Mawr* models such a challenging and paradoxical stance by suggesting that the home must openly confront its own unhomeliness. This entails redefining home as an inherently estranging place.

**Redefining Home in *St. Mawr***

Soon after they returned to Taos in March 1924, the Lawrences relocated to Lobo Ranch in the mountains near San Cristobal. The relocation was precipitated by a recurring conflict with the Luhans, and, in the interest of keeping D. H. and Frieda in New Mexico, Mabel offered them her ranch, located some 20 miles outside of Taos. Lawrence refused the gift, but Frieda accepted and proposed to “purchase” the land by giving Mabel the manuscript of *Sons and Lovers*. This land, rechristened as Kiowa Ranch, became the only property that the Lawrences would ever own and call “home.”

This is where Lawrence wrote *St. Mawr*, between May and October 1924. Along with the short stories “The Woman Who Rode Away” and “The Princess,” Lawrence considered *St. Mawr* a
narrative sketch in preparation for his novel *Quetzalcoatl*, later published as *The Plumed Serpent*. Each of these texts features wealthy “liberated” middle-aged white women searching for renewed vitality in the American Southwest. *St. Mawr* stands apart from the other writings of this period in at least two significant ways. Firstly, more than any other work of this period, *St. Mawr* narrates an ideological shift from the Old World to the New. The novella follows the itinerary of its protagonist from England to New Mexico in order to chart a geographical and ideological transition from the living death of Euro-American modernity to the revivifying wildness that yet remains at the fringes of the American frontier. Secondly, the novella offers an exquisite mash-up of significant Lawrentian themes, from the negotiation of love and sex between men and women to the significance of animals, the spirit of place, travel, home(lessness), and so on. Perhaps paradoxically, the integration of these longstanding themes contributes to the novella’s coherence. As James Lasdun comments, *St. Mawr*’s strength “is partly a matter of the sure-footed rapidity of Lawrence’s late style, which had evolved by now into a kind of hieroglyphic alphabet for transcribing the living world at high speed, every phrase and image condensing formidable accumulations of knowledge, observation and reflection” (xv–xvi). *St. Mawr* offers a deeply syncretic narrative that integrates many modalities of Lawrence’s thinking, and this convergence plays out in the novella’s stunning conclusion, in which Lou Witt purchases a ranch outside of Santa Fe (modeled on the Lawrences’ Kiowa Ranch). In the final act, the narrative makes a lengthy digression to describe the topography of the ranch and offer a detailed history of its human habitation. This represents the novella’s only moment of profound engagement with a spirit of place, and from this engagement emerges a powerful vision of the ranch as a living landscape constantly seething with nonhuman—even *inhuman*—life. As Lasdun notes, descriptions in *St. Mawr* are certainly “beautifully perceptive as to the surface of things,” yet they “are never static or merely pictorial” (xvi). Indeed, Lawrence’s living descriptions invoke an uncanny spirit of place that, for Lou, proves weirdly revitalizing. In the end,
Lou rejects marriage and erotic love for the estranging terror of this unfamiliar mountain landscape. The ranch becomes her first real home, and yet it is a home characterized not by stability, protection, and comfort, but by an unsettlingly proliferous wildness.

Read from the telos of its ending, *St. Mawr* stands as a work concerned with finding a home for modernity’s orphans. And indeed, the novella opens with Lou, a 25-year-old American woman who finds herself in Europe, where she feels haunted by “the lurking sense of being an outsider everywhere, like a sort of gipsy, who is at home anywhere and nowhere” (*St. Mawr* 41). In England, Lou finds herself surrounded by other orphans and social misfits, such as the two grooms, Geronimo Trujilla (aka Phoenix) and Morgan Lewis. The mixed-race son of a Mexican father and a Navajo mother, Phoenix is an “unhappy fellow [who] had now no place in life at all” after leaving Arizona to fight in the First World War and returning to the world of the living in a shell-shocked haze (45). Lewis, on the other hand, is a Welsh “aboriginal” whose unhappy upbringing in his aunt and uncle’s home has marked him with a pervasive attitude of “indifference.” When Lou’s mother, Mrs. Witt, asks him, “Do you feel strange when you go home?” he confesses that he cannot “go home” (91); orphaned at an early age, he has no home to return to. All of these characters find themselves “completely at sea” (41) within the supposed center of Euro-American civilization, yet none of them knows where to turn to alleviate their sense of spiritual decay. Focalized through Lou, much of the novella concerns the coming-into-consciousness of this profound malaise and the transformative journey necessary to address it. Before the novella maps out this journey, however, it first articulates the problem.

The primary critique of modern civilization in *St. Mawr* plays out through a sustained interspecies comparison between Lou’s Australian husband, Rico, and the eponymous bay horse, St. Mawr. The narrative presents both characters as dangerous in their own right, and, at first glance, this shared dangerousness appears well matched. The narrator even likens Rico to “a horse that
might go nasty at any moment” (48). This apparent similarity leads Lou to purchase St. Mawr for Rico, but their temperaments quickly prove incompatible. For his part, Rico is a foppish socialite with a nervous temper. The danger he poses emerges from a place of insecurity, a psychological fragility that can only prove destructive. St. Mawr, on the other hand, embodies an unsettling vitality that goes beyond the destructiveness of Rico’s touchy nerves:

The wild, brilliant, alert head of St. Mawr seemed to look at [Lou] out of another world. It was as if . . . the walls of her own world had suddenly melted away, leaving her in a great darkness, in the midst of which the large, brilliant eyes of that horse looked at her with demonic question, while his naked ears stood up like daggers from the naked lines of his inhuman head, and his great body glowed with red power.

What was it? Almost a god looking at her terribly out of the everlasting dark, she had felt the eyes of that horse; great, glowing, fearsome eyes, arched with a question, and containing a white blade of light like a threat. . . . He was some splendid demon, and she must worship him. (50–51)

In contrast to Rico’s shallow anger, St. Mawr’s dangerous vitality stems from a deep yet obscure source. Certainly, this sense of depth is partly the product of the ontological gap that separates Lou from the horse: “What was his non-human question, and his uncanny threat? She didn’t know” (51). But the appearance of depth vis-à-vis Rico’s shallowness does not explain everything. Indeed, Lou admires St. Mawr for the way in which his “demonish” and “uncanny” threat is fully embodied; his robust head is matched by “his great body glowing with red power.” Rico, by contrast, is little more than a neatly groomed head: “It was perfectly prepared for social purposes. If his head had been cut off, like John the Baptist’s, it would have been a thing complete in itself, would not have missed the body in the least” (53–54).

The narrator also casts this deep incompatibility between Rico and St. Mawr in terms of a “battle between two worlds.” Rico belongs to the world of civil society, circulating through stuffy

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42 Rico’s anger was wound up tight at the bottom of him, like a steel spring that kept his works going, while he himself was ‘charming,’ like a bomb-clock with Sèvres paintings or Dresden figures on the outside. But his very charm was a sort of anger, and his love was a destruction in itself” (60–61).

43 In this sense, Rico also belongs among the ranks of modernity’s orphans: “He really was aware that he would have to hold his own all alone, thrown alone on his own defences in the universe” (54).
drawing rooms and preoccupied by aesthetic concerns. St. Mawr, however, moves “in a prehistoric twilight where all things loomed phantasmagoric, all on one place, sudden presences suddenly jutting out of the matrix. It was another world, an older, heavily potent world” (55). In other words, this battle plays out along an axis that polarizes the anxious shallowness of “civilization” against the profound vitality of a wildness that remains obscure, even as it makes its unsettling presence known by “suddenly jutting out of the matrix.”

The battle of worlds (and wills) comes to a head during a day trip to Devil’s Chair, the most distinctive of several Cambrian quartzite ridges among the Stiperstone Hills in Shropshire. A small group sets out on horseback in search of wildness. After passing up the comparatively unremarkable Angel’s Chair, the group proceeds to the more “savage” outcrop, “where the spirit of aboriginal England still lingers” (93). Curiously, the Devil’s Chair altogether lacks aesthetic power: “It was neither impressive nor a very picturesque landscape. . . . Yet it had a strange effect on the imagination” (93). Strangest of all, it causes Lou to consider the long lineage of “aboriginal” blood that “flows still in a few Englishmen, Welshmen, Cornishmen.” Witnessing the rocks worn by the “weather of all ages” and considering their present “age-moulded roundness” inspires Lou with a morbid realization about modern life: “All these millions of ancestors have used up all the life. We’re not really alive, in the sense that they were alive” (94). Soon after this moment, the narrative redirects this critique of an enervated modernity toward Rico, who, on the return journey, pulls too hard on the reins when St. Mawr rears to avoid a snake. The force causes the horse to fall backward, landing hard on Rico’s leg and critically injuring him.

As the group collects itself and rushes back to the farm to seek medical assistance, Lou has another revelation, this time about the nature of evil: “She became aware of evil, evil, evil, rolling in great waves over the earth. Always she had thought there was no such thing—only a mere negation of good. Now, like an ocean to whose surface she had risen, she saw the dark-grey waves of evil
rearing in a great tide” (98). This revelation immediately changes the course of the novella’s action. Unable to recognize his own fault in the “accident,” Rico instead brands St. Mawr as “evil” and orders the “brute” to be shot. Lou, however, rejects the thought that St. Mawr’s spirit could harbor evil, and she concludes instead that the horse wields a powerful creative force, one that defends itself not from a space of insecurity but from one of calm power. In contrast to Rico’s pure destructiveness, St. Mawr’s “soul adhere[s] to that which is life itself, creatively destroying as it goes: destroying the stiff old thing to let the new bud come through. The one passionate principle of creative being, which recognises the natural good, and has a sword for the swarms of evil. Fights, fights, fights to protect itself. But with itself is strong and at peace” (100). Far from being a source of evil, St. Mawr guards against the wickedness of humanity.

The Devil’s Chair episode serves as a major turning point in the novella. First, as I have argued, it reveals that modern Euro-American civilization is the source of a “vast, mysterious force of positive evil” and that St. Mawr’s resistance to human control demonstrates his profound creative force. Second, and more strangely, this creative force evokes a sense of home. For instance, St. Mawr and “the natural wild thing in him” powerfully reminds Lou of “the great bare spaces of Texas, the blue sky, the flat, burnt earth, the miles of sunflowers. Another sky, another silence, towards the setting sun. And suddenly, she craved again for the more absolute silence of America” (102). This moment also explains Lou’s initial attraction to the horse, whose presence had inexplicably conjured a spacious landscape vision earlier in the narrative: “Why did he seem to her like some living background, into which she wanted to retreat? When he reared his head and neighed from his deep chest, like deep wind-bells resounding, she seemed to hear the echoes of another, darker, more spacious, more dangerous, more splendid world than ours, that was beyond her. And there she wanted to go” (61; my emphasis). Lou associates St. Mawr’s “dark vitality” (61) with the “unutterable, almost cruel” reality that characterized life in her childhood home in the silent “empty
spaces” of the Texan plains (102). In the wake of the novella’s critique of modern evil, the narrative uses the nonhuman figure of St. Mawr to refocus on an American landscape where a living spirit may yet flourish.

Lou is not the only one to turn her gaze westward. Others share in her sense that modern existence has sapped the vital essence from life and long to seek out more vibrant horizons. Phoenix, for instance, also longs for America’s wilder landscapes: “He had suffered too much [in England], and in that country his sufferings would overcome him, unless he had some other background. . . . He needed an alien contact to give him relief” (105). Like Lou, who craves the “cruelty” of the Texan wilderness, Phoenix also frames his desire in somewhat surprising terms: he longs for an “alien contact” with something radically different that will, in essence, alienate him from himself and relieve his perpetual suffering.

Rico’s plan to sell St. Mawr to a neighboring estate that intends to geld him offers a perfect opportunity to escape. Lou and her mother devise a plot to abscond with the horse and sail to America along with Phoenix and Lewis. Following the long journey across the Atlantic, Lou feels exhilarated when she arrives at her family’s ranch in Texas. But the initial joy of homecoming quickly wanes as Lou realizes that St. Mawr’s dark vitality seems out of place even in the Texan landscape. After two weeks at the ranch, Lou and her mother begin to sense a lack of depth to life in Texas: “There were no roots of reality at all. No consciousness below the surface, no meaning in anything save the obvious, the blatantly obvious. . . . Visually, it was wildly vital. But there was nothing behind it” (151). The shallowness of Texan life recalls the flatness of the cinema; everything subscribed to a “film-psychology.” Civilization has domesticated the previously wild land, corrupting cowboy culture
with a self-consciousness that inspires a shallow absorption with self-image. Life in Texas has become a mere performance that recalls the vague unreality of entertainment.

Leaving Lewis and St. Mawr behind, Lou, Mrs. Witt, and Phoenix set off hoping to discover a living reality still flourishing further west. They stay for a while in Santa Fe at a “clean, comfortable, ‘homely’ hotel, where ‘every room had its bath’: a spotless white bath, with very hot water night and day” (153). As comfortable and “homely” as the hotel purports itself to be, Lou rejects it as yet another example of “living in the mirror.” Not unlike in Texas, where wild complexity had been flattened into something picturesque, the marketing machinery of the tourist industry had reduced Santa Fe to a catalog version of home. “I don’t see much home about it,” Lou admits. In a final bid to discover a truly homely place, Lou and Phoenix leave Mrs. Witt in Santa Fe and drive out to see a ranch for sale up in the mountains. As with St. Mawr at the beginning of the novella, Lou instantly recognizes a deep vitality in the ranch: “‘This is the place,’ she said to herself. This little tumble-down ranch, only a homestead of a hundred-and-sixty acres, was, as it were, man’s last effort towards the wild heart of the Rockies, at this point” (160).

Like the fateful trip to Devil’s Chair, Lou’s arrival at this ranch serves as a crucial turning point in the novella—the first true “homecoming” for a woman who has lived in existential exile for much of her life. The ranch episode also serves as the novella’s climax, richly evoking the New Mexican spirit of place over the course of a lengthy narrative detour that extends across more than ten pages, offering a comprehensive description of the ranch’s layout, the surrounding geography, and the detailed history of human settlement (and un-settlement). If the entire novella up to this point has narrated the journey from the Old World to the New in search of a living landscape that

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44 “Cowboys just as self-conscious as Rico, far more sentimental, inwardly vague and unreal. . . . [I]nwardly they were self-conscious film-heroes[, ] . . . all of them living in the mirror. The kind of picture they made to somebody else” (151).
can provide a real home for modernity’s orphans, then we must consider this apparent digression a crucial moment that suspends narrative time in order to frame out a new understanding of home.

The ranch was first settled by a schoolmaster who had come out west in search of gold but found little. Despite the failure of his initial purpose, “the mountains had got hold of him, [and] he could not go back” (160). Immediately possessed by the immanent power of the mountains, the schoolmaster stayed to make some rudimentary improvements on the land, building a log cabin and growing alfalfa. This endeavor failed as well, and, succumbing to debt, he sold the homestead to a trader. Exhibiting true pioneer spirit, the trader who bought the ranch “tackled it with a will” (161), erecting more buildings and ensuring they all had running water—“for being a true American, he felt he could not really say he had conquered his environment till he had got running water, taps, and wash-hand basins inside his house” (161). For the trader, “The little ranch was, as it were, his hobby, his ideal” (161). To the trader’s dismay, and despite “advantageously” selling the fruits of his labor (e.g., alfalfa, beans, potatoes, wool, and goat cheese), the ranch turned out to cost a great deal of money. As if echoing Lawrence’s insistence on the danger of idealizing Nature, just when the farm finally begins to produce enough to turn a profit, rats infiltrate the farm, and the trader’s water source dries up. The struggle between rancher and ranch proves increasingly taxing:

And it all cost, cost, cost. And a man was always let down. At one time no water. At another a poison-weed. Then a sickness. Always, some mysterious malevolence fighting, fighting against the will of man. A strange invisible influence coming out of the livid rock-fastnesses in the bowels of those uncreated Rocky Mountains, preying upon the will of man, and slowly wearing down his resistance, his onward-pushing spirit. . . . As if the invidious malevolence of the country itself had slowly taken all the pith of manhood from them, leaving a hopeless sort of corpus of man. (163)

The narrator casts these challenges as the products of a “mysterious malevolence” and a “strange invisible influence” that emanates from the rocky terrain. The ensuing battle emasculates and dispirits the trader.
Curiously, it is precisely this emasculating malevolence that attracts the trader’s “New England wife” to the land: “The woman loved her ranch, almost with passion. It was she who felt the stimulus, more than the men[...], intensifying her ego, making her full of violence and of blind female energy” (164). The trader’s problem was that he idealized the ranch as a wild space to be conquered by his will and transformed into a profitable enterprise. His wife idealizes the ranch in a different but equally problematic way. Much like Tom Outland in *The Professor’s House*, the woman from New England imaginatively transforms the ranch into landscape—that is, she objectifies it as a distant “other world” of absolute beauty, which has an additional effect of consolidating her sense of self. She articulates this through the transcendental refrain “beyond”: “But beyond the pine-trees, ah, there beyond, there was beauty for the spirit to soar in. . . . Beyond was the only distance, the desert a thousand feet below, and beyond” (165). Beauty inhabits this Beyond: “It was pure beauty, *absolute* beauty! There! That was it. To the little woman from New England, with her tense fierce soul and her egoistic passion of service, this beauty was absolute, a *ne plus ultra*” (165). Despite her ecstatic response to this beauty, the wife remains aware of transitional moments when it melts into something more unsettling, as when “the sun would go down blazing above the shallow cauldron of simmering darkness, and the round mountain of Colorado would lump into uncanny significance, northwards. That was always rather frightening” (166). But the wife denies this “uncanny significance” any real power, insistently ignoring any looming darkness: “Ah: it was beauty, beauty absolute, at any hour of the day. . . . It was always beauty, *always!*” (166).

And yet, in direct contrast to the New England woman’s desire to inhabit the landscape that she perceives as “beyond” her, the narrator offers a corrective vision that reveals the ranch as a “vast and living landscape.” One finds oneself completely enmeshed in this living landscape, and yet simultaneously estranged from it: “The landscape lived, and lived as the world of the gods, unsullied and unconcerned. The great circling landscape lived its own life, sumptuous and uncaring. Man did
not exist for it” (166). The acknowledgment of an “uncaring” landscape forces an additional recognition upon the woman from New England: “But even a woman cannot live only into the distance, the beyond. Willy-nilly she finds herself juxtaposed to the near things, the thing in itself. And willy-nilly she is caught up into the fight with the immediate object. The New England woman had fought to make the nearness as perfect as the distance: for the distance was absolute beauty” (166–67). As the living world converges around her, the wife finds herself amidst a seething environment; she is no longer a detached observer of a framed and distant vista. Furthermore, with the world rushing into a radical nearness, the narrator invokes the Kantian notion of the thing-in-itself (das Ding an sich). Here, objects become ghostly figures that intimate to the woman the hidden realities that lurk behind her apprehension of them. The “beyond” she had previously idealized has been relocated within the entities themselves, and, in the process, the absolute beauty of the distant view dissolves into the terror of absolute proximity.

The collapse of the New England woman’s idealized landscape vision yields further revelations about the real nature of the world around her. At the same time as she confronts things-in-themselves, an “invisible attack was being made upon her. While she revelled in the beauty of the luminous world that wheeled around and below her, the grey, rat-like spirit of the inner mountains was attacking her from behind” (167). She perceives this invisible attack as a multipronged one. The first sign is that predators and disease pick off her chickens. Thunderstorms cause lightning strikes that kill her horses. The sheer violence of these storms eventually causes a crisis of faith: “The rivers of fluid fire that suddenly fell out of the sky and exploded on the earth near by, as if the whole earth had burst like a bomb, frightened her from the very core of her, and made her know, secretly and with cynical certainty, that there was no merciful God in the heavens” (167; original emphasis).
This crisis of faith is further exacerbated by the sheer proliferation of life on the ranch. The flourishing vitality challenges her fragile illusions about universal love and casts her as an alien in her own home:

The very chipmunks, in their jerky helter-skelter, the blue jays wrangling in the pine-tree in the dawn, the grey squirrel undulating to the tree-trunk, then pausing to chatter at her and scold her, with a shrewd fearlessness, as if she were the alien, the outsider, the creature that should not be permitted among the trees, all destroyed the illusion she cherished, or love, universal love. There was no love on this ranch. There was life, intense, bristling life, full of energy, but also, with an undertone of savage sordidness. . . . a peculiar undercurrent of squalor, flowing under the curious tussle of wild life. (168)

The narrator further describes this wild “tussle” of life as a botanical survival of the fittest, a “seething conflict of plants trying to get hold” (168). This battleground features an array of vegetal soldiers, from “fang-mouthed” nettles to “ghostly” mariposas and spiny desert cactuses that lie in wait. All of these extraordinary descriptions evoke a sense of the ranch as a living environment that exemplifies a truly posthuman spirit of place—a weird anima that, as in Cézanne’s paintings, slips, slides, twitches, and seethes beneath the surface of things. This incessant battle stratifies life into the kind of vitalist hierarchy Lawrence develops in “Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine”: “The seething cauldron of lower life, seething on the very tissue of the higher life, seething the soul away, seething at the marrow. The vast and unrelenting will of the swarming lower life, working forever against man’s attempt at a higher life, a further created being” (170). After suffering years of this unrelenting battle, during which “the animosity of the spirit of place” utterly exhausts her, the New England woman retires from the ranch and returns to civilization. “She was glad to come to a more human home, her house in the village. . . . [She] did not want to go up to the ranch again. It had broken something in her. It had hurt her terribly. It had maimed her for even in her hope, her belief in paradise on earth” (170; my emphasis). After her departure, a skeleton crew of Mexican workers remained in charge. But the land still required too much effort to be profitable, and they abandoned
it at the advent of the Great War. In the years following the ranch’s abandonment, the tussle of wild life reclaimed the land.

Lou’s haste in purchasing the ranch after this dense elaboration of its vexed history has struck some readers as ill advised. Literary critic Donald Gutierrez is one such reader. Although Gutierrez defends against the idea that the ranch episode marks a structural flaw in the novella at large, what he does consider problematic is its ambivalent spirit of place: the ranch embodies “two hylozoisms, one negative, the other positive,” and they “appear to be unreconciled” (191). For Gutierrez this ambivalence is a problem because it seems flatly contradictory rather than productive, and from this perspective, Lou’s zeal seems dangerously misplaced: “This ‘wild spirit’ certainly wants Lou, but the evidence of the narrative might convince the reader of a contradiction between narrator and protagonist interpretations [sic] of the setting” (192). In other words, we cannot decide whether we should take Lou’s enthusiasm seriously or remain wary of her choice. But I disagree with Gutierrez in his claim that the novella’s ambivalence is simply contradictory and therefore undecidable. As I suggested above, the novella’s lengthy engagement with the New Mexican landscape signals that the ranch serves a narratological purpose that exceeds such a reduction. Indeed, Lawrence presents his readers with the more challenging task of remaining with this apparent contradiction in order to discover just what it might produce.

One way of reading the ambivalence of the final episode without resorting to Gutierrez’s idea of competing “hylozoisms” would be to consider Lou’s point of view vis-à-vis her mother’s. Over the course of the novella, their perspectives on modern life gradually converge, leading up to their collaboration on the plan to escape England with St. Mawr. By this point in the narrative, Mrs.

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45 It has often been suggested that the abrupt abandonment of St. Mawr and his apparent replacement by the ranch represents a formal flaw in the novella. However, Gutierrez argues (rightly, I think) that “St. Mawr belongs to a hierarchy of transvalued, preternatural values that, ascending from such ministers of Pan as Lewis and Phoenix to the level of vitalism represented by the horse, culminates in a spirit of place located around the Lawrence ranch on Lobo mountain northwest of Taos. This hierarchy, helping to structure the story, also helps to dispose of the stallion” (190).
Witt’s dissatisfaction with European civility (and especially modern masculinity) seems largely in line with Lou’s more wide-ranging critique of modern civilization. In fact, just prior to setting sail, Mrs. Witt warns herself against “idealising her native country. . . . It was not that she expected to arrive at any blessed abiding place. No, in America she would go on fuming and chafing the same” (*St. Mawr* 139). During the long journey across the Atlantic and on to Texas and New Mexico, however, Mrs. Witt grows increasingly exhausted by her struggle against modern life, and her “fuming and chafing” wanes when faced with the disappointing flatness that has corrupted her home in Texas. Unlike her daughter, Mrs. Witt lacks the stamina required to keep striving for a truly new way of living. The narrative reveals the extent of Mrs. Witt’s failure in the final episode, when Lou returns to her newly purchased ranch with her mother in tow. The dispirited Mrs. Witt profoundly misunderstands her daughter’s intentions and state of mind. She insists, for instance, on a stereotypically American idiom of accomplishment (“But what do you expect to achieve by it?”) that recalls the trader and his market-driven efforts to harness the ranch for personal profit. But Lou rejects Mrs. Witt’s insinuation: “I was rather hoping, mother, to escape achievement” (173).

Mrs. Witt’s deepest misunderstanding of her daughter occurs in the arena of relationships. Concerned for Lou’s well-being as a lone woman on the ranch, she suggests that the latent sexual attraction between her daughter and Phoenix might “be coming into the foreground before long” (173). Lou forcefully rejects this idea, but Mrs. Witt insists: “after all you’ve got to live. You’ve never lived yet: not in my opinion” (173). Lou resents her mother’s assumption that a conception of “life” should remain tied to sexuality in any simple way: “What do you call life? . . . Wriggling half-naked at a public show, and going off in a taxi to sleep with some half-drunken fool who thinks he’s a man because—Oh mother, I don’t even want to think of it. I know you have a lurking idea that *that is life*” (173; original emphasis). Lou’s frustration in this scene goes deeper than just a reaction against her mother’s apparent sexism. Indeed, her rejection of the simple link between life and sex demonstrates
how shallow Mrs. Witt’s critique of modern life has always been in contrast with Lou’s. Whereas Mrs. Witt remains narrowly focused on relations between men and women, Lou, through her encounter with St. Mawr, recognizes that a renewed sense of vitality requires an altogether new way of living. For this reason, she insists to her mother that her life on the ranch represents “the beginning of something else, and the end of something that’s done with” (174). With this claim to a definitive break, a “silence that was a pure breach” (174) opens up between mother and daughter that the novella refuses to close.

But the problem remains: How can we evaluate Lou’s claim that she has relinquished her ideological ties to the Old World? As I have argued throughout this section, the setting-aside of an old ideological framework has been the allegorical work of the novella as a whole. What distinguishes Lou from her mother as well as her predecessors on the ranch is that, prior to her arrival, she has already done the necessary work of confronting her own idealism. The novella frames Lou as an exemplary figure through her three-fold resistance. First, in contrast to her mother, she resists an erotic solution to the problem of revitalization. Second, in contrast to the trader, she rejects the ranch as a site for her own (self-)production. And third, in contrast to the trader’s wife, she eschews any desire for the “absolute beauty” of the landscape. As an alternative, she envisions herself as a “Vestal Virgin” who pledges herself “to the unseen presences. . . . to the unseen gods, the unseen spirits, the hidden fire” (158–59). As she later tells her mother, though invisible and hence unknown to her, these presences represent worlds beyond the human that, taken together, fashion a living spirit of place that she now calls home, even if it may at times prove profoundly unsettling. In a final bid to justify herself to her mother, Lou explains:

There’s something else for me, mother. There’s something else even that loves me and wants me. I can’t tell you what it is. It’s a spirit. And it’s here, on this ranch. It’s here, in this landscape. It’s something more real to me than men are, and it soothes me, and it holds me up. I don’t know what it is, definitely. It’s something wild, that will hurt me sometimes and will wear me down sometimes. I know it. But it’s something big, bigger than men, bigger than people, bigger than religion. It’s something to do with wild America. And it’s something
If Lou’s zeal for the ranch at first seems too hasty or naïve, this speech reveals the deep consideration involved in her decision to purchase it. What’s more, her mother’s failure to understand Lou’s reasoning further emphasizes the importance of her thinking *in spite of* its logical challenge. The novella closes with an otherwise ambivalent Mrs. Witt congratulating Lou on how “cheap” she got the ranch, “considering all there is to it” (175). But this celebration of cheapness casts Lou’s relationship to the ranch solely in terms of ownership, which Lou’s speech implicitly rejects. Her point is not that she has become the proud owner of a slice of “wild America,” but rather that her purchase (which is merely a socioeconomic arrangement, and hence meaningless in any essential sense) places her in the midst of a complex network of vital relations.

What all of this means is that we can only understand Lou’s zeal for this ranch in all of its dangerous splendor once we recognize that the novella’s final episode offers a radical new definition for what it means to be “at home” in the first place. Thus, while Lou’s description of an unknown “something” or “spirit” that simultaneously welcomes and endangers her may seem naïve and contradictory, her observations emerge from a deeper recognition that home, understood as a protective enclosure, tends to extinguish life rather than to revitalize it. In *St. Mawr*, then, Lawrence offers a quite different view of the “homely” than either Heidegger or Cather. Lawrentian metaphysics retains the importance of *being-in-the-world* without insisting that it depends on a concurrent sense of *belonging to* a particular place. Like Lou, Lawrence dispenses with the protective enclosure while retaining the essential importance of vitality.

But what happens when home no longer protects one from external threats? First of all, it prevents the consolidation of the ego. Unlike for Gaston Bachelard, for Lawrence there can indeed be a “concentration of being” *without* “limits that protect.” Protective enclosures limit our ability to
sense the reality that exists beyond basic perception, and hence closes us off from the very sources of vitality. As I demonstrated in an earlier section, Lawrence associates this kind of enclosure with “self-mastery,” which he defines as the attempt to reduce oneself to one self. Relinquishing the enclosure enables the return of the multiplicitous or “allotropic” self that fundamentally resists consolidation. Secondly, if home no longer designates a protective enclosure made safe for domestication and socialization, then it provides an opening for an awareness that goes beyond mere human concern. It provides the space necessary to cultivate a sense for the spirit of place as something fundamentally posthuman—indeed, other than human—and characterized by a weird anima that never settles into a harmonious balance but seethes relentlessly all around you. Thirdly, and most important of all, is that a nonprotective home no longer conceals its own intrinsic unhomeliness. Indeed, awakening to the presence of the “unseen spirits” proves necessarily unsettling, even uncanny. When Lou appeals to the “unseen gods” inhabiting the New Mexican landscape, she does not proffer a vague occultism or a naïve animism. As I have shown at length throughout this chapter, the spectral rhetoric Lawrence employs throughout his New Mexican writings always gestures toward that which exceeds language’s representational capacities. It is precisely that which can be acknowledged without being known that inspires fear. In this sense, Lou’s appeal to the hidden is particular even in its lack of specificity. This is the strange paradox at the heart of Lawrence’s New Mexican writings.

In the end, then, I read St. Mawr as part of a larger body of texts that attempts to name the unnamable solution to the problem epitomized by modern civilization. Like I suggested at the outset in the Mount Etna episode from Sea and Sardinia, the solution necessitates a change in thinking as much as a shift in being. As an exercise in thinking, it requires a break from Enlightenment rationality and its idealist notions of a consolidated subject who is “his” own master. As an exercise in being, it requires a break from the comforts that tend to dull sensation and a reunion with that
potentially dangerous other-than-human universe that simultaneously envelops us and estranges us. This unhomely world is where we are *really* at home. Thus, in order to retain a vital sense of ourselves in the fullness of our own being, we must, according to Lawrence, strive to keep the strangeness alive. We must remain open to the uncanny of ecology.
Part Two:

Ecological Realism

and who decided stones had no rights for stones can waste away from being
denied from being abused and who decided who is the ploughed and who ploughs

Marlene van Niekerk, *Agaat*

*Who knows, perhaps in stones there are also holes we have never discovered.*

J. M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country*
Chapter 4

Ecological Realism and the “Farmworld” in Southern Africa

What is a farm but a mute gospel?
Emerson, Nature

Part One of this dissertation began with Heidegger’s claim that Dasein, or human being, is most primordially at home in the World. In order to understand this point more fully, chapter 1 argued for a reading of Heidegger that emphasized landscape and what I called its “homely metaphysics.” The following two chapters continued to theorize the homeliness of landscape: chapter 2 examined Willa Cather’s use of narrative to focus landscape into a metaphysical home, and chapter 3 considered D. H. Lawrence’s posthuman reimagining of home as something inherently unhomely.

If Part One focused on landscape description as an imaginative homemaking practice, Part Two makes a conceptual shift to landscape description as a “worlding” mechanism. As I argued in chapter 1, in Heidegger’s lexicon the term Landschaft, or landscape, names an everyday manifestation of what he more famously terms Welt, or World. World signifies a total context of meaning that gathers around the human subject, involving it in an inextricable relationship of concern (Fürsorge). According to Heidegger, we very rarely experience natural phenomena as merely there and awaiting us to assign them a meaning. Instead, we only tend to notice phenomena that are already involved with our concerns, in which case they (always) already have meaning for us.¹

In chapter 2 of Being and Time, Heidegger adopts the figure of the farmer and his farm to explain how concern regulates the relationship between Dasein and the World. When the farmer examines his crop or looks to the horizon for oncoming weather, he is inspecting his surroundings for meaningful signs. These signs constitute both the World around him and his understanding of

¹ To use Heidegger’s terms, this means that worldly phenomena are always zughanden rather than vorhanden—"close-to-hand” rather than “ready-to-hand.”
that World. Heidegger uses the south wind as a representative example. The farmer never experiences the south wind as a merely meteorological or sensorial phenomenon; that is, wind is never simply the patterned movement or air particles or the bodily sensation of a cool breeze on the skin. Instead, it is always—and always first—a meaningful sign of coming rain. The farmer only encounters the south wind as the south wind because it already bears directly on his concern for the well-being of his farm and the livelihood of his family. The strange, co-constitutive temporality of this example is important to Heidegger’s basic understanding of the World as total a context of “meaningfulness” (Bedeutsamkeit). As Bruce Foltz explains: “The ‘relational totality’ of these meanings generated by [the farmer’s] concern, along with the signifying acts that constitute them, is what Heidegger calls ‘meaningfulness’ as such” (27). Meaningfulness saturates the World, rendering it an organic plenum. Signs thus do not require interpretation so much as the direct bearing of concern. Through the farmer’s concern, his farm emerges as a context of meaning. Like landscape, the figure of the farm assumes a World-like structure.

In the interest of thinking landscape as a worlding mechanism, Part Two extrapolates from Heidegger’s example of what I call the “farmworld”: that is, the topos of the farm as a world in and of itself. While my primary focus in what follows will be on the farmworld as a literary topos, it will also be necessary to understand something of its historical pedigree. It should be remembered, for instance, that agriculture is a characteristically human endeavor; it has driven the growth of the human species from the Neolithic Revolution to the contemporary system of global agriculture. Of course, the (nearly) universal significance of agrarian life in human history should not erase the fact

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2 “Signs also originate when something already at hand is taken as a sign. . . . For example, when the south wind is ‘accepted’ by the farmer as a sign of the rain, this ‘acceptance’ or the ‘value attached’ to this being is not a kind of bonus attached to something already objectively present, that is, the movement of the wind and a certain geographical direction. As this mere occurrence which is meteorologically accessible, the south wind is never initially something objectively present that occasionally takes on the function of an omen. Rather, the farmer’s circumspection first discovers the south wind in its being by taking the lay of the land into account” (Being and Time 79).

3 See, for example, Marcel Mazoyer and Laurence Roudart’s A History of World Agriculture: From the Neolithic Age to the Current Crisis.
that agriculture is a multivalent ideological practice that manifests differently in the many social, political, historical, and ecological contexts where it thrives. This is perhaps the most important lesson that postcolonial environmental history has taught us: contest over land is always also a contest over competing land-use ideologies and modes of landscape perception. For this reason, ecological history must always also concern itself with social and political histories.4

Heidegger's farmer is indisputably European and hence deeply influenced by the Old World notion of husbandry. As John Stilgoe asserts, “Husbandry is not farming. Husbandry is noble in the eyes of others; it is the avocation of enlightened kings; it is the first work of God himself” (Common Landscape 137). In the seventeenth-century English imaginary, husbandry united the husbandman with the feminized earth—“Mother Nature”—in a matrimonial bond. The bond with the land produced fruits just like the marital bond produced children, and hence the husbandman’s labor served in part to answer God’s decree in Genesis to “be fruitful and multiply.” In the American colonies especially, husbandry also responded to God’s command to “fill the earth, and subdue it”: “It was the husbandman . . . who made the wilderness into a garden, who civilized a chaos and made it bear fruit and grain of every kind” (Stilgoe, Common Landscape 137).

Given the particular challenges the colonists faced in the American wilderness, however, the New World husbandman had to become a farmer. More engineer than spouse, the American farmer sought to master and transform the land. As Ralph Waldo Emerson exclaimed to a group of farmers at a country fair in 1855, “the earth is a machine which yields almost gratuitous service to every application of intellect” (“Farming” 131). Early colonists like J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur celebrated this transformational project as being essential to the emergent American identity. In the third epistle from his Letters from an American Farmer (1782), Crèvecoeur famously asks, “What, then,

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4 This is the central argument made by Ramachandra Guha in The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya. For another example more closely related to the issue of ideological contest over agrarian life, see Ranajit Guha’s illuminating account of the permanent settlement of Bengal in the eighteenth century, A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement.
is the American, this new man?” (69). As if in answer to this question, he encourages his European reader

to examine how the world is gradually settled, how the howling swamp is converted into a pleasing meadow, the rough ridge into a fine field; and to hear the cheerful whistling, the rural song, where there was no sound heard before, save the yell of the savage, the screech of the owl or the hissing of the snake. Here an European, fatigued with luxury, riches, and pleasures, may find a sweet relaxation in a series of interesting scenes, as affecting as they are new. (87)

Crèvecoeur champions the redemptive capacity of labor. Not only does agricultural labor serve to uproot and displace undesirable members of the ecological community, but it also cultivates a revitalizing “scene.” This scene, which is nothing other than the farm, the farmer’s new home, constitutes the source of a new identity: “The instant I enter on my own land, the bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of independence, exalt my mind. . . . What should we American farmers be without the distinct possession of that soil?” (54; my emphasis). Crèvecoeur’s farm consolidates his Americanness by representing the New World in microcosm.

In *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur offers a prototypical vision of the farmworld: a self-contained ideological space that nourishes and protects his sense of being and belonging. In this sense, the figure of the farm emblematizes the homely metaphysics of landscape that occupied me in chapters 1 and 2. This, however, is only one reason why I have chosen to focus on the trope of the farm in Part Two. Whereas in Part One I was primarily concerned with the understanding the mechanics of homely metaphysics, in Part Two I wish to focus on its fragility. I have already offered a glimpse of this fragility in my reading of D. H. Lawrence’s uncanny New Mexican landscapes. As was evident in the case of Lou Witt’s ranch in *St. Mawr*, even though the land(scape) afforded aesthetic and philosophical pleasures, this kind of idealism broke down quickly in the face of the ranch’s unsettlingly proliferative materiality. As it happens, Lawrence takes Crèvecoeur to task directly in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, chastising his tendency to idealize colonial domestication. Lawrence even seems to relish the biographical irony of *Letters*, which Crèvecoeur
revised in Paris around the same time that his farm, Pine Hill, was burned down during an Indian raid, killing his wife and forcing his children to flee. “H. St. J. de C. tried to put Nature-Sweet-and-Pure in his pocket,” Lawrence writes: “But nature wasn’t having any, she poked her head out and baa-ed” (31). The ideological assurances of the farm belie its instability.

Just as Part Two makes a conceptual turn from landscape as home to landscape as world, it also makes a geographical shift from the American Southwest to southern Africa. This choice may seem especially strange considering the preceding discussion of the farm and its centrality in American history and literature, from Crèvecoeur’s eighteenth-century account of the cultivation of the colonies to early-twentieth-century celebrations of the pioneer mythos such as Cather’s O Pioneers! (1913) and O. E. Rolvaag’s Giants in the Earth (1927). The reasons for making this shift are both historical and literary in nature, and they are more about a difference in degree than a difference in kind. To state the case briefly, the historical and literary farm in southern Africa is much more obviously bound up with the racial politics of settler colonialism than it is in the American example, where this relationship is disguised. As I have already suggested with respect to Crèvecoeur, in the American context the farm represented the New World in microcosm, emblematizing the colonial ethos of freedom and equality. Just as the colonists celebrated the (false) idea that they had “inherited” this ethos without recourse to violence, Crèvecoeur’s symbolic inheritance appears equally innocent: the colonial history of anti-Indian and ecological violence that made farms like Pine Hill possible remained largely invisible in the early American literary-historical record.

This instability continues into the present, a time when there is almost not public recognition that the United States remains a settler colony and even less hope that decolonization will ever

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5 Lawrence’s apparent conflation of nature and the Indians who destroyed the farm becomes especially potent in light of Crèvecoeur’s own shorthand, in which displacing “the yell of the savage” as well as “the screech of the owl” and “the hissing of the snake” was required to consolidate his farm.
happen. Not only would this entail a sea change in the abysmal relationship between the U.S. government and the Tribal Nations, but it would also require a revolution in the complex racial politics that have defined the American nation from the advent of slavery to the contemporary discourse of Black Lives Matter. Recent settler colonial theory reveals the difficulty of such prospects. As Lorenzo Veracini argues, the settler colony is defined by a triangular set of population relations between “settler colonizers,” the “indigenous colonized,” and “non-settler migrants.” A settler colony retains its identity as long as its settlers can manage its indigenous and exogenous populations. For this reason, the settler colonial structure resists hybrid identifications, which, especially when formalized as racial ideologies, “disturb the triangular system of relationships . . . and ultimately reproduce a dual system where two constitutive categories are mixed without being subsumed” (30). This duality defines the colonial form of relation; settler colonialism, however, requires not one but two dialectical counterpoints. Although it could certainly be argued that the United States continues to function (both socially and politically) through European settlers’ management of indigenous and exogenous populations, contemporary American identity politics deeply complicates such a claim. The tendency toward hybridized forms of identity, the disavowal of history, and the urgency of present-day racial tensions all conspire to make the nation’s foundational violence against the Native American populations seem like a distant territorial skirmish. Because of this, America’s settler colonial inheritance remains all but invisible.

In southern Africa, however, the history of settler colonialism is much more visible and remains at the forefront of social, political, and historical consciousness. Particularly in the case of South Africa, where the Apartheid regime was founded on twin problematics known as the “Native

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6 In his recent essay on America’s settler colonial inheritance, Mahmood Mamdani reflects on what it might take for the United States to decolonize. He quotes Felix Cohen, an Indian law specialist who wrote in the period directly following the Holocaust: “The Indian plays much the same role in our American society that the Jews played in Germany. Like the miner’s canary, the Indian marks the shift from fresh air to poison gas in our political atmosphere; and our treatment of Indians . . . reflects the rise and fall in our democratic faith” (qtd. in Mamdani 614).
Question” and the “Land Question,” the fates of black Africans and their relations to both the European minority and the land continue to play out under the auspices of the “New South Africa.” Post-Apartheid politics have embarked on the ambitious yet delicate aim of decolonizing a settler colonial nation.

Unlike in the American context, where the farm typically mythologizes the (European immigrant) farmer’s claim to the American Dream of land, freedom, and equality, in southern Africa the farm plays a much more visibly complex role. From the historical origins of settler colonialism to present-day decolonization, the southern African farm has been a figure for the settler colonial nation, functioning as a crucible for its racial politics. The (European) farm in southern Africa is a microcosm, a world in itself: a farmworld. What is perhaps most crucially important about the farmworld in southern Africa—and especially in European fiction from the region—is that it not only interrogates the founding mythology of the farm/nation but also disrupts those foundations. In contrast to the American context, where the farm continues to prop up a political mythology that effaces its own origins, the southern African farm at once reiterates these origins and radically dismantles them. As I will argue, this is important because it creates an opening for a new form of realism, one that draws our attention to the ecological uncanny and the speculative thinking it inspires.

The rest of this chapter makes a series of surprising twists and turns through various intellectual terrains. What may at first seem like detours will, I hope, ultimately be revealed to the reader as a necessary introduction for the increasingly strange readings that appear in the final three chapters of the dissertation. The following section sketches out the historical and literary genealogies of the farm in southern Africa in greater detail, and the next one offers a more concrete formulation of the farmworld concept through a brief reading of an Afrikaans-language plaasroman, or farm novel, by C. M. van den Heever. Whereas these first sections emphasize the ideological foundations
of the farmworld, the final sections explore the collapse of these foundations. I begin the second half of the chapter with a theoretical discussion of ecological realism and its close relationship to the ecological uncanny. I then discuss the role this new form of realism plays in settler colonial texts before returning to the question of the southern African farm novel. All of this material is meant to provide the necessary literary, historical, and theoretical foundations for the chapters that follow, which explore how three English-language farm novels from across the long twentieth century progressively dismantle the totalizing ideology of the farmworld.

**The European Farm in Southern African History and Literature**

Southern African history has mythologized the farm as the primal scene of white belonging, a sacred site that consolidates and sustains white being. As a symbolic entity, the farm’s racialized ideological burden developed throughout southern Africa’s long history of imperialism, which began, so to speak, with the imposition of a foreign metaphysics of land ownership. When the Dutch first arrived in the region in the seventeenth century and encountered its indigenous inhabitants, they failed to grasp local cosmologies of inhabitation and land tenure. For instance, the colonists viewed the itinerate existence of the Khoisan peoples as a form of pastoralism that rejected all forms of possession. The Europeans’ misunderstanding of San pastoralism made it much easier to imagine the landscape as empty and waiting to be claimed by the plow. According to San metaphysics, however, the land represented what archaeologist Sven Ouzman describes as “a vast network of relations and obligations between people, animals, places, [and] spirits” (qtd. in Spillman 175). Far from being empty, the environments inhabited by the San were teeming with life and populated by ancestral spirits that took various forms, such as wind, rain, and stars as well as flora and fauna. Understanding these relations provided the San with a strange kind of “title-deed” that confounded the European conception of individual ownership: “the land or network of relations
was believed to own *them*” (175; my emphasis). It was for this reason that, among the San, land could not be “owned” in the European sense; instead, individuals “retain[ed], through birth, marriage, and residence, rights to special access to particular territories” (Barnard 242). As a matter of “special access” rather than exclusive use, individuals lacked the one right that was crucial for the narrower European definition of possession: the right of alienation.

When the Dutch began to settle at the Cape, they did so with very a different idea about land tenure, one that privileged the long-term settlement of individuals in the service of agricultural production. If the Khoisan system of land tenure was founded on a notion of special access defined by a certain metaphysics of belonging, the Dutch system was founded on a notion of possession defined by the metaphysics of natural right. According to this metaphysics, human labor established the claim of sovereignty over a particular territory. Locke authorizes the doctrine of natural right in the second of his *Two Treatises of Government*, where he insists that, by way of divine covenant, “Man” has property through his labor: “And hence subduing or cultivating the Earth, and having Dominion, we see are joined together. The one gave Title to the other. So that God, by commanding to subdue, gave Authority so far to *appropriate*. And the Condition of Human Life, which requires Labour and Materials to work on, necessarily introduces *private possessions*” (292, §35). Labor therefore endows land with metaphysical value in the same way it does for the commodity in capitalism. As in Marx’s value-form theory, the true value of the Lockean farm does not reside in its materiality, which is essentially “contentless” (*inhaltlos*).⁷ Instead, as a kind of commodity, the Lockean farm accrues a more important form of value through a more ineffable form of content (*Gehalt*). Marx describes this kind of content as a crystallized residue that renders a commodity exchangeable, alienable. This residue is invisible, such that “neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of assistance.” Marx insists, instead, that “The power of abstraction must replace both”

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⁷ This is what Marx called “use-value”—the “content of wealth” (*Inhalt des Reichtums*) that only had value in consumption (Marx 126).
(90). Only by abstraction can we understand how labor generates the exchange-value of the Lockean farm; it lies not in the physical realm, but in the more-than-physical (übertatürlich) one.8

As a conceptual entity, the European farm in southern Africa marries this Lockean—and hence capitalist—metaphysics with what I have been calling the homely metaphysics of landscape, which gathers mere surroundings into “felicitous space”: a home. This homely metaphysics has a parallel and equally long history in southern Africa that reaches back to the initial moments of Dutch settlement. Soon after establishing a refreshment station at Table Bay in 1652 for ships passing between Europe and India, the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, or Dutch East India Company, released a small number of its servants to become full-time boere, or farmers. These farmers were responsible for stocking the station with fresh produce. However, between the fickle climate and cattle raids perpetrated by malcontent groups of indigenous neighbors whose livelihoods had been disrupted by European settlement, these boere only barely eked out a living. Upset with their precarious position on the frontier, these farmers approached Cape Commander Jan van Riebeeck seeking better payment for their annual wheat harvests. But the Company, which continued to see the “free burghers” as servants, refused to offer more than the bare minimum required for survival. Van Riebeeck managed to relieve the brewing tensions, but he realized that more was at stake than the price of wheat. As he wrote in his diary in December 1658, the burghers “would like to be their own masters and overrule the lawful authorities placed over them” (qtd. in Giliomee 2).

As Hermann Giliomee indicates in his “biography” of the Afrikaners, these early tensions foreshadowed South Africa’s long and vexed history of settlement. Many of the conflicts that would

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8 Curiously, in the early twentieth century the Afrikaner nationalist imaginary will reframe the right of alienation as an illegitimate form of land transfer (see Wenzel 94). The capitalist metaphysics that transmutes labor into value does not, according to this view, render land readily exchangeable. To treat land like an alienable commodity denies natural right, which requires the “buyer” to inscribe the land with his own labor. Hence the importance of lineal inheritance, in which labor value is accumulative within a single family.
erupt in the Cape in the ensuing decades, and indeed much of the expansion in the coming centuries, would play out in the midst of the Afrikaners’ search for greater autonomy and sustainability in their agricultural endeavors. For instance, following the gruesome Frontier Wars (1770–1812), the insecurity of farms on the Zuurveld gave rise to a number of emigrations from the colonial territory in the nineteenth century. Most famous among these departures was that of the Great Trek, or Great Trek, by a group of people who would later be known as the Voortrekkers. Emigrating throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Voortrekkers emphasized political grievances having to do with a lack of land, labor, and security. With farm life under threat from dangers both external (e.g., Khoisan and Xhosa raids) and internal (e.g., poor governance), as well as a growing sense of marginalization from British colonial culture, which increasingly framed the Boers as culturally backward brutes, the Voortrekkers left in search of a stronger, more stable connection to the land (Giliomee 130–60). In the midst of these settlements, conflicts, emigrations, and resettlements, the farm became for the Afrikaner an elusive historical and cultural fetish object: universally contested, fought over, and hence in need of ideological protection (i.e., mythologization) as much as physical defense. In the Afrikaner imaginary, then, the farm comes to represent a place that secures an otherwise troubled sense of belonging; it becomes a sacred site that disavows a history of violent displacement by imaginatively transforming “empty space” into a home—a complete, self-enclosed world that sustains Afrikaner being.

Elsewhere in southern Africa—and particularly in the British settler colony of Southern Rhodesia—farming had a different, though similarly powerful lure for Europeans. After the turn of the twentieth century, and following the acquisition of the territories south of the Zambezi River and north of the Transvaal by Cecil Rhodes and his British South Africa Company, Southern Rhodesia became something of a Promised Land for British subjects who felt worn down by life in England. The colony was advertised at the British Empire Exhibition as a land of plenty, replete
with large and inexpensive tracts of land where even novice farmers could “Get Rich on Maize.” Such promises piqued the interest of disaffected men in search of adventure, independence, and economic advancement. Doris Lessing describes her own father, Captain Alfred Tayler, as one such man who saw his home nation “as a country that had betrayed its promises to its people, as cynical, as corrupt” (*Under My Skin* 36). Along with many others, Captain Tayler uprooted his family and moved to southern Africa.

In truth, the situation in Southern Rhodesia proved more complicated than the colonial image of a Land of Plenty suggested. Much of this complication stemmed from the false narrative on which the colony was founded—that is, that the Europeans had been forced to act in order to save the peace-loving Shona farmers from the aggression of their warrior neighbors, the Ndebele. Imperial acquisition was thus framed as a protective measure that would, ostensibly, ensure the future prosperity of the new colony’s indigenous agriculturalists. The British alignment with the Shona makes sense insofar as the Shona land tenure ethos and work ethic appeared to match the Old World ideals of husbandry, which remained important to the settler imaginary that the colonial government used to promote Southern Rhodesia as the ideal place for noble (and profitable) agricultural pursuits. According to Lawrence Vambe, the Shona had already formed something of a viable peasantry before the arrival of the British South Africa Company. For example, he writes at length of the prosperous time of the Mutapa Empire, which lasted from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-eighteenth century:

There is no doubt that the growing of food was one of the greatest achievements of the Shona society of that day. Having the peace, the time and the social structure conducive to

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9 In his revision of this narrative, Shona historian Lawrence Vambe rejects the notion that the Shona were under Ndebele rule. He argues that this lie was in fact perpetuated by the Shona ruler Lobengula, who was as much a self-interested power seeker as Rhodes. According to Vambe, Lobengula fabricated this lie in the hopes of using the Europeans to expand his power and influence in the region. In talks with Rhodes he exaggerated his authority, claiming himself to be the ruler of all Zambesia, a massive precolonial region stretching from Lake Tanganyika in the north to the Limpopo River in the south and from the east coast to the west in a wide band where the river systems all drain into the Zambezi River. Of course, Lobelgula’s boasts eventually backfired: the Rhodesian leadership did not grant him greater authority, and his own constituency turned against him.
the production of food, they developed a remarkably advanced system of agriculture. . . . As time went on, the VaShawasha people and their kindred tribesmen came to measure a man’s worth and standing in society on the basis of his husbandry and industry, as proved by his harvests rather than his boasts, his cunning or physical strength. Thus among the pillars of any Shona tribal grouping were people called *burudza*. This title, both in the singular and the plural, means an agricultural baron or barons, and was given to individuals who proved themselves to be hard-working, productive farmers. . . . A *burudza*, in this context, was a man not only of sustained and conscientious industry. He was also a man of wisdom, of value to the people of Zimbabwe. He was well connected socially and accordingly played an influential role in all Shona tribal and national affairs. (42–43)

Terence Ranger notes that such *burudza* also enjoyed the favor of the traditional spirit mediums, such that “productive farming went hand in hand with veneration of the spirits” (*Peasant Consciousness* 44–45). Clearly, the successful farmer held a place of privilege in Shona society. Nor did the initial arrival of the British drastically change this state of affairs. Ranger reports that, in the Shona district of Makoni, oral testimony concerning the period between the 1890s and the 1920s “still refers to but does not passionately resent the loss of land to whites. The reason . . . is that despite very extensive land alienation it was possible in this period to create a viable peasant economy” (46). Many Shona peasants remained on European land and could market their produce, and the Reserve lands that had been established by the colonial government still had enough productive soil for indigenous agriculture. Eventually, however, the success and relative independence of the Shona peasantry began to cause problems for European settlers, who found no readily available labor for their own farms. In 1930 the colonial administration passed the Land Apportionment Act, which barred Africans from owning non-Reserve lands except in very special cases. A series of Maize Control acts also attempted to curb peasant profits. Nevertheless, ingenious peasant farmers continued to find ways to benefit from loopholes in these acts, and European farmers grew jealous. By 1935, as J. A. Edwards has indicated, British settlement in Southern Rhodesia “carried the mark of disappointment,” with the majority of white Rhodesians retreating to the less inhospitable Highveld territory. “By the middle of the thirties the settler knew without a shadow of a doubt that his community would always remain small, a minority living among masses of Africans. It was this
fearsome truth that gave the ideal of survival such desperate strength” (qtd. in Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness* 66).

It was during this period of desperation—the very same time when Doris Lessing’s family worked its 1,000-acre plot some 55 miles outside of Salisbury (now Harare)—that the European farm in Southern Rhodesia underwent its own mythologization. Unlike in the South African example where the European farm grounds a claim of natural right, in the Southern Rhodesian context the European farm grounds a narrative of ecological salvation. In south-central Africa, the 1930s witnessed a significant shift in perceptions about conservation, moving from a concern with European cultivation as a source of erosion to the demonization of African agriculture as the cause of degradation. By the end of the 1930s, the colonial administration came to see African Reserves as sites of a full-blown ecological crisis, a perception that would escalate tensions between the British and the Shona throughout the 1940s. Whereas the African peasants understood the problem of the Reserves as a crisis created by low crop prices and the enforced divergence of labor into government conservation work, the colonial administration saw the crisis in terms of the Africans’ methods of cultivation, which had supposedly exhausted the soil’s productivity. The British position was hypocritical, for in previous decades it had been the work of colonial agricultural demonstrators to coerce the African peasantry to abandon traditional cultivation methods and adopt more intensive methods made possible by the plow. Terence Ranger summarizes the irony: “Recently the heroes of progress, converts to the ‘gospel of the plough,’ they now figured as destroyers of the environment” (*Peasant Consciousness* 69). In contrast to the destructiveness of the African farmer, then, the European farmer became an agent of conservation. In a strange parody of Cecil Rhodes’s founding myth, in which the Europeans were forced to save the Shona from their warring neighbors, further

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10 This is a fundamental trope in African environmental history, which has amply documented the centrality of ecological discourse (e.g., preservationism, conservationism) in the demonization of African agricultural practices as well as in relation to the colonial alienation of land. For a particularly excellent study, see Roderick P. Neumann’s *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa*. 

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land alienation came to be founded on the myth that the soil needed to be saved from the agricultural violence of African farmers. In Southern Rhodesia, then, the European farm legitimized the settler’s claim to the land by becoming a space of ecological salvation.

Literature in southern Africa deeply engages with the figure of the European farm, by turns contributing to and challenging these histories and their attendant ideologies. Literary interest in the farm has generated two complexly interrelated traditions of “farm novels” that span the last 150 years of southern African letters. This literary legacy begins with the 1883 publication of Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*, a profoundly anti-pastoral novel that concerns itself as much with European moral philosophy and gender politics as it does with the haunting strangeness of its African setting. The publication of *African Farm* was followed by other lesser-known nineteenth-century English farm novels by writers such as Mary Ann Carey-Hobson and Anna Howarth.11 Reversing the dark and tortured ethos of Schreiner’s Karoo farm, Afrikaans-language *plaasromane* by iconic writers such as Jochem van Bruggen, Daniel François Malherbe, and C. M. van den Heever emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. These novels sought to remake the farm into a literary figure that mythologized the (male) Afrikaner farmer and naturalized his place in the South African landscape.12 These *plaasromane* were written at the height of Afrikaner nationalism and promoted an ideology consonant not only with the future Apartheid regime, but also with the *Blut und Boden* politics enshrined in German *Bauernromane* of the same period (Coetzee, “Farm Novel” 15). In the later twentieth century, new strains of farm novels emerged to critique these literary forebears. Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Afrikaans-language novelists such as André Brink, Etienne Leroux, André Letoit, and Etienne van den Heerden penned revisionist *plaasromane* in the postmodern mode that attacked and satirized the ideological foundations of the Afrikaner farm

11 See Mary Ann Carey-Hobson’s *The Farm in the Karoo* (1883) as well as Anna Howarth’s *Jan, an Afrikander* (1897) and *Katrina, a Tale of the Karoo* (1898).
12 See, for example, Jochem van Bruggen’s *Aampie* trilogy (1924–1942), Daniel François Malherbe’s *Die Meulenaar* (1926), and C. M. van den Heever’s *Laat Vrugte* (1939).
imaginary. During this same period, writers such as Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee published English-language farm novels (1974’s *The Conservationist* and 1977’s *In the Heart of the Country*, respectively) in the modernist mode that also sought to disrupt the history and ideology of white land ownership in South Africa. Both of these traditions have survived into the post-Apartheid era, where Afrikaans novels like Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat* (2004) as well as English novels like Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) continue to deploy the farm as a central figure animating debates about land ownership and racial politics in the “New” South Africa.

Far from seeking to rewrite the literary history of the farm in southern African letters, the second part of this dissertation has the much humbler goal of tracing a single curious motif through a number of English-language farm novels. What previous literary criticism has typically identified as a strain of anti-pastoralism, I wish to read as a more obscure, more radically disruptive mode. The nature of that mode will become clear in the final section of this chapter. However, as this mode turns on the trope of the farmworld, I must first show just how this trope functions in southern African fiction.

**The Farmworld in the *Plaasroman***

As I have defined it, the farmworld enshrines the farm as a self-enclosed space, a world in itself that remains mystically separate from its surrounding environs. This recalls Mircea Eliade’s understanding of the sacred, which I discussed in chapter 2. According to Eliade, any act of settlement also functions as an act of consecration, a symbolic re-founding of the world in

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13 See, for example, André Brink’s *Houd-en-Bek* (1982; translated as *Chain of Voices*); Etienne Leroux’s *Sewe dae by die Silbersteins* (1962; translated as *Seven Days at the Silbersteins* and collected as part of a trilogy in *To a Dubious Salvation* in 1972); André Letoit’s *Somer II: ’n Plakboek* (1985); and Etienne van Heerden’s *Toorberg* (1986; translated as *Ancestral Voices*).

14 For excellent examples of other literary histories, see in particular J. M. Coetzee’s important essay, “Farm Novel and *Plaasroman* in South Africa,” as well as Nicole Devarenne’s “Nationalism and the Farm Novel in South Africa, 1883–2004,” Gerrit Olivier’s “The Dertigers and the *Plaasroman*: Two Brief Perspectives on Afrikaans Literature,” Caroline Rooney’s “Narratives of Southern African Farms,” and Jean Marquard’s “The Farm: A Concept in the Writing of Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith, Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer and Bessie Head.”
microcosm. Likewise, the European farm in southern Africa becomes a symbol of “smallness in the midst of vastness” (Coetzee, “Farm Novel” 2). The tendency of the southern African farm novel to imagine the farm as a self-contained world emerges as a counter to external threats. As a protective enclosure, the farm ensures the well-being of its inhabitants and promises longevity for the ideological structures that sustain them. It becomes a static realm of cultural reproduction that, over time, enables the fabrication of a primordial myth of origins. The metaphysics of natural right transforms history into mythology, newly settled land into ancestral soil.

Relatively unchallenged versions of this farmworld ideology have occasionally appeared in English-language farm novels. For instance, Pauline Smith’s 1925 short story collection The Little Karoo and her 1926 novel The Beadle are both set on a quintessentially pastoral farm appropriately named “Harmonie.” Harmonie represents one farm within the wider Aangenaam (“Pleasant”) community, which in turn is nestled in a valley in the Little Karoo. As Coetzee points out, this Edenic, womb-like enclosure preserves a rural order of patriarchal feudalism against the incursions of modern capitalism (“Farm Novel” 6). However, more than simply preserving a particular mode of production, Smith’s farm rehearses the pastoral as the figure of her own displacement from South Africa. At the age of 13 she was sent to Scotland for boarding school, and for the rest of her life she remained in England, though she made several extended visits to the place where she grew up. As Smith describes in the short autobiographical essay, “How and Why I Became an Author,” when she began to write following the death of her father, who had remained in South Africa, she did so “to set down for my own comfort the memories of these happier days” (Haresnape 151). Smith’s farm therefore gives form to a certain nostalgia for the Karoo from within her own situated Englishness.15

15 Myrtle Hooper has offered several more nuanced readings of Pauline Smith’s work, arguing that Smith engages complexly with Afrikaner life and religion in ways that are “epistemologically loaded” for both her characters and her readers. Hooper looks to Smith’s use of Afrikaans-inflected English as well as her narrative strategies as a way of resisting received readings (i.e., Coetzee’s reading) of Smith’s politics. She rejects such political interpretations through an emphasis on craft, insisting that Smith’s artistic abilities override the power of her nostalgia. Whereas Hooper’s work
Bessie Head’s novels *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) and *A Question of Power* (1973) offer similarly idyllic visions of agricultural life in southern Africa. Both of these novels take place within farming utopias in rural Botswana that gather imagined communities of refugees. The earlier novel focuses on life in Golema Mmidi, a village whose name means “to grow crops” (28) and which “consisted of individuals who had fled there to escape the tragedies of life” (16). Among these refugees is the protagonist, Makhaya, who has fled the violent racial politics of Apartheid in South Africa, crossed the barbed-wire border to Botswana, and settled in this farming haven where local farming methods and modern scientific methods collaborate to inspire communal uplift. The later novel follows the cross-border escape of another protagonist, Elizabeth, the product of an illegitimate (and illegal) union between a white mother and a black father. Finding herself homeless and without a solid identity in Botswana, Elizabeth slips between hallucinations and reality as she recovers in Motabeng, or “the place of sand” (19). Here she takes part in a youth development group where work in a community garden eventually helps alleviate her nervous condition. Though each place has its own specific gender, ethnic, and racial politics, Golema Mmidi and Motabeng both provide semi-utopian havens that offer protective enclosures for southern Africa’s outcasts.¹⁶

In spite of these examples, both of which are more complex than I am able to let on here, it is not the English-language farm novel that most fully emblematizes the utopian ideology of the farmworld. Rather, it is the Afrikaans *plaasroman* of the 1920s and 1930s that formalizes the

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¹⁶ In an interesting essay, Neil Lazarus at once critiques and affirms the reading of Bessie Head’s work as utopian. Situating her work within the debate between naturalism and realism in African fiction, Lazarus asks whether “the discourse of naturalism in African literature [can] be theorized in Lukácsian terms as a degraded form, one whose effective politicity emerges as contrary to its radical intent” (341). His response is that naturalism in African fiction often does not simply reflect bleak and therefore unalterable circumstances, but rather portends a “spectral promise of insurrection” and, in doing so, poses a radical challenge of “the totalizing, rationalistic progressivism” that realism represents in Lukács as well as in the socialist realism of Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo’s *Petals of Blood* (342). For this reason, Lazarus claims that Head’s naturalism is significant in that, “although it refuses to relinquish its radicalism, its commitment to a transindividual utopia, it is resolutely opposed to the totalizing collectivities affirmed by realism” (343).
farmworld ideology most fully by giving it a nuanced narratological role. In these novels, not only does the fantasy of enclosure imaginatively protect the Afrikaner farmer from natural disasters (drought, flooding, fires) and economic collapse (under the burden of accruing debt) that threaten to destroy the farm, but this fantasy also seeks to secure the lineage of landownership and hence to safeguard the myth of the farmer as a *natuurmens* (natural man) whose being and belonging are sacredly bound up with the land.

In *White Writing*, J. M. Coetzee notes that the development of the *plaasroman* was coterminous with the emergence of a class of farmers rendered landless due to drought and economic depression. The *plaasroman* gave voice to this difficult time by developing a number of recurring themes, such as the problem of inheritance with limited land, the avarice of land speculators, the migration of dispossessed Afrikaner to the cities in search of labor, and the threat of metropolitan values. During an era when men expected to succeed as independent landowners, it is unsurprising that contemporary Afrikaner writers sought to dignify the disaster by claiming for the old dispensation an antiquity losing itself in the mists of time. . . . Thus we find the ancestors hagiographized as men and women of heroic strength, fortitude, and faith, and instituted as the originators of lineages. . . . The farms they carved out of the wilds, out of primal, inchoate matter, become the seats to which their lineages are mystically bound, so that the loss of a farm assumes the scale of the fall of an ancient house, the end of a dynasty. (83)

The myth of the farm as a dynastic seat naturalizes white sovereignty by appropriating a metaphysics in which patriarchal lineage is paramount. According to the terms of this myth, in which “it is in some sense sacrilegious to sell an ancestral farm,” Coetzee asks whether “it is also sacrilegious to buy a farm in whose soil the ancestor of another man lie buried” (85). To this question—ironic given the dubious nature of the Afrikaners’ original “purchase” of these lands—Coetzee responds that the only way to secure legitimacy through purchase is to invoke a Lockean metaphysics of landownership; that is, “one establishes one’s ownership by signing the land with one’s imprint as one signs a legal document with one’s mark—a process that may take a lifetime” (85).
Perhaps no body of work captures the ethos of the *plaasroman* better than that of Christiaan Maurits van den Heever. A prolific novelist and a poet, Van den Heever is best known for his farm novel *Somer* (1935), which raced through sixteen print runs by 1951. Like other of his *plaasromane*, *Somer* expresses deep anxieties about landlessness, impoverishment, and dispossession—anxieties that his novels frequently associate with the rapacity of land speculators and the moral corruption of city dwellers. As a foil to these dangers, the farm represents the romantic centerpiece of the Afrikaner’s rural lifestyle. However, the farm’s symbolic charge in these narratives tends to emerge through negative circumstances. In the prototypical Van den Heever novel, the farmer only realizes his mystical bond to the land when it’s too late. An accumulation of threats provides the preconditions for an epiphany in which “for the first time the farm appears to the farmer in the glory of its full meaning, and for the first time the farmer fully knows himself” (Coetzee, *White Writing* 88). Unlike his prototypical *plaasroman*, however, *Somer* is more optimistic in that it never fully thwarts the relationship between farm and farmer. Nevertheless, even without the epiphanic moment described by Coetzee, *Somer* employs other narrative strategies that consolidate the farm as a self-contained world. Specifically, the novel introduces a number of natural and anthropogenic forces that threaten the farm from “outside,” thereby rendering the farm as an enclosed, monad-like entity. In moments when dangers come into the foreground, the novel retreats into idyllic landscape imagery. The invocation of landscape offers symbolic recompense that asserts more than just the farmer’s natural right to the land, established by generations of labor; indeed, it also instigates the homely metaphysics that cathects the land into the farmer’s own particular beloved place. In this light, it seems significant that T. J. Haarhoff’s English rendering translates the title not as “Summer,” but as “Harvest Home.”

*Somer* centers on a tract of family farmland that has been divided between two sons, Frans and Tom. Frans’ farm, Driefontein, is on the brink of financial ruin. Over the years, and as a result
of persistent bad luck, Frans has amassed considerable debt from the Land Bank. In the novel's present time, Driefontein falls prey to a freak thunderstorm that obliterates the majority of its crop while leaving neighboring lands untouched. Frans faces bankruptcy in the storm’s wake, a disaster that puts him face to face with the callousness of Nature. Frans (along with the novel itself) casts Nature as antipathetic to the farm, an obscure force bent on its destruction. Not only does Frans frequently invoke “the fatal power of the earth beneath them” (71), but he also repeatedly exclaims that “old Mother Nature was against me” (89; see also 96 and 121) whenever misfortune befalls him. *Some* consistently pits Nature against the farmer and, by extension, his farm. In this sense, the novel figures the farm as being outside of Nature, a separate entity that must be protected from the latter’s amorality and arbitrary danger.

If the farm must be protected from Nature, it must also be secured against human threats, which the novel represents through two related motifs. First is the motif of the shrinking farm, which speaks to historical anxieties about land shortages. Lacking the finances and space required to expand the family’s holdings, farmers had to subdivide their farms to provide plots for their male heirs. As generations passed and farms became smaller, farmers faced diminishing returns and eventual dispossession, which the novel equates with suffocation and death: “Farms get smaller. I tremble to think of my children’s future. We must stick to our lands, such as they are; once we lose them, we’re driven to Johannesburg or one of those places. And once you’re on the mines, you’ve got phthisis before you know it—your chest whistles as you struggle for breath. Dig ourselves in here—that’s all we can do” (11). The only way for the farmer to sustain his livelihood, his very being, is to root himself ever more firmly. Yet this need for rooting is challenged by the novel’s second motif, in which the ground itself is figured as unstable. As Frans complains to Tom: “What discourages me so, is that it seems impossible to make a stand—the ground slips clean away under your feet” (82; see also 63). This anxiety about the farm slipping out from under him relates to the
very real threat posed by the Land Bank, which could seize Driefontein at any moment on account of Frans’s failure to pay off his piling debt. It also speaks to the conflict in the novel between Tom and a greedy neighbor, Faan, who plans to purchase Driefontein in the event of bankruptcy.

Even as these threats directly challenge the stability of landownership, they also endow the farm with a sense of unity. Whenever such threats arise in the novel, the narrative retreats into the idyllic language of landscape. This gestures further to the optimism of Somer, which the English-language rendering frames not as a novel but as “an Afrikaans idyll.” For a more specific example, take the scene when Oom Faan taunts Tom with his plans to purchase Driefontein. Faced with Faan’s greed, Tom’s thoughts turn to the twin subjects of landscape and genealogy:

\[W\]hile his enraged neighbour stalks away, Oom Tom’s fury cools. . . . He is just as weak as Faan. But that the man could taunt him so mercilessly . . . Driefontein in his hands, Driefontein that since the Voortrek has belonged to the same family! His eye wanders over the surroundings, he sees the dark-green garden, the ridges quivering in the heat, the land where three generations of his family has [sic] toiled so hard . . . “Even if I ruin myself,” he mutters, “I must help Frans to keep his land—the farm must remain in our hands.” (100–1)

Faced with the dissolution of farm and family, Tom’s appeal to the natural features of the land and his invocation of what Coetzee calls “lineal consciousness” plays a compensatory, comforting role. And yet, the imperative thrust of his repeated use of “must” intimates a sense of desperation. It also admits a certain frailty in the idea of the farm’s unity. Once again the novel figures the collapse of Driefontein as tantamount to death. Tom must risk his own ruin to preserve the land and his kin—the unity of both entities depends on it. Hence, while contemplating his brother and the generations of forebears going back to the Voortrek (in reality less than a century had passed), Tom gathers the farm into his visual field and channels the worlding power of landscape.

Landscape idylls appear frequently in the novel, and not always in direct relation to threat. Indeed, Somer also links landscape to “Nature’s unified beauty” (18) in moments that romanticize the farm and the farmer’s labor. This romantic tendency embodies the ideology of the South African

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17 “Oom” means “uncle” in Afrikaans, but it is also used as a title for male peers.
pastoral, which needed to portray labor to stave off critiques of sloth, and it needed that labor to be "white" to stave off critiques of colonialism. Somer's third chapter, which tells of the corn harvest on Tom's farm, upholds this pastoral iconography by gendering the relationship between the white male farmer and a feminized land:

Before [the laborers] lies the yellow corn-field, caressed by the soft compulsion of the morning-breeze. A ripple passes over the surface, the ears bow in stately fashion and are still; there is a whispering in the stalks, a whisper of corn-maturing summer, of mother-earth rejoicing in her fruits, bringing a restful joy to the hearts of the harvesters, inviting them to the task. (17)

The harvest ritual places farmer and farm into a clearly gendered relation of mutual attraction: the male presides over the farm, which embodies the inviting warmth of "mother-earth" as opposed to the cold callousness of "old Mother Nature." The land lies subjugated, spread beneath the farmer's gaze. The narrative perspective aligns this patriarchal gaze with the morning breeze, the "soft compulsion" of which caresses the corn stalks into "stately" bows of subservience. The welcoming earth-mother figure invoked here derives in part from Old World European thinking about husbandry, which I have discussed above. This is one topic that brings the southern African and colonial American agricultural imaginaries into conversation. In her study The Lay of the Land, an ecofeminist psychohistory of the pastoral impulse in male American literature, Annette Kolodny describes "America's oldest and most cherished fantasy" as "a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction" (4; my emphasis). In the context of the South African boer, the kind of gendered imagery critiqued by Kolodny also derives from the idea of the volksmoeder, or "mother of the nation." As an important figure in Afrikaner

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18 See Coetzee, White Writing, "Introduction."

19 Kolodny also argues that a feminized landscape also implies male possession: "the total female matrix of attraction and satisfaction offers not only protection and nurture, but also arouses sexuality and desire for exclusive possession" (58).
nationalism, the image of the volksmoeder embodies the spirit of virtue and self-sacrifice, much like Van den Heever’s anthropomorphized cornstalks. Allegorically, the volksmoeder trope casts the farm as a microcosm of the Afrikaner nation, a gesture that contributes to Afrikanerdom’s rural myth of origins. However, this invocation also endows the farm with a more “housewifely” sensibility, subjected to the power of the farmer who is traditionally said to be “married” to his land, and whose metaphorical matrimony with the farm is consecrated, above all, by the harvest ritual. Whether understood as the “mother of the nation” or the more rustic “farmer’s wife” (boervrou), the association between farm and volksmoeder renders the farmer’s land a warm, womblike enclosure that protects its inhabitants from the harshness of “Mother Nature” bellowing beyond its borders.

As Somer’s third chapter continues, the narrative adopts Oom Tom’s perspective as he presides over the corn harvest. Tom tracks the progression of the sun and searches the skies for inclement weather. In these moments, when the narrative takes on the farmer’s gaze and, by extension, his concern for the farm, landscape imagery plays a key role in imaginatively managing the progress of the harvest. When looking for the sun, for instance, the narrator takes note of distant rain: “The East has now become dark red, with thin lines of gleaming light along the edges of the hills” (18). When looking to the west where “thunder-clouds appear”—the very thunderclouds that harbor his brother’s coming misfortune—the landscape description becomes more detailed, signaling the farmer’s increased concentration: “At first the downy points are just visible beyond the quivering mistiness; then, the white curves swell out, column on column, until the snow beacons majestically fill the horizon and serenely dominate the spacious veld” (19).

Tom’s close attention to the shape, texture, and movement of the towering cumulonimbus columns approaching from the west offers a clear reprisal of Heidegger’s farmer, who constitutes

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20 Marlene van Niekerk writes that the volksmoeder mythos embodies a number of particular characteristics including “a sense of religion, bravery, a love of freedom, the spirit of sacrifice, self-reliance, housewifeliness, integrity, virtue and the setting of an example to others” (“Afrikaner Woman and her ‘Prison’ ” 147).
the *Weltlichkeit*, or “worldliness,” of his farm through his concern about the south wind. Although Van den Heever’s novel cannot be said to recapitulate the Heideggerian example in any straightforward way, in an abstract sense the comparison does help draw together my basic point about this novel. In *Somer*, as in other *plaasromane* of the same period, the invocation of landscape imagery—whether in response to external threats to the farm (e.g. storms, land speculators, debt) or to romanticize the rural lifestyle the farm sustains—renders the farm a totalizing metaphor, a microcosm to which the farmer is bound in a relationship that is at once biological and existential, mythical and ontological. The farm becomes a *farmworld*: a homely site that guarantees the farmer’s sovereign sense of belonging and secures his deepest sense of being-in-the-world.

**The Ecological Uncanny and Ecological Realism**

So much for the basic structure of the farmworld. Yet for all of its ideological reinforcement, the farmworld remains feeble. And indeed, as with Lou Witt’s ranch in *St. Maur*, the idealism of the farmworld construct is dangerous. In the remainder of this chapter—and indeed the remainder of Part Two—I want to turn from the homely constitution of the farmworld to its dismantling. This latter project has been underway within Afrikaans literature since the 1960s, when revisionist *plaasromane* began to work against the imaginary set up by their literary forebears. In contrast to the idyllic pastoralism embodied by earlier novels, these revisionist *plaasromane* share a tendency to deploy anti-pastoral tactics meant to undermine an inherited ideology. André Letoit, for instance, penned a postmodern send-up of Van den Heever in his 1985 novel *Somer II*. According to Nicole Devarenne, Letoit’s novel “sets out to be a thorn in Van den Heever’s side” by introducing a potty-mouthed narrator who “soils the original *Somer*’s idylls with his grimy internal tableaux, his maudlin fantasies of self-annihilation, and his characterization of Van den Heever’s beloved *taal* [language] as a ‘whore’ ” (636). In contrast to the totalizing metaphor of the farmworld in *Somer,*
Letoit’s misbegotten sequel “proposes schizophrenia and fragmentation as an appropriate response to living in South Africa” (636). In addition to Letoit’s schizophrenic aesthetics, other Afrikaner writers have sought to dismantle the figure of the farm through similarly postmodern methods. Etienne Leroux’s *Seven Days at the Silbersteins* (1964) presents a surrealist satire that reduces the farm to a bizarre backdrop, whereas Etienne van Heerden’s much later *Kikuyu* (1999) uses metafictional experimentation to explore wider sociopolitical issues that overshadow the protagonist’s identity struggles on his parents’ Karoo farm.

Instead of truly undermining the ideology of Afrikaner pastoralism, the anti-pastoralism of these novels at most affects a shift in tone; that is, it satirizes, bastardizes, and makes a mockery, but it does not necessarily pose a radical challenge to the farmworld or the homely metaphysics that sustains it. As will become clear, this is because their anti-pastoralism focuses solely on the level of (human) politics and (human) history. Unlike Lou Witt, these novels don’t pay homage to the “unseen presences” that implicitly challenge human sovereignty.

One late-twentieth-century *plaasroman* that takes a slightly different approach to the dismantling of the farmworld is André Brink’s 1982 novel *Houd-den-Bek*, translated as *A Chain of Voices*. The polyphonic narrative structure of Brink’s novel erodes any sense of a stable Afrikaner

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21 For an alternative reading that interprets Leroux’s novel as reinforcing Afrikaner nationalism, see Vivian Sheer’s essay “Etienne Leroux’s *Sewe Dae by die Silbersteins*: A Reexamination in the Light of its Historical Context.”

22 Unfortunately, it is outside the scope of this project to engage closely with black southern African writers, and particularly with those whose writing who could be placed in conversation with white writers’ preoccupation with farms. For example, works such as “Farmer and Servant” by H. I. E. Dhlomo, *Bones* by Chenjerai Hove, and *Time of the Butcherbird* by Alex La Guma all address the figure of the European farm in southern Africa, and yet all of them also circumvent the topos of the farm as a metaphysical unity. Dhlomo’s short story, for instance, begins with a group of black Africans traveling from Nyasaland. Before they can escape the Transvaal, however, they are captured and relocated to an Afrikaner farm. Whereas the story’s first section presents a narrative of enslavement, its second section offers a miniature *plaasroman*, complete with a historico-mythological account of white farmer and the “pastoral symphony” of his highland property. When World War I breaks out, “Excitement and events [conspire] to disorganise the farm” (459). One of the original fugitives escapes the farm and becomes a great war hero in North Africa, humiliating his white rival—the farmer’s son—in the process. In “Farmers and Servants,” the farm does not have the same metaphysical gravitas as it does in white farm novels. Dhlomo certainly satirizes the farmworld trope, but his story swiftly moves beyond the confines of the European farm. Indeed, Dhlomo’s narrative does not need to overemphasize the farm as a sign of possession and belonging because his black African protagonists are not anxious about legitimizing their presence.
settlement in ways that at once encompass and transcend the political injustices of displacement and enslavement. Set during a slave uprising in 1825, the novel links together a diverse range of voices, from Boers and their wives to slave laborers on Afrikaner farms to the quasi-independent Khoisan who live and work among the slaves. This structure allows Brink to establish a narrative counterpoint that places white and black South African voices in tension. For instance, in contrast to the biblical language the Boer farmers use to resist British laws impinging on their authority and to support their lineal claim to the land, characters like the San matriarch Ma-Rose produce competing mythologies that displace the language of Genesis and re-place black Africans at the center of legitimacy: “In the beginning there was nothing but stone” (125). Importantly, Ma-Rose’s language is as much geological as it is mythic; it points at once to ecological precariousness and to the ideological frailty of the European farms:

There is a settled look about the string of farms with their houses and outbuilding and kraals, . . . but don’t be fooled by that. One single great gust of wind and it’s all gone as if it’s never been here. The White people, the Honkhoikwa, the Smooth-haired ones, are still strangers to this part. They still bear in them the fear of their fathers who died on the pains or in the forbidding mountains. They do not understand yet. They have not yet become stone and rock embedded in the earth and born from it again and again like the Khoikhoin. One doesn’t belong before one’s body is shaped from the dust of one’s ancestors. (24–25)

Ma-Rose’s prophecy courts the uncanny in its association of death and belonging: to belong, one must be formed from the bone dust of ancestors who perished in the stony wilds. Yet even when legitimacy has been established, precariousness still reigns. As Ma-Rose explains, “our mountains are old, stretching like the skeleton of some great long-dead animal from one end of the Bokkeveld to the other, bone upon bone, yet harder than bone; and we all cling to them. They’re our only hold” (24; my emphasis). The instability of this uncanny reality descends on the Boer patriarch, Piet van der Merwe, early in the novel. Upon returning to his farm after learning of a slave uprising on an Irish farm (an event that foreshadows the uprising on his own son’s farm), Piet sees his home landscape
transformed, “As if a strange presence had touched it all and turned it all transparent, revealing veins and secret organs and the skeleton below” (39).

It is here that the ecological uncanny surfaces, threatening to alienate the Afrikaner farmer. It strips away layers of habitual perception that have transformed the land into his own particular beloved place, reducing the farm to its raw materials. This uncanny revelation is much more radical than the postmodern anti-pastoralism introduced by Letoit, Leroux, and Van Heerden. Whereas the anti-pastoralism of these revisionist plaasromane seeks to negate the ideology of pastoralism, Brink’s novel, albeit only briefly, seeks to estrange the pastoral from within. Rather than naturalizing belonging, *A Chain of Voices* introduces a theme that will prove much more significant in the English-language farm novel tradition, which, as I will show, uproots the idea of a “homely” Nature and dissolves the metaphysics of natural right.

When the farmworld and its attendant ideology falls prey to the ecological uncanny, another view of reality emerges, one that signals the need for a new form of realism. The ecological uncanny references a reality that cannot be idealized into a harmonious and beautiful Whole. Again like Lou Witt’s ranch, the organic totality of the southern African farmworld must succumb to the multiplicity of ghosts that constitute the “spirit” of place. As Lawrence recognized, the reality of this spirit cannot be represented directly. Rather, its obscure, spectral manifestation compels us to contemplate what Timothy Morton has called “the subaesthetic level of being.” He writes: “We can’t call [this level] beautiful (self-contained, harmonious) or sublime (awe-inspiring, awesome). *This level unsettles and disgusts*” (*Ecological Thought* 92; my emphasis). This is precisely the unsettling reality that confronts the farmer Piet.

Crucially, Morton’s interest in ecological “subaesthetics” must be understood in the context of his overlapping interest in the tributary of speculative realism known as object-oriented ontology (OOO). OOO posits itself as a philosophical materialism that accounts for our most up-to-date
understanding of how reality “really” works. Although the work of Morton and others who are associated with OOO\textsuperscript{23} is sometimes branded as speculative metaphysics rather than speculative realism, I see their rigorous attempts to think what Levi Bryant calls “a finally subjectless object” as having a decidedly antimetaphysical thrust.\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, what makes OOO unique in contemporary philosophy is its commitment to the simple idea that real objects exist independently of the human mind. As Rick Elmore has pointed out, this seemingly straightforward position has not found much purchase in the history of philosophy because it appears to be a pseudo-problem, a “dogmatic assertion that objects are simply out there in the world.” But this grossly misstates the case. For one thing, in OOO objects are not limited to entities with a physical presence. “Object” refers to corporeal as well as incorporeal entities, whether organic or inorganic. Human beings and the global climate—and for that matter global climate change—are as much objects as a hammer. The vast range of possible objectivities renders the spatial and temporal character of objects far stranger and more complex than could be captured by the reductionist view that “things exist.” OOO explores the strangeness of this reality in great detail. Morton’s major contribution to this field, Realist Magic, draws on new developments in the philosophy of quantum mechanics.\textsuperscript{25} It does so in order to rethink the nature of causality through an object-oriented critique grounded in the fundamental strangeness of quantum reality.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{23} Most notably Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, and Ian Bogost.

\textsuperscript{24} I see object-oriented ontology as antimetaphysical in large part due to its understanding of objects as withdrawn from access and irreducibly split between what Levi Bryant calls an object’s “virtual proper being” (its inaccessible, nonspiritual “essence”) and its “local manifestation” (its “appearance” for other objects). In these senses, OOO can be seen as adopting and rigorously developing Kant’s original challenge to metaphysics in Critique of Pure Reason.

\textsuperscript{25} This work ranges widely, from David Bohm’s magisterial Wholeness and the Implicate Order (1980) to more recent works such as Karen Barad’s quantum-feminist reframing of agency in Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning (2007).

\textsuperscript{26} Realist Magic argues that causality is essentially aesthetic. What this means is that objects interact through their appearances for one another rather than through their most essential being. In other words, entities never “touch”; there always remains a gap between phenomenal appearances and withdrawn essences. Morton’s language tends to sound like metaphysical speculation, but the grounding of his thought in quantum mechanics belies this appearance. Take, for example, this “realist” reading of radioactive decay: “The weird clownlike demons that float in front of objects are up to all kinds of tricks. Think about radiation. A unit of radiation is some kind of quantum, such as a gamma ray. It’s very...
As I have already indicated, such a realism is not “naive” in the way its detractors often claim. For instance, quantum realism does not posit itself as having a privileged or unmediated understanding of reality “as it really is.” Retooling Einstein’s warning that all physics is metaphysics, Vassilos Karakostas has argued that quantum realism represents a “contextual realism”: “In the quantum domain of inquiry, it would be illusory to search for an overall frame by virtue of which one may utter ‘this’ or ‘that’ ‘really is’ independently of a particular context of reference” (63; my emphasis). Quantum realism is thus not about revealing “reality” as such. Rather, it attempts the paradoxical task of simultaneously framing our epistemological limits and yet daring to remain open to the radical strangeness that remains beyond our ken. To my mind, the power of this brand of realism lies in its demonstration that we do not need a new metaphysics to (re)enchant the world; the bizarre realm of the really real is already “magical” enough.

Whereas contemporary philosophy has largely dismissed realism as naïve, the field of ecological psychology has embraced the reality of objects. Much like OOO’s attempt to reposition objects at the center of a new realism, ecological psychology has attempted to reposition the environment at the center of perception. This is the central thrust of James Gibson’s pioneering ecological approach to perception, which is based on information rather than sensation. Stated more specifically, Gibson’s theory focuses on the “affordances” made to an organism by its environment rather than on the internal mechanisms that determine how an organism perceives its world. In this sense, Gibson does not take a conventional stimulus–response view of perception,
preferring to ask “not what’s inside your head, but what your head’s inside of.” Gibson’s emphasis on the reality of the in situ environment forms the basis for what has since been called “ecological realism”: the direct (rather than representational) perception of the really existing and fully populated environments in which organisms find themselves. Just as in the case of OOO, ecological realism cannot easily be dismissed as a naïve realism. As Edward S. Reed explains:

As with other forms of realism, ecological realism takes observation to be a mode of discovery, as a way of finding out what is the case. However, unlike most existing forms of scientific realism, ecological realism can and does take into account complexities in what is the case and the very real limitations of statements about what is the case. The environment is rich beyond understanding in what it affords and in the information available within it. It is therefore impossible in principle for an observer to perceive any situation completely. . . . There is always more to know about the environment is a basic tenet of ecological realism. (17; my emphasis)

In Gibson’s theory, then, organisms perceive their worlds and the entities that populate them more or less as they actually are.

And yet, despite ecological realism’s tendency to see perception as direct and veridical, perception inevitably remains incomplete. This incompleteness is certainly due in part to the limitations of particular perceptual apparatus. Human eyes can only see a small range of the electromagnetic spectrum, fly eyes can only distinguish a couple of colors, and mollusks perceive only the relative presence or absence of light (i.e., shadow), yet all three organisms are accurately perceiving real information in their own limited ways. In the case of Gibson’s ecological realism, however, perceptual incompleteness has more to do with “the selectivity of perception; we attend to the affordances of things we are interested in, and often do not attend to other aspects of situations” (17–18). Thus, much like Heidegger’s farmer, who constructs a world through his concern for his farm, ecological realism claims that organisms patch their partial worlds together through the attention they pay to their environments.

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29 As this veiled reference to Heidegger’s concept of “thrownness-into-being” (Geworfenheit-ins-Dasein) suggests, Gibson’s theory of environmental affordances resonates curiously with the ontology presented in Heidegger’s early work. See Gary Williams’s reflection on this subject in “Ecological Realism and Affordance Ontology.”
It is precisely through the gaps in perception that the ecological uncanny surfaces. Ecological realism’s point that attention is always selective implies an inevitable perceptual darkness from whence the strangeness of reality can creep up on one. What’s really strange, however, is that though obscured by inattention, this reality is already close. Thus, when we suddenly notice something previously concealed from our noticing—when a hidden entity jumps out, so to speak, from the perceptual darkness—it is unsettling because it is strangely familiar to us. We’ve repressed it because it is already too close for comfort. Ecological realism and its relation to the uncanny therefore turns on relative levels of attentiveness and perceptual bias. The more closely we attend to the gaps in our perception of the world, the more we will understand how little we know.

How does all of this apply to a narrative context? As I discussed in the Introduction, Freud turned to literature for his exploration of the uncanny because readers tend to pay more attention to literary worlds than to their own immediate environments. Literature provides a space to practice attention and thus to develop an understanding of how the uncanny functions across various levels of mediation. Following a similar logic, would it be possible to develop a literary form of ecological realism that attends more fully to the unsettling nature of other-than-human reality in the ways that Lou Witt and Ma-Rose exemplify? Such an ecological realism would necessarily strain the confines of more ordinary literary realisms. For one thing, it would require an expansion of the social totality that Georg Lukács sees as the real object of any “critical” realism worth its salt. Lukács lauds realism for its critical understanding of the world, whereas he dismisses modernism and its “naturalist” tendencies as naïve—“exclud[ing] critical detachment . . . and stuck to first impressions” (Contemporary Realism 76). Realism’s critical acumen should ultimately be directed toward what Lukács sees as the most basic element of literature: its depiction of “the interaction of character and environment” (24). Yet Lukács’ use of the term “environment” does not admit anything beyond

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30 Lukács understood “naturalism” and its ideological sympathies as a form of modernism rather than an outgrowth of realism.
humansociety: “Content determines form. But there is no content of which Man himself is not the focal point” (19). By contrast, like Gibson’s environmental psychology, the kind of ecological realism I wish to develop here can account for the much wider society of entities that populates literary environments. Encounters with such entities are very real indeed, and though mediated, literary descriptions of these encounters cannot be dismissed as merely naturalistic in Lukács’ sense. As I discussed above in the context of OOO, the point is not only to affirm the real existence of these entities or in this cause their presence in a literary text, but also to emphasize that our “first impressions” are not naïve so much as incomplete. Like Lukácsian realism, then, ecological realism also stresses reflection: it takes critical distance to come to terms with just how limited our knowledge of this reality really is—to achieve what James Clerk Maxwell once deemed “thoroughly conscious ignorance” (Firestein 7). However, as I suggested in my reading of Heidegger, and as I will continue to argue in the final chapters, this critical distance is ultimately the condition of possibility for greater critical engagement.

The literary form of ecological realism I am proposing also necessarily exceeds what Njabulo Ndebele in the South African context has termed “the ordinary.” Ndebele’s contrast between the spectacular and the ordinary revamps the opposition Lukács establishes between naturalism and realism. Like naturalism, the spectacular uselessly wallows in the moralism and self-pity of the individual; like realism, the ordinary is an analytical mode that discloses injustice and points a way forward for the social collective. “The ordinary,” he explains, “is sobering rationality. . . . Paying attention to the ordinary and its methods will result in a significant growth of consciousness” (152). Ndebele’s emphasis on ordinariness also reprises Lukács’ resistance to modernist subjectivism, which in Kafka, for example, gives rise to “the expression of a ghostly un-reality, a nightmare world” (Contemporary Realism 24). Modernist subjectivity also warps time and space such that, in Proust, “the

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31 This comparison is the subject of Neil Lazarus’s essay “Realism and Naturalism in African Fiction.”
artist’s world disintegrates into a multiplicity of partial worlds” (39). Both of these situations result in a form of literary bad faith that disrupts the primary dialectic between “Man and Society.” However, as its connection to the ecological uncanny should already indicate, ecological realism will necessarily retain the aspects of ghostliness and fragmentation that Lukács and Ndebele banish from their realisms. As I suggested in my reading of Lawrence, ghostliness does appear as a distortion of reality, but this distortion is produced by the limits of perception—not, as Lukács sees it, by the individual artist’s deliberate “attenuation of actuality” (24). Nature is not intrinsically uncanny, nor is its uncanny appearance simply the result of warped representation. Rather, it is an effect of our inevitably partial attention, which leave gaps that, when revealed, produce something like an unsettling or uncanny mood (unheimliche Stimmung). Ecological realism thus registers that ecology often manifests specularly and that it has the ability to shatter, or at least deeply complicate, the (human) social totality.32

While I explore the particularities of this literary form of ecological realism further in the coming chapters, I should like to signal here that this new realism is as much a characteristic of a text as it is a new way of reading. By this I mean that ecological realism is both a way of approaching a text’s worlding mechanisms (its particular “ecology”) and a method for thinking about “ecological signifiers” that appear within a narrative or on its margins. This form of reading is situated somewhere between “symptomatic” and “surface” reading practices. Symptomatic reading emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, when the more widespread acceptance of Marxism and psychoanalysis stimulated the production of interdisciplinary theoretical work. Most emblematic of this work is Fredric Jameson’s The Political Unconscious (1981), which imagined the text as being shaped by an absent cause, a sort of literary unconscious. This entailed rethinking the purpose of

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32 This last point reflects a great deal of writing that has emphasized the complex interarticulation of the human social world and other-than-human worlds. For a theoretical account of this interarticulation, see Bruno Latour’s We Have Never Been Modern. For a more recent example, see Eduardo Kohn’s attempt to construct a more-than-human anthropology in How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human.
interpretation as an attempt to identify the latent or “repressed” meaning that hides behind the text's manifest surface (Political Unconscious 60). Ecological realism does not entirely rely on symptomatic reading because, like in environmental psychology, it takes entities encountered in the world (including the literary world) at “face value,” so to speak. We know our perception of these entities is limited, but their reality is immediately obvious to us. For this reason, we need not seek out latent meanings, especially when that repressed content is, as it is for Jameson, History itself.33 Instead, ecological realism follows Mary Crane in her resistance to Jameson’s tendency to see contradiction as a key for unlocking the obscure machinations of history. Rather than being the result of repression, contradiction is simply an effect of cognition. Crane's theory of the unconscious is closer to Lawrence's than Freud's in the sense that it consists of complex “structures of categorization” that occur too rapidly to be perceived (Crane 78–79). Rather than seeing meaning as the “allegorical” product of the distance between what is latent and manifest, the cognitive critic takes a more realist approach, locating meaning in the perception, however incomplete, of really existing cognitive structures. Although Crane understands these structures to be truly invisible to the individual, they are not located in the depths of the psyche so much as they sit on the “surface” of cognition.

The out-in-the-open quality of Crane’s theory points the way toward what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus call surface reading. As they write in their introduction to this reading practice, “we take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding. . . . A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through” (9). Paradoxically, and especially in the reign of symptomatic reading, what is most manifest in a text has the tendency to hide in plain sight. In their work, Best and Marcus propose a number of different modalities of surface reading. And yet, each modality ultimately promotes an understanding of the textual surface in a way that recalls Foucault’s characterization of archival

33 Hence Jameson’s (in)famous decree: “Always historicize!”
research: “rather than dig for ‘relations that are secret, hidden, more silent or deeper than . . . consciousness,’ [the researcher] describes himself as seeking ‘to define the relations on the very surface of discourse’ and ‘to make visible what is invisible only because it’s too much on the surface of things.’ [Surface] reading sees ghosts as presences, not absences, and lets ghosts be ghosts, instead of saying what they are ghosts of” (13). Once again, the surface of a text presents its readers with a kind of reality that is immediate in spite of its virtual (i.e., literary, representational) character. Within this reality, readers encounter objects and entities directly and must on some level accept them at face value. This applies as much to the surface of the text as to surfaces in the text.34 In a descriptive reading practice, figural language has a shocking tendency to become literal. This is the sense in which I take Best and Marcus’ final allusion to ghosts, which fortuitously recalls the “ghosts” of the New Mexican landscape that Lawrence understood as embodied yet unknowable—he, too, lets ghosts be ghosts.

Yet from the perspective of ecological realism, surface reading is not entirely satisfactory either. Just as symptomatic reading disavows the surface, surface reading disavows depth. As Best and Marcus describe it, “in the geometrical sense, [a surface] has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth” (9). Ecological realism cannot subscribe to an idea of pure surface because ecological reality itself has depth and breadth. Timothy Morton’s rethinking of “interconnection” demonstrates why. In contemporary environmental ethics, which adopts deep ecology’s philosophy of the earth as a living whole, interconnection is inseparable from its associated principles of harmony, balance, and equilibrium—all concepts that seek a utopian seamlessness that amounts to a pure surface. Unlike the Whole of Nature, however, what Morton calls “the mesh” of ecology has many holes in it: “Interconnection implies separateness and difference. There would be no mesh if there were no strange strangers. The mesh isn’t a background

34 I owe this distinction to Ariana Reilly’s essay, “Always Sympathize! Surface Reading, Affect, and George Eliot’s Romola.”
against which the strange stranger appears. It is the entanglement of all strangers” (Ecological Thought 47). Entanglement therefore requires depth because it entails an overlapping multiplicity.35

Here I again appeal to Lawrence’s St. Mawr, where the “weird anima” of Lou Witt’s ranch signals a vast array of human and nonhuman entities that collectively constitute that particular place. Each of these entities has its own phenomenal world gathered around it, what Jakob von Uexküll calls an organism’s Umwelt. The surface of a text may indicate this multiplicity of worlds, but it cannot contain it. For example, when a character in a novel encounters an ecological signifier—say, the sound of a frog croaking in the distance—that frog’s presence is registered on the textual surface. However, being marginal vis-à-vis the protagonist and her story, the frog and its frog world necessarily remain unexplored. But just as a real-world frog has its own froggy existence and froggy experiences that do not depend on humans, the frog in the world of the novel can also be said to exist within its own froggy cosmos, at once “inside” the diegetic space of the novel and yet “outside” the realm of human narrative concern. The frog’s strange location at the limits of the narrative strains any notion that it exists solely on the textual surface. For this reason, surfaces may suggest a multiplicity of Umwelten, but they cannot fully encompass this multiplicity. This is because, as in the case of the frog world, nonhuman worlds are largely invisible in human narratives—they exist as holes in the textual surface, one of many possible gaps that might shatter the narrative totality if interpretation did not work so hard to paper over them and produce the illusion of a pure surface. But more often than not, we readers fail to notice these “blanks” in the first place.36 Just as

35 This is not unlike the more traditional metaphor of textuality as a textile, characterized by the implicit depth made by the overlapping warp and weft.

36 See The Act of Reading, in which Wolfgang Iser outlines his phenomenological approach to reading. According to Iser, literature is indeterminate in two senses. First, literature itself never constitutes a complete world—this is the problem of givenness, according to which literature is mostly non-given, just as real-world reality is not fully given to consciousness and must be gathered into meaning from the slices of perception that our partial attention affords us. The reader’s own inability to hold the whole text in her mind at the same time constitutes the second level of indeterminacy, which must be supplemented by creating “formulations of the unwritten” as much as of the written. Literature communicates through this indeterminacy, which is grounded in what Iser calls the blank. The blank “designates a vacancy in the overall system of the text, the filling of which brings about an interaction of textual patterns” (182).
Heidegger’s phenomenology stresses the gathering together of surroundings into the seamless unity of the World, a phenomenological approach to reading shows that the textual surface is in part a product of human cognition, which strives to gather narrative space into a unified, albeit imaginary, world. In both the real world and in narrative worlds, then, “we witness . . . the collapse of the multi-layered [reality] of nature, the overlapping Umwelten which interpenetrate but never touch, into a single spatial pancake which we claim as our own” (Evernden 148).

For all of these reasons, ecological realism demands a mode of reading that neither solely plumbs the text’s depths nor exclusively skirts over its surface. The ecological uncanny is crucial for this process because its unsettling mood forces us to pay closer attention to the gaps in perception. Like a singularity that is only visible from the radiation it discharges, the uncanny mood that issues from the holes in the whole helps to detect the presence of hidden gaps in the perceptual world, of unseen depths beneath the textual surface. The ecological uncanny may not fully reveal the veiled operations of a text in the way that symptomatic reading desires, but it certainly has a powerful effect on characters and readers alike. Affect therefore seems to be key for ecological realism.

Curiously, affect also turns out to be key for the new theory of realism that Fredric Jameson presents in his recent volume, *The Antinomies of Realism*. Jameson’s theory posits realism as a consequence of the dialectical tension between narrative and scene; that is, between the chronological movement of récit and the “eternal present” of the roman. In essence, this is a point, then, is that blanks don’t necessarily call out for completion—that is, they don’t signify a need for the reader to supplement the text from outside. Rather, blanks indicate a need for combination: “It is only when the schemata of the text are related to one another that the imaginary object can begin to be formed, and it is the blanks that get this connecting operation under way. They indicate that the different segments of the text are to be connected, even though the text itself does not say so. They are the unseen joints of the text, and as they mark off schemata and textual perspectives from one another, they simultaneously trigger acts of ideation on the reader’s part. Consequently, when the schemata and perspectives have been linked together, the blanks ‘disappear’” (182–83).

37 For a fuller account of how this happens in literary descriptions of nature in particular, see Timothy Morton’s critique of nature writing (what he calls “ecomimesis” and its “ambient poetics”) in *Ecology without Nature*, 31–54.

38 I should note that I mean this in a very different way from the kind of environmental affect promoted in first-wave ecocriticism, which emphasized the healing effects (both for the human psyche and the biosphere at large) of cultivating the five senses and learning to perceive the environment with ever greater acuity. A touchstone example of this kind of work is Mitchell Thomashow’s *Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change*.  

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temporal dialectic, one that plays out between the time of “destiny” (teleology) and the time of “unfolding” (phenomenology). According to Jameson, literary realism emerges from this unresolved tension, which produces a strange optical illusion—a “doubling of perception, in which the aesthetic perspective of the painter does not replace that of the explorer-protagonist, but rather imperceptibly slips in beside it, in a kind of stereoscopic view” (56). This perceptual doubling is what Jameson terms affect: “Affect is perhaps here present as a kind of invisible figuration, which doubles the literal invisibly; a convex that shows through, as though reality itself blushed imperceptibly” (47).

For Jameson, affect is at once embodied and beyond language. This places it in opposition to feelings, which are emotional states of consciousness. Whereas feelings are named emotions that have thus entered a linguistic register, “the positive content of an affect is to activate the body” and thus is opposed to language (32). This poses a unique challenge, since affect cannot be described without becoming meaningful. In this case, sensation becomes allegorical. Yet as Jameson insists, “it is allegory and the body which repel one another and fail to mix” (37). Thus, just as “characters become the most perfunctory pretexts for what is virtually an autonomous unfolding of sense data” (59), Jameson warns that “there can be no ultimate ‘zero degree’ in perception, that all such seemingly pure data are still haunted by a meaning of some kind, which is to say an ideological connotation” (64). For this reason, in order to resist vulgarizing affect through allegory (i.e., personification, “naming and nomination”), he argues that “we need a different kind of language to identify affect without, by naming it, presuming to define its content” (37).

As Jameson’s own discussion of the strange doubling of perception indicates, the uncanny proves useful for developing a conceptual language for affect that resists defining content. The uncanny evokes a specific kind of mood, one that is located in bodily experience and yet escapes immediate cognition. Jameson points out that, for Heidegger, such a mood, or Stimmung, “was
neither subjective nor objective, neither irrational nor cognitive, but rather a constitutive dimension of our being-in-the-world” (38). The ecological uncanny defines just such an unheimliche Stimmung, an unsettling mood that emerges from a broad range of very real (and often material) ecological encounters. Hence, it is not a feeling in the sense of being a conscious state; rather, it signals a gap between language and experience, perception and reality. Jameson evokes something very close to the ecological uncanny in his response to a long descriptive passage from Le Ventre de Paris, in which Zola writes about the “chaotic” and “bewildering multiplicity” of a market full of “masses of vegetables,” “heaps of edible flesh and blood,” and, “in a kind of delirious climax, the world of seafood in which the category of fish differentiates into pages of monsters and weird otherworldly beings” (52). Jameson’s reading is worth quoting at length:

It would appear at first glance, and in the light of Zola’s remarkable organizational procedures, that what is at stake here is a resolution of multiplicity back into unity, of difference back into identity. The enormous lists and catalogues would seem to be subsumed under generic categories and everyday commonsense universals: from life to the edible, from the edible to plants and animals, from the latter to meats and fish, and so on. In fact, I believe that this impression is at the least ambiguous; and that simultaneously with this first centrifugal movement of mastery and subsumption, of the ordering of raw nameless things into their proper genetic classifications, there exists a second movement which undermines this one and secretly discredits it—a tremendous fermenting and bubbling pullulation in which the simplicity of words and names is unsettled to the point of an ecstatic dizziness by the visual multiplicity of the things themselves and the sensations that they press on the unforewarned observer. The unexpected result is that far from enriching representational language with all kinds of new meanings, the gap between words and things is heightened; perceptions turn into sensations; words no longer take on a body at prey to its nameless experience. Finally the realm of the visual begins to separate from that of the verbal and conceptual and to float away in a new kind of autonomy. (54–55; my emphasis)

In this excursus on strangeness, which is very uncharacteristic in his oeuvre, Jameson confirms the claim I made above that a new realism would need to exceed both Ndebele’s emphasis on the ordinary as well as Lukács’ preoccupation with the (human) social totality. Whereas Lukács saw

39 Considering Jameson’s renown for his Marxist dialectical materialism, it is curious to note how close his language here comes to that of object-oriented ontologists. Compare, for example, to Ian Bogost, who defines speculative realism as “a moment when the epistemological tides ebbed, revealing the iridescent shells of realism they had so long occluded” (5), or to Levi Bryant, who discusses “the existence of a bubbling excess” that erupts from within any whole or totality (272).
Zola’s writing as politically admirable but ideologically compromised due to its alignment with naturalism rather than realism,\(^{40}\) Jameson finds in *Le Ventre de Paris* an exemplar of how realism’s “antinomies”—narrative and description—reveal the constitutive and often uncanny strangeness of the real. It seems, then, that the ecological uncanny provides a powerful conceptual language for approaching an ecological realism.

**(Settler) Colonial Allegory**

Just as Jameson’s theory introduces oppositions between affect and feeling and language and the body, it also implies an opposition between realism and allegory. It is this final opposition that directs us back, at long last, to the farm novels at the center of Part Two. Specifically, my attempt to develop a theory and method for reckoning with ecological realism also requires me to deal with the question of allegory, which continuously arises in the postcolonial context in general and in readings of southern African farm novels in particular. Coincidentally, Jameson himself has played a part in the importance of allegory as a postcolonial paradigm. His suggestion that allegory inevitably arises in any attempt to codify the real recalls his longstanding argument for the centrality of political allegory, made most memorably in *The Political Unconscious* and in his essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital,” where he claimed that all “Third-World” novels double as national allegories. This claim has been both contested\(^{41}\) and extended\(^{42}\) within the sphere of postcolonial studies.

More significant (and less controversial) for postcolonial theory, however, has been Abdul R. JanMohamed’s essay “The Economy of Manichean Allegory,” later expanded into the volume

\(^{40}\) See Lukács’ chapter on Zola in *Studies in European Realism*.

\(^{41}\) See, for example, Aijaz Ahmad’s powerful response to Jameson, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” which originally appeared in *Social Text* and was reprinted in the collection *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures*.

\(^{42}\) See, for example, Olakunle George’s reading of D. O. Fagunwa’s *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* in terms of Jameson’s national allegory paradigm in *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters*.
Manichean Aesthetics. In this work, JanMohamed pushes beyond the analysis of stereotyping in colonialist fiction to something he calls “manichean allegory,” a conceptual schema that metonymically extends racial difference into any number of infinitely flexible binary paradigms (white/black, good/evil, rationalism/emotionalism, etc.). In all of these oppositions, the European remains hierarchically superior to the non-European. This schema inheres within the colonial mentality, instituting an “economy” that invests racial difference with moral and metaphysical significance.

By offering a powerful tool for understanding the symbolic economy of colonial texts, JanMohamed’s theory provides the basic groundwork for what I might call “colonial allegory.” Colonial allegory fixates on racial difference as the key for a proliferating series of self/other oppositions that define the colonizer and the colonized against each other. This paradigm assumes a dialectic of identity and difference that works out, however ambivalently, between a single pair of racial others pitted against one another. Such a mutually defining opposition extends to all elements of a colonial text, carving the fictional world into signifiers of Europeanness and non-Europeanness. Nothing escapes this polarizing allegory—not even absence. For example, Van den Heever’s Somer repeats a common tendency in the South African pastoral only to represent white labor. The implicit erasure of black Africans from the farm landscape protects against metropolitan critiques that might see the representation of black labor as a sign of settler sloth or, even more damning, of colonial slavery. Reading black absence against white presence in this way swiftly returns us to the binary relations of colonial allegory.

Colonial allegory is significant for having identified the characteristic ambivalence of the colonial text and the complex ways in which colonial writers are often complicit with the ideology of imperialism. However, now that the influence of postcolonial studies can be felt throughout the humanities, reading practices focused on colonial allegory have become undesirably formulaic. With
imperialism having touched nearly every region of the planet, claims to some form or degree of postcoloniality have proliferated. This is at once a sign of postcolonialism’s continued importance and of its need to be complicated. By continuing to place a Manichean schema at the center of interpretive practice, postcolonial critics (and other critics who adopt a postcolonial perspective) are in danger not only of reinforcing a binary worldview, but also of neglecting the many other possible relations that need not be reduced to this single axis of opposition.

One strain of thinking that has emerged within postcolonial studies to complicate this paradigm is settler colonial theory. Instead of the binary relations of colonial “encounter,” settler colonial theory emphasizes a triangular set of population relations. In place of JanMohamed’s Manichean symbolic economy, Lorenzo Veracini introduces a three-fold population economy that defines relations between the settler colonizers, the indigenous colonized, and various nonsettler migrants (or “exogenous others” as Veracini calls them). Settler colonialism therefore depends on settlers’ ability to domesticate and “biopolitically manage” their domains as well as the various populations within them (16). In contrast to the binary colonial paradigm, then, settler colonial dynamics are determined by at least three polarities: settler–indigenous relations, settler–exogenous relations, and indigenous–exogenous relations. For this reason, the kind of hybridity that some postcolonial theorists have celebrated is much less straightforward in the settler colonial context, where not just one but two (or more) dialectical counterpoints are at play. Identity is more strictly managed in the settler colony, where hybrid forms of identification would “disturb the triangular system of relationships . . . and ultimately reproduce a dual system where two constitutive categories are mixed without being subsumed” (30). This is why settler colonial regimes manage racially mixed

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43 As a principle example, see Homi Bhabha, whose essays explore how the subjectivities of the colonizer and the colonized are both inscribed through processes of iteration and translation vis-à-vis one another. In other words, they are both constituted within a hybrid space. For Bhabha, this hybrid space can be operationalized for subaltern use in ways that subtly undermine colonial authority and power. See especially “Signs Taken for Wonders” in The Location of Culture.
people by subsuming them into one racial category or another, whether by a “one-drop” rule or by some other mechanism.

What I want to suggest by introducing Veracini’s notion of the settler colonial population economy is that, against the polarizing schematic of colonial allegory, we might consider the possibility of a “settler colonial allegory” in which relations other than that between colonizer and colonized are also at play. Not only would this allegorical form resist the sectioning of fictional worlds according to a single opposition; it would also encourage new ways of reading (post)colonial texts that would consider the “exogenous others” that complicate and exceed settler–indigenous relations.

Specifically, I am interested in how settler colonial allegory would enable reading for the kind of ecological realism I introduced in the previous section. Importantly, Veracini’s population economy does not limit the settler colony to three racial groups: different categories of exogenous others might appear within a single context. I therefore see no reason to limit analysis to a strictly “triangular” model with only three types of actors. Nor do I see a reason to limit analysis solely to human actors. After all, settlement by definition implies a relation with the land and its flora and fauna, and compelling evidence has been gathered that demonstrates the complex and often negative ways that settler colonial endeavors affect the natural environment. Alfred Crosby calls this “ecological imperialism,” in which colonizing peoples, either accidentally or deliberately, introduce populations of animals, plants, and microorganisms that precipitate significant transformations in the ecologies of newly colonized regions and often lead to population collapses in the indigenous
human communities. Given the importance of ecological actors in the histories of settlement, it seems necessary to consider them alongside human agents.

I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that the shift from the American to the southern African context was motivated in large part by the increased visibility of settler colonialism in the latter. In addition to this, my interest in southern African farm novels is also motivated by the proliferation of ecological actors appearing in these texts. Colonial allegory needs to subsume these figures into one of two Manichean categories in order to function. Often, any and all ecological signifiers are taken metonymically as stand-ins for the land itself and, consequently, for the figure of the indigenous black Africans who otherwise remain absent. In other words, colonial allegorical readings understand ecological actors not as agents in their own right, but as mere symptoms of a displaced nativity. Settler colonial allegory, by contrast, has more leeway for considering ecological actors at face value because it has less need to see every object as a symptom of something else. I examine this distinction at length in chapter 6 on Doris Lessing’s The Grass is Singing. The sound of cicadas that permeates that novel cannot so easily be reduced to a sign of Mary’s psychological collapse in the face of her sexual attraction to (and rejection by) Moses, an African laborer on her Rhodesian farm. The overwhelming reality of the cicadas’ presence in the novel exceeds any attempt to reduce it to a displaced figure of blackness. Colonial allegory needs to make this kind of interpretive maneuver in order to reinstate the usual colonial opposition. Settler colonial allegory, however, does not need to make the cicada into something other than what it is. Much like ecological realism, then, settler colonial allegory is strangely situated between surface and symptom. It allows us to take objects encountered in the fictional world at face value, yet it does so without claiming to reveal the whole picture. In the world of a farm novel, we can at once acknowledge the

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44 See Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*. For a more recent study of ecological imperialism, see Jill Casid’s *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization*. Jared Diamond has also brought this argument to a popular audience in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Guns, Germs, and Steel.*

45 For a novel exploration of nonhuman agency, see Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things.*
presence of ecological actors like Lessing’s cicadas, and yet recognize that the complexity of the novelistic world both includes and exceeds those actors.

**Farm Novels and Visions of the World Without Us**

In the coming chapters, my emphasis on how ecological actors disrupt farmworlds with their uncanny presence demonstrates how allegory and realism begin to shear against one another. It does so by following a strange motif threaded through three English-language farm novels—Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*, Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*, and J. M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*—in which uncanny visions of ecological insurgency depict the destruction of the farmworld. With reference to Alan Weisman’s popular thought experiment, I call these “world-without-us visions.” Like Weisman’s speculative project in *The World Without Us*, which richly imagines how the natural world would “take back” the earth in the event of humanity’s sudden disappearance, these novels envision the ecological reclamation of southern African farms. Such visions shatter the illusion of the totalized farmworld and empty the landscape of its human inhabitants.

At first glance, such world-without-us visions appear to replicate what J. M. Coetzee has called the “dream topography” characteristic of southern African landscape poetics, which imagines the country as “a vast, empty, silent space, older than man . . . and destined to be vast, empty, and unchanged long after man has passed from its face” (*White Writing* 7). Indeed, postcolonial readings have often (and rightly, as my own reading of Cather’s *The Professor’s House* in chapter 2 should indicate) passed judgment on the politics of erasure that underlie this dream topography. In Olive Schreiner’s case, Loren Anthony chastises *African Farm* for a moment in which the character Waldo imagines the geological timescale of the veld: “What should be the recounting of a political and historical moment (the displacement of the Bushmen by the Dutch) is transmuted dreamily into a
naturalised image of nature as process, timeless and ageless” (12). However, as I elaborate in the next chapter, the particular circumstances surrounding Waldo’s vision of the world without us offer fodder for alternative readings that do interesting political work without resorting to an allegorical mode and its “metaphysical” revelation of hidden meaning. More than simply replacing a violent history of displacement with transcendental lyricism, world-without-us visions in these novels also sponsor unsettling scenes that resist the homely pleasures of landscape metaphysics and destabilize the fantasy of the farm as a self-enclosed entity—“a complete world unto itself,” as Stephen Gray writes of Schreiner’s farm (139). My argument, then, is that these novels signify on the southern African dream topography by reappropriating the image of Timeless Nature as part of a disruptive logic that, like in Lawrence’s St. Mawr, divorces beings from belonging by attending to the universe of things beyond the horizon of human meaning.

Ironically, given his influential critique of this trope in White Writing, it is Coetzee who points the way for such a reading in his 1998 memoir Boyhood, where he narrates his early sense of the impossibility of owning (though not of inhabiting) the South African veld. In his third-person, quasi-fictional narrative, Coetzee recalls his love for Voëlfontein, the paternal family farm. He describes this love as the freest and most uncomplicated of his life. And yet, “since as far back as he can remember this love has had an edge of pain. He may visit the farm but he will never live there. The farm is not his home; he will never be more than a guest, an uneasy guest” (79; my emphasis). Part of this pain stems from Coetzee’s bitter realization that living on the farm requires ties of belonging: “Is there no way of living in the Karoo . . . as he wants to live: without belonging to a family?” (91). This thought becomes even more unsavory in the next moment when, by virtue of juxtaposition, “belonging to a family” becomes intimately connected to the possession of the farm as a bounded entity: “The farm is huge, so huge that when, on one of their hunts, he and his father come to a fence across the river-bed, and his father announces that they have reached the boundary between
Voëlfontein and the next farm, he is taken aback. In his imagination, Voëlfontein is a kingdom in its own right” (91). “Belonging” and the sense of possession it entails dismantles young Coetzee's fantasy of the farm as its own endless world. Soon after this scene, the vexed discourse of belonging returns with a different emphasis—one that invites a sense of the uncanny:

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\text{The secret and sacred word that binds him to the farm is } \text{belong. Out in the veld by himself he can breathe the word aloud: } I \text{ belong on the farm. What he really believes but does not utter, what he keeps to himself for fear that the spell will end, is a different form of the word: } I \text{ belong to the farm.}
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He tells no one because the word is misunderstood so easily, turned so easily into its inverse: The farm belongs to me. The farm will never belong to him, he will never be more than a visitor: he accepts that. The thought of actually living on Voëlfontein, of calling the great old house his home, of no longer having to ask permission to do what he wants to do, turns him giddy; he thrusts it away. I belong to the farm: that is the furthest he is prepared to go, even in his most secret heart. But in his secret heart he knows what the farm in its own way knows too: that Voëlfontein belongs to no one. The farm is greater than any of them. The farm exists from eternity to eternity. When they are all dead, when even the farmhouse has fallen into ruin like the kraals on the hillside, the farm will still be here. (95–96)

At the end of this passage, Coetzee taps into the dream topography of South Africa as an eternally “vast, empty, silent space” that spans a geological timeline extending long before and after human presence. But this version doesn't simply erase history by naturalizing it as an anomalous bump in a grander “process”: Coetzee's revised dream topography honors the injustices of history that he learns about in the early chapters of Boyhood, albeit in a counterintuitive way. Rather than advocating for the simple restitution of lands, Coetzee entertains a more radical solution, one that advocates a personal politics of absolute non-ownership predicated on reversing the traditional vector of belonging. Such a politics remembers history at the same time as it negates it, rejecting the historical mess of violence and dispossession as well as the Lockean metaphysics of land-as-property to which that history gave rise. Crucially, Coetzee’s revised dream topography depends on an uncanny awareness of “what the farm in its own way knows”: that it belongs “to no one” but itself. The anthropomorphistic suggestion of the farm as a knowing entity in itself lends young Coetzee's epiphany an uncanny edge: it renders the homely pleasures of Voëlfontein unheimlich, endowed with
an unsettling power that lies beyond his control and undermines any desire for a final sense of belonging.

In the chapters that follow, the uncanny reality of ecology begins to dissolve the homely metaphysics of landscape. Throughout Part Two I link the conflict between landscape and ecology to a more “literary” competition that I see playing out in each of these novels between (colonial) allegory and (ecological) realism. Whereas in this study allegory represents a metaphysical reading practice that, in postcolonial criticism at least, tends to see the farm as meaningful only as long as it is, say, a microcosm of the nation, realism offers a speculative mode of reading that attempts to tap into the unsettling realm of the really real. The conflict between allegory and realism pits entrenched ideological structures against the de(con)structive force of ecology.

Each of these chapters builds on the previous one, charting a trajectory that reveals increasingly bizarre realities. Whereas the uncanny only begins to creep into Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*, its presence becomes increasingly pronounced in Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*, and completely saturates the world of Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*. The first two chapters, on Schreiner and Lessing, foreground the conflict between allegory and realism and elaborate the stakes of this competition within the context of the farm novel as a genre. While in the final chapter on Coetzee I remain concerned with allegory and realism, I shift focus to a related conflict between complicity and contingency. In this context, complicity represents the inescapability of ideology, the complex webbing of culture and history. If complicity invokes a world of strictly human concern, contingency opens up a much wider universe of relation. Contingency represents an ecological principle insisting on the idea that the development of every being is radically contingent on (usually random) encounters with known as well as (and especially) unknown entities. The movement from landscape metaphysics to ecological realism depends, finally, on the shift from thinking complicity to thinking contingency.
Surprisingly, this point returns us to Jameson’s attempt to grapple with the strangeness of realism. In a discussion of Roland Barthes’ notion of the “reality effect,” Jameson notes a split between the codes that signal the concrete and the codes that signal meaning:

This irreconcilable divorce between intelligibility and experience, between meaning and existence, then can be grasped as a fundamental feature of modernity, particularly in literature, whose verbal existence necessarily inclines it to idealism. If it means anything, it can’t be real; if it is real, it can’t be absorbed by purely mental or conceptual categories. . . . Yet what Barthes in fact describes here already has another name, it is contingency. (Antinomies 37)

Contingency marks the bizarre and difficult gap between phenomenon and actuality. Thinking contingency, then, will require us to get down in the muck, as Timothy Morton says, and delve deeper into the increasingly strange universe of things. The final chapter on Coetzee follows this experimental line of thought by incorporating the object-oriented approach of what Ian Bogost calls “alien phenomenology.”

If nothing else, these admittedly ambitious culminating chapters develop a searching and highly speculative reading practice that works away at the limits of the homely metaphysics that have occupied me in the foregoing chapters. As the unwieldy length of this chapter indicates, the implications of this interpretive shift are difficult to unfold in any summary fashion. Thus, the success or failure of these final chapters will depend, in the last, on the specific intricacies of the readings they elaborate.
Chapter 5

Allegory, Realism, and Uncanny Ecology in the Work of Olive Schreiner

Every day the karroo shows us a new wonder sleeping in its teeming bosom.
Olive Schreiner, The Story of an African Farm

As the book that inaugurated the genre in the literature of the region, Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* seems like an obvious starting point for thinking about the southern African farm novel. And yet, Schreiner’s novel also has a complex status in the history of southern African letters that troubles any attempt to read it solely as a “farm novel.” In the first place, *African Farm*’s formal heterogeneity exhibits a conflicted genre identity. Schreiner incorporates elements from romance and the Gothic in addition to sermons, dreams, letters, and allegories, all ostensibly united within a strange revision of Victorian realism, to which I will come soon enough. As Deborah Spillman has noted, Schreiner’s style “often self-consciously exposes the genres’ various rhetorical strategies in a proto-modernist fashion” (191). The novel’s “proto-modernism” is additionally corroborated by its disjunctive, episodic structure. From the perspective of genre, then, *African Farm* occupies an ambiguous space between Victorian and modernist sensibilities.

In addition to its heterogeneous genre identity, *African Farm*’s multivalent legacy in literary history also places its status as a farm novel in question. An immediate commercial success upon publication in 1883, the novel initially gained fame for boldly flouting Victorian religion and social mores. The 28-year-old Schreiner, writing under the pen name Ralph Iron, depicts a stark world abandoned by God where individuals struggle in isolation, cobbling together homegrown agnosticisms in search of new existential paths. The struggles of the mind in a spiritually unshepherded world engender new modes of thought that *African Farm* introduces through Lyndall and Waldo, the New Woman and New Man at the heart of the novel. Through Lyndall, Schreiner focalizes her complex feminist critique of empire, which implicates all levels of institutionalized
patriarchy governing colonial life, from the Crown to the Church to the Family. Waldo, by contrast, represents a raw new intellectualism made possible by liberation from theological obscurity and initiation into the luminous influence of John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Literary critics have yet to decide whether Lyndall or Waldo represents the true heart of the novel.¹ What is *African Farm* “really” about: feminist revolt against society, or intellectual enlightenment in the aftermath of God’s abandonment? The novel is, of course, irreducibly both.

*The Story of an African Farm* is irreducibly double in yet another sense: literary history also has yet to resolve the ambiguity of Schreiner’s self-description as an “English South African” novelist, and it remains unsure as to whether her work represents an extension of English literary paradigms in South Africa, or if it inaugurates a new South African tradition altogether. Does the novel represent a response to European literary pastoralism, or is it better understood as being bound up with the “land question” that governed the history and politics of the only home Schreiner ever professed to love? Once again, the novel cannot be reduced to one position or the other. This means that *African Farm* is not merely an English farm novel that has been transported to the Karoo, as Coetzee has said of Pauline Smith’s work. Instead, some form of transculturation has occurred that roots her work firmly in her South African environment. Susan R. Horton and Simon Lewis have both made this point before, and they each treat Schreiner as a historically contingent figure who is reacting to her particular South African milieu. The catch, however, is that even as she responds to her specific environment, she does so with the linguistic and ideological tools of a settler culture.

The deep entrenchment of this double bind emerges from Schreiner’s own lifelong sense of being between cultures, a feeling that mediated her shifting relationship to South African politics and

¹ A great deal of the criticism of *African Farm* emphasizes its feminist sympathies and Schreiner’s depiction of Lyndall. This seems surprising to other readers such as Doris Lessing, who sees Waldo’s sustained presence throughout the novel as outweighing the powerful though comparatively minimal presence of Lyndall and her revisionist discourse.
history. From the beginning, Schreiner’s life and writing were animated by the anguish of exile, a lifelong sense of alienation that derived from being “a colonial intruder in a foreign land” (McClintock 265). While as a white woman she enjoyed a degree of freedom denied to others around her, Schreiner also felt that her whiteness alienated her from black Africans. In addition to this in-betweenness, her early rejection of Christianity exiled her from her family, and her powerful intelligence set her apart from the “niggardly colonial culture” that otherwise stifled her (265). Awareness of her in-between status would later lead Schreiner to intervene in the racial politics of her time. During the Anglo-Boer War, for instance, she passionately defended the Afrikaners against their inhumane treatment at the hands of the British, who in turn detained her for betraying the cause of her own race. Later in life, Schreiner turned against the Afrikaners and the British alike for their equally brutal treatment of indigenous African populations. And yet, throughout these shifting political allegiances, Schreiner always remained the product of colonial society. In other words, she occupies an ambivalent position, at once agitating against colonial ideology while simultaneously (and often unknowingly) replicating it. This form of ambivalence is also called complicity.

Given all of these features that render Schreiner and her novel so irreducibly complex, we must once again ask what is at stake in treating *African Farm* as a farm novel. Although doing so may risk reducing the text’s formal heterogeneity and varied literary-historical significance, I want to argue that reading *African Farm* specifically as a farm novel has the added advantage of focusing a spotlight on the issue of ambivalence by highlighting the novel’s ambiguous relation to the so-called “land question.” Such a reading limits the field of complexity without erasing the text’s peculiar challenges. Despite its deceptively innocuous name, the land question, like the closely associated “native question,” posed the problem not only of how to divide up South Africa’s limited lands, but also under what terms to dispossess indigenous communities, where to relocate them, and how to redistribute capital and labor to ensure the profitability of European agriculture. The Natives’ Land
Act of 1913 proved a watershed moment in the history of the land question. The Union Parliament passed the act in an attempt to regulate Africans’ acquisition of territory by “reserving” a miserably small portion of the poorest-quality land—some 7 percent of the total arable area—for exclusive use by the black population. In addition to the mass dispossession this entailed, the act also regulated African labor by forbidding tenant farming arrangements between African sharecroppers and European farmers. For Africans who could or would not take to the reserves, this regulation effectively forced them into slavery on white farms. As Sol Plaatje powerfully argues in *Native Life in South Africa*, the Natives’ Land Act was more than a segregation policy; it actively sought to subjugate black Africans, reducing them from a former position of semi-independence to complete serfdom on European-controlled lands. The influence of the Natives’ Land Act can still be felt in post-Apartheid South Africa, where, as critics point out, even the democratic land reform programs have moved too slowly to repair this damaging legacy.²

The farm novel genre uses the farm as a stage on which to dramatize a variety of land-related concerns: agricultural best practices, soil fertility, natural disasters, problems of intergenerational inheritance, the fraught nature of land use economics, the unequal distribution of arable land, the aesthetic compensation of landscape, and so on. As I showed in the case of C. M. van den Heever’s *Somer*, engagement with the land question primarily sought to defend the legitimacy of Afrikaner ownership against natural disasters (e.g., fires, storms) and anthropogenic threats (e.g., land bank, lad speculators). *African Farm*, by contrast, represents a far more ambivalent position vis-à-vis the land question. From a biographical perspective, this ambivalence is surprising given Schreiner’s continuous engagement with the politics of land; it preoccupies her writing from throughout her career, from the moonlit Karoo scene that opens *African Farm* to the extended topographical survey of the country in her posthumously published essay collection *Thoughts on South Africa*. As if in

² See, for example, Lungisile Ntsebeza and Ruth Hall’s edited volume, *The Land Question in South Africa: The Challenge of Transformation and Redistribution.*
summary of her life’s work, Schreiner concludes in *Thoughts* that the “right understanding of the South African people and their problem” requires “a clear comprehension of their land” (30). However, as various critics have noted, land has a conflicting status throughout Schreiner’s oeuvre, where it at once serves as a figure for her deep love for South Africa and a source of profound melancholy. Schreiner found it impossible to reconcile these conflicting emotions and often emphasized metaphysical pleasure at the expense of historical injustice. Anne McClintock, for instance, claims that Schreiner sought redemption from her various forms of exile by taking to the desert, where she found a metaphysical solace “projected onto the steadfast immensity of sky and veld” (265). Yet the retreat into her “longing for the infinite” was not entirely innocent: it “also concealed the very real history of colonial plunder that gave her privileged access to this immensity” (266). This ambivalence becomes particularly evident in *African Farm*, which has come under fire from other critics for its apparent erasure of history through the figure of empty land. Loren Anthony, for example, critiques the novel’s metaphysical investment in the land(scape) as a weak attempt to cover up the “overwhelming intransigence of the land issue, which forces a sacralized, pseudo-mystical response to untenable issues in the novel” (12). This is the “spiritual landscape” where Susan R. Horton claims “Schreiner habitually set up residence and felt most at home” (181). In *African Farm*, land comes to represent the disavowed site of historical violence that must remain empty in order for Schreiner (and her characters) to embrace its transcendent potential.

If the contradictions in Schreiner’s representation of land render her historical and political allegiances murky, then how is the critic to evaluate *African Farm’s* significance as the model that inaugurated the farm novel in southern Africa? Taking note of the novel’s irreducibly ambivalent representation of land leads Coetzee, for one, to question whether *African Farm* qualifies as a farm novel in the first place. According to him, Schreiner’s farm is “too little distinguishable from nature.” Yet at the same time as the farm seems indomesticable as raw nature, the bigotry, hypocrisy,
and idleness of its human inhabitants lend the farm an urban aura. In this sense, “Schreiner’s farm is an unnatural and arbitrary imposition on a doggedly ahistorical landscape” (4). Coetzee thus sees the farm as having a “twofold being,” at once as country (natural) and city (unnatural). “These two aspects merely coexist, juxtaposed. They form no synthesis” (2). He ultimately views this unresolved contradiction in the farm’s twofold being as a sign of Schreiner’s anticolonial vision, one that differs greatly from Pauline Smith and C. M. van den Heever, whose farms remain continuous with the “venerable Old-World” farm ideology. Unlike these, Schreiner’s farm “is never accepted as home” (4).

Influential as Coetzee’s reading has been, it does not fully account for the paradox of Schreiner’s farm: (anti)colonial ambivalence no longer seems satisfying as a catchall explanation for the novel’s challenging ideological murkiness. Postcolonial readings of the novel have not moved beyond this essential position, which Coetzee initially took in his 1986 essay “Farm Novel and Plaasroman in South Africa” and expanded in his 1989 volume White Writing. Instead of being the final word on the subject, Coetzee’s reading raises another question: How can Schreiner’s farm at once be “too little distinguishable from nature” and yet represent a microcosm of civilization, “a tiny society in the middle of the vastness of nature” (2)? How can the farm be perfectly natural and perfectly unnatural at the same time?

In my reading of African Farm, this oscillation turns out to be symptomatic of a stranger and more constitutive tension at work in the novel. This tension is at once formal and philosophical. In the first place, I characterize African Farm’s deep ambivalence as the product of a struggle between allegory and realism. This struggle is linked to another tension between the novel’s metaphysical sympathies and the unsettling actuality of the South African veld. As the former quietly yields to the latter—and as allegory yields to realism—the unquiet ecological realm begins to “creep” in from the margins of the narrative, giving voice to the low hum of an unheimliche Stimmung.
The Metaphysics of Allegory and the Stakes of Realism

In his classic work on the subject, Angus Fletcher defines allegory as a symbolic mode that “says one thing and means another” (2). As a procedure of linguistic encoding, allegory fosters a curious doubleness of vision. Such doubleness, we could say, produces a surface that conceals a hidden but symbolically resonant depth. This definition pays heed to the metaphysical origins of allegory as “a human reconstitution of divinely inspired messages, a revealed transcendental language which tries to preserve the remoteness of a properly veiled godhead” (21). Allegory therefore serves both obfuscatory and revelatory purposes. It is this tension that makes allegories “far less often the dull systems that they are reputed to be than they are symbolic power struggles” (23). However, as I am arguing throughout the chapters in Part Two, allegory’s doubleness of vision and the symbolic power struggles this doubleness entails profoundly complicate the task of interpretation. As Anne McClintock notes in her discussion of Olive Schreiner, the allegorical mode has a dark side that “both solicits and frustrates the desire for original meaning.” This is because allegory establishes an occult relationship between words and things—it purports (etymologically speaking, from ἄληγορία) “to speak in public of other, or secret things” (279–80).

The understanding of allegory as a metaphysical conceit—one meant (partially) to reveal transcendental depths—produces a symbolic structure that is at once disjunctive and unified, irreal and hyperreal. It is worth quoting Fletcher at length on this point:

[The] visual clarity of allegorical imagery is not normal; it does not coincide with what we experience in daily life. It is much more like the hyperdefinite sight that a drug such as mescaline induces. It is discontinuous, lavish or fragmentary detail. . . . [Furthermore,] its so-called “illustrative” character is more than merely “tacked on” to a moral discussion. Allegorical imagery must be illustrative, because its discontinuous nature does not allow a normal sense world to be created. In the picture plane of the typical representational painting, objects, regardless of their importance in the scheme of things, will be compelled to obey the laws of perspective. Objects in the background will be drawn small, objects in the foreground will be drawn large. Such a picture plane will yield to the eye of the perceiver what we know as “the real world.” . . . An allegorical world gives us objects all lined up, as it were, on the frontal plane of a mosaic, each with its own “true,” unchanging size and shape. Allegory perhaps has a “reality” of its own, but it is certainly not of the sort that operates in
our perceptions of the physical world. It has an idealizing consistency of thematic content, because, in spite of the visual absurdity of much allegorical imagery, the relations between ideas are under strong logical control. (102–5)

Allegory produces a distorted version of reality, one that is at once decidedly unrealistic and yet also incredibly real. In Fletcher’s powerful description, allegory forsakes realistic perspective and instead brings all objects onto the same visual and thematic plane. From a certain point of view, this rejection of naturalistic perspective appears strange and discontinuous. And yet, the “strong logical control” according to which the thematic content of the allegory is organized also functions as a form of unification. A new world is consolidated, one that is less “real” and yet more “true” than the surface reality.

As this last point suggests, allegory privileges depth over surface in a way that Jameson’s symptomatic reading champions. Yet Fletcher also points out that allegory doesn’t entirely discount the surface. In fact, as he claims, “The whole point of allegory is that it does not need to be read exegetically; it often has a literal level that makes good enough sense all by itself.” As he goes on to claim, however, “somehow this literal surface suggests a peculiar doubleness of intention, and while it can, as it were, get along without interpretation, it becomes much richer and more interesting if given interpretation” (7). Though perhaps unwittingly, by defining allegory as a surface that “suggests” a hidden depth, Fletcher effectively opens any and all texts to be considered as allegories.

Fletcher published his treatise in 1964 at the height of structuralist discourse, and the pluralization of allegory his book facilitates continued into the poststructuralism of the 1970s and ‘80s. It appeared most notably in Paul de Man’s *Allegories of Reading*, which locates allegory in the critic’s own “process of reading[…] in which rhetoric is a disruptive intertwining of trope and persuasion” (ix). It would seem, then, that any text could be understood as an allegory in some looser sense. This conflation should, at the very least, give us pause.
The purpose of this excursus on allegory has been, first, to spotlight its metaphysical origins and, second, to suggest that allegory is as much a symbolic mode (that is, a literary figure) that is intrinsic to a text as it is a critical decision to “read into” a text. In this sense, allegory seems unavoidable; any intimation of meaning is always, as Jameson reminds us, “already an allegory” (*Antinomies* 33). My point, therefore, is not to claim that allegory can be done away with. Rather, it is to emphasize the frustrated relationship that allegory has with reality, and to suggest that instead of privileging the idealized and unified logic of the allegorical depth, critics can instead begin with the discontinuous surface.

*African Farm* can help to make a similar shift. Schreiner has long been known for her interest in allegory, which she considered the highest mode of symbolic art. She has received both negative and positive attention for this fondness. Many early readers (including Schreiner's own editor, Dan Jacobsen) criticized what they saw as her digressive use of allegory within the context of longer narratives like *African Farm*. As Gerald Monsman notes, however, more recent critics have begun to recognize Schreiner’s “adroit use of the symbolic fable, of the religious quest, and of social and political allegory to illuminate the failures of colonialism” (50). These conflicting critical positions repeat the split I highlighted above between the discontinuity of allegory as a narrative mode (i.e., full of digressions) and the totalizing tendency of interpretation (i.e., as political allegory).

One useful case for understanding this split is the allegory of the hunter, which first appeared in *African Farm* and was later republished as a self-contained story in Schreiner's 1891 volume *Dreams*. In the novel, a stranger passing through the farm stops to tell Waldo a story about a man who departs from society to pursue an elusive bird of truth. The hunter spends his life clambering up a precipitous mountain path in search of the bird. In the end, just as he realizes that

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3 Perhaps the most obvious example of Schreiner's use of allegory to illuminate the failures of colonialism appears in *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*. This short novel, which was published in 1897, offers a powerful critique of Cecil Rhodes and the violence and profit-driven ideology of his campaign for Rhodesia.
his own harrowing and apparently fruitless journey has actually forged a path for other truth seekers, he receives a single feather as a reward. The deployment of such an allegorical digression proves rather complex, at once a complete story in its own right and hence speaking for itself, and at the same time providing a key for allegorical readings of the broader text. Irene Gorak, for instance, reads *African Farm* as a “test case for the recuperability of allegory in progressive social narrative” (“Colonial Allegory” 56). She suggests that a digression like the hunter’s allegory, which is “set like a capstone half-way through the book,” may disrupt the narrative, but it also serves to “[crown] the younger character’s colonial hopes and terrors in a story of a man who leaves conventional society and its pieties” (61). Formally, then, allegory ultimately tethers the narrative together, allowing the reader to fashion a conceptual unity from disparate parts.

Upon closer inspection, however, allegory has a difficult relationship with “reality” in Gorak’s reading. She claims that throughout *African Farm*, “Schreiner empties the world of ‘reality’ only to saturate it with stories told by alien, potentially treacherous guides” (61). And yet, in order for these self-contained stories and allegories to apply symbolically to the larger narrative, they simultaneously depend on the novel establishing a foundational sense of reality. This provides the basis for what Gorak, following Gustave Coubert, calls a “real allegory,” which features “fragments of artifice set in a realistic frame” (56). If “self-conscious art challenges our faith in realistic representation,” then real allegory “turns back the challenge,” first establishing the order of the “real” to offer “rich opportunities for moral and political digression” (56–57). Unfortunately, Gorak’s study leaves the nature of this reality obscure. Nor does she clarify how an allegorically inclined critic should understand this realistic frame when otherwise invested in the metaphysical revelation of occult meaning. How is it possible to perceive this realistic frame when the allegorical mode “both solicits and frustrates the desire for original meaning,” creating an intrinsic ambiguity
that continually “threaten[s] to undermine its [own] intelligibility” (McClintock 280)? Where does the real reside in a text so richly “intercalated” (Gorak’s term) with allegorical visions?

To pursue an answer, it is perhaps best to turn to Schreiner’s own preface to *African Farm*, which, despite her predilection for the allegorical mode, frames the novel as a realist narrative. In the preface, Schreiner confesses to her reader that, because the novel deals “with a subject that is far removed from the round of English daily life, it of necessity lacks the charm that hangs about the ideal representation of familiar things” (xxxix). Schreiner goes on to explain that whatever her implied British reader might find unfamiliar in her work could not be made familiar without also being decontextualized and idealized. For Schreiner, such a process of decontextualization and idealization is inherent in the conventional approach to the realist novel, and she wants no truck with conventionalism. Indeed, she describes this approach as the “stage method” of representing human life, a method that offers readers an illusion of “completeness” and satisfying predictability: “we know with an immutable certainty that at the right crises each [character] will reappear and act his part, and, when the curtain falls, all will stand before it bowing” (xxxix). According to Schreiner, the stage method of conventional realism is profoundly unrealistic. It corresponds, as Deborah Spillman notes, “with a social evolutionary narrative that attempts to construct the illusion of seamless causality, in which arbitrary, discontinuous, and incidental ‘facts’ find no place” (193).

In opposition to the stage method, then, Schreiner introduces “the method of the life we all lead.” This method frustrates the desire for predictability: “Here, nothing can be prophesied. There is a strange coming and going of feet. Men appear, act and re-act upon each other, and pass away. When the crisis comes the man who would fit it does not return. When the curtain falls no one is ready” (xxxix). Schreiner’s real-life realism bears some resemblance to that of Charles Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*, which she read while drafting *African Farm* and which, according to Raymond Williams, developed a narrative style that was able to register increasingly complex and arbitrary
social relations. Not only does this unconventional realism offer a more realistic representation of the “strange coming and going of feet” characteristic of “the life we all lead,” but it does so without submitting real life to the idealizing and unifying strategies normally required to transform it into art and endow it with superadded meaning. Schreiner’s own method allows for disjointed aesthetics, unresolved conflicts, and a fragmented and episodic narrative structure; it develops a realism that thwarts any attempt to see African Farm as a reassuring and satisfying whole.

At the same time as it resists the conventional tendencies of Victorian realism, African Farm inaugurates a new South African realism that Deborah Spillman has deemed “grotesque.” Drawing on John Ruskin’s theorization of the concept in The Stones of Venice, Spillman frames the grotesque as a Victorian aesthetic category that diverges from verisimilitude. Instead of offering strictly “realistic” representations of the world, the grotesque presents visions that are “wild and monstrous, rude and savage.” Yet this preference for the wild or the rude does not denote a warping of reality so much as it indicates a “deep insight into nature” (Ruskin, qtd. in Spillman 188). The grotesque therefore strains Lukács’ definition of realism as a critical mode dedicated to gathering and understanding the (human) social totality. By contrast, the grotesque proffers “an aesthetic of fragmentation and incongruous juxtapositions” (188) that undermines any sense of wholeness and speaks to an underlying reality that exceeds the human.

As Schreiner elaborates further in her Preface, African Farm’s realism required the author’s immersion in and close attention to her immediate surroundings. For this reason, African Farm could never have been written far from South Africa’s particular reality. Distance gives way to imaginative flights of fancy, which would have reduced Schreiner’s novel to little more than a commonplace colonial text, a “history of wild adventure” (xxxix). Such a novel would “best [be] written in Piccadilly or in the Strand” where “the gifts of the creative imagination, untrammelled by contact

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4 See Williams, The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence.
with any fact, may spread their wings” (xxxix–xl). By contrast, a work such as *African Farm* requires the writer to reject those “brilliant phases and shapes which the imagination sees in far-off lands” and instead “to paint the scenes among which he has grown” (xl). It is only by attending to “what lies before him” that “he will find that the facts creep in on him” (xl). Schreiner’s realism is thus a homegrown varietal specially cultivated for South African soil; it does not require imaginative flourishes to conjure “brilliant phases and shapes,” because the facts of life in South Africa are already flourish enough. Schreiner’s phrase “creep in” is evocative here, at once innocuous and distressing. She seems to suggest that the “facts” of South African reality settle in gradually over time—they seep into one’s consciousness. Yet the notion of *creeping* also spawns a more sinister vibe. Like a horror villain stalking his prey, South African reality creeps up on you from behind, revealing itself just when it’s too late to get away. It’s enough to give you the creeps. Certainly, Schreiner’s realism is creepier than it is grotesque. It is also more ecologically than socially oriented. As I will show in later sections, it is South Africa’s peculiar ecological (and geological) reality that contributes most to *African Farm’s* eerie undertones.

For a novel so often studied through the discourse of allegory, what is at stake in reading the novel as inaugurating a creepy, even uncanny revision of Victorian realism? Spillman, for one, argues that Schreiner’s realism links *African Farm* to indigenous aesthetics, and particularly to the aesthetics of the “Bushman” paintings that figure prominently in the novel. While this link casts Schreiner as a “model home-grown artist” (177), Spillman claims that it is also a “sign of [African Farm’s] colonial fetishism” (180). By contrast, just as I want to resist reading the novel’s allegory solely in connection to its colonial narrative, I also want to resist reading its realism as a form of colonial fetishism. Neither position is entirely satisfying. Indeed, what makes *African Farm* unique is not its exclusive

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5 As Spillman discusses at length, South African rock images captured the imagination of many Victorian writers, anthropologists, and geologists. Through their writings, these so-called “paintings” entered an intellectual economy that battled over their proper interpretation, typically (mis)reading them according to European aesthetic codes. See Spillman 175–80, 198–208.
use of allegory or realism, but rather its manifestation of a deep conflict between them—a conflict that I suspect animates Coetzee’s contradictory (and unresolved) observation that Schreiner’s farm is at once perfectly natural and perfectly unnatural. Whereas Coetzee sees this conflict as a challenge to its status as a farm novel, I see it as the key to what makes *African Farm* an exemplar of the genre. Through its penchant for allegory and its metaphysical inheritance, the novel emblematizes the farmworld ideology, which presents the farm as a mystically unified home. The metaphysics of the farmworld emerges in *African Farm* through the figure of Nature, which Schreiner introduces as a transcendental home for those exiled by the disappearance of God. At the same time, however, the figure of Nature competes with the novel’s uncanny realism. This realism operates on multiple fronts, by turns fragmenting the novel into discontinuous episodes, infiltrating human narratives with nonhuman points of view, instigating unsettling encounters with strange natural phenomena, and enabling disquieting moments of perceived interobjectivity. In each of these ways, Schreiner’s uncanny ecology works to unsettle Nature’s homely metaphysics.

**Schreiner’s Homely Metaphysics: Land, Landscape, and Nature in *African Farm***

Postcolonial scholars often critique Schreiner’s treatment of land for its tendency to seek solace in the metaphysical at the expense of history, but their critiques generally neglect to acknowledge a curious slippage between Schreiner’s personal investment in land, her literary discourse about landscape, and her philosophy of Nature. This slippage persists throughout all of Schreiner’s work, and it exhibits an unstable relationship between her investment in the political actuality of “real life” and her simultaneous retreat to metaphysical ideals. For my purposes here, it is Schreiner’s collection of political essays, *Thoughts on South Africa*, that most clearly showcases a slippage between land, landscape, and Nature. In the opening chapter, Schreiner attests to the importance of understanding the land, where “land” refers to geographical and ecological features as
well as to South Africa’s sociopolitical history and the country’s unjust land distribution policies. In order to understand the land, then, Schreiner offers a lengthy survey of South African topography, passing through a number of different ecologies and noting geological as well as anthropogenic and historical features. At various point in her survey, she stops to conjure the grandeur of different natural scenes, giving the reader something like a typology of South African landscape aesthetics. For Schreiner, however, the true comprehension of South Africa’s land requires a further level of abstraction, one that traces a “certain unity” running through the variety of landscapes peculiar to the country. She describes the country’s natural unity in terms of “a certain colossal plenitude, a certain large freedom in all its natural proportions” (49). The key to understanding South Africa, then, is not a scientific or historical mapping of its land, nor an awareness and appreciation of its various landscapes. The issue is Nature writ large:

If Nature here wishes to make a mountain, she runs a range for five hundred miles; if a plain, she levels eighty; if a rock, she tilts five thousand feet of strata on end; our skies are higher and more intensely blue; our waves larger than others; our rivers fiercer. There is nothing measured, small nor petty in South Africa. . . . It is this “so much” for which the South African yearns when he leaves his native land. (49–50)

Schreiner eventually translates this abstract unity-in-vastness from Nature into the social sphere. She argues that even more important to social cohesion than economic or political unity is a yet more abstract “vital unity” that would allow for “the production of anything great and beautiful by our people as a whole” (61). Over the course of the first chapter of Thoughts on South Africa, then, the land problem gets transformed, first, into an issue of Nature’s unity and, subsequently, into a problem social unity. A skeptical reading would venture that Schreiner’s dream of metaphysical holism belies an anxiety about the impossibility of any such cohesion. Late in the chapter Schreiner repeatedly deploys a rhetorical strategy whereby she emphasizes the challenges facing South Africa,
then roundly refutes the seeming impossibility.\(^6\) The oscillation between apparent hopelessness and the rhetorical recuperation of hope suggests an optimism curbed by anxiety—an ambivalent stance that emerges clearly in Schreiner’s assumption that, should South Africa ever achieve this higher unity, “no man now living will see the final solution” (63). By chapter’s end, Nature’s metaphysical solace no longer seems a sure bet.

In *African Farm* there is a similarly swift movement past land( scape) toward the compensatory unity of Nature. This may be surprising given the ubiquity of “landscape” as a keyword in Schreiner scholarship. For instance, take Susan R. Horton, who emphasizes Schreiner’s “psychic landscapes,” or Gerald Monsman, who subtitled his 1991 monograph on Schreiner’s fiction “Landscape and Power.” These and other critics explicitly link landscape to the more metaphysical aspects of Schreiner’s fiction. Upon closer inspection, however, landscape description in *African Farm* tends not to reaffirm Schreiner’s metaphysical investments as much as they showcase the principles of her self-proclaimed realism. Simon Lewis comes close to acknowledging this when he claims that Schreiner’s landscapes resist traditional representational codes. Although he agrees that her monotonous and empty landscapes “still work to justify imperialist occupation of the land” (95), Lewis ultimately argues that they resist settler ideology through their “horizontality.” The width and flatness of the Karoo thwart the imperialist desire for an elevated view; they also undermine the “vertical” aesthetic codes that enable the picturesque and the sublime. However, in making this argument, Lewis ignores the fact that it is not simply Schreiner’s representation of the Karoo that is resistant to European aesthetic categories, but rather the landforms themselves. As Coetzee notes in *White Writing*, finding the proper language to depict South Africa’s landforms strained European

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\(^6\) Here is one example of this rhetorical gesture: “Must we for ever remain a vast, inchoate, invertebrate mass of humans, divided horizontally into layers of race, mutually antagonistic, and vertically severed by lines of political state division, which cut up our races without simplifying our problems, and which add to the bitterness of race conflict the irritation of political division? Is national life and organization unattainable by us? We believe that no one can impartially study the condition of South Africa and feel that it is so” (60).
representational capacities. For the first Europeans in the region, the South African landscape “remain[ed] alien, impenetrable, until a language [was] found in which to win it, speak it, represent it” (7). And not just a new way of representing the landscape but a new way of seeing it became necessary. Specifically, the proper viewing of the Karoo required a “geological, not a botanical gaze” (167), and Schreiner was the first to make this revelation in literature: her “penetrating gaze reveal[ed], not the superficial aesthetic form of the land, but an underlying prehistoric form threatening to erupt back into history” (168). I will return to Coetzee’s image of prehistory’s eruption into history later in this chapter. For the moment, however, I wish to emphasize that, while Schreiner’s geological language may be resistant to European representational strategies, this language was made possible by the rocky South African environment that was there long before she arrived. If her landscapes seem unfamiliar to the European reader, it is less due to her representational techniques than to her realist method, according to which she paints precisely “what lies before” her—no matter how strange or unfamiliar.

Despite this discussion of Schreiner’s apparently innovative landscapes, a close examination of African Farm reveals few instances of the kind of extended landscape description that have drawn comparisons with other colonial writers such as Isak Dinesen.7 And, when such description does appear, it channels something unnerving about the environment as much as it reveals its “horizontality.” For instance, the novel opens with a nighttime vision of the moonlit Karoo, in which the “wide, lonely plain” gleams with “a weird and an almost oppressive beauty” (1; my emphasis). The sole form that breaks the monotony is “a small, solitary ‘kopje’ ” that is morbidly yet fantastically reminiscent of “some giant’s grave.” In the glow of moonlight, only the uncanny shadow-play of plants disrupts the emptiness of this expanse: “stunted ‘karroo’ bushes” populate the plain “with their long, finger-like leaves,” while atop the kopje “a clump of prickly-pears lifted their

7 Both Susan R. Horton and Simon Lewis have written comparative studies of Schreiner and Dinesen.
thorny arms, and reflected, as from mirrors, the moonlight on their broad, fleshy leaves” (1). The moonlight creates an unsettling double vision of the Karoo: at once disturbing in its emptiness and desolate mood, and yet full with quasi-anthropomorphized botanical life forms; simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, beautiful and creepy.

Elsewhere in the novel, landscape comes into frame by way of absence and indirection rather than through direct description. The ecological uncanny is at work in these moments as well. Take, for instance, Waldo’s disquieting return to the farm after his weeklong absence to conduct business in town. Waldo arrives home with a sudden jolt of recognition, realizing that he had been riding in familiar territory without knowing it: “opening his eyes wide, it struck him that the brown plain he looked at was the old home farm. For half an hour he had been riding in it, and he had not known it” (64). Here the landscape figures in the narrative only through its implicit monotony—“featureless” and “unmappable,” as Simon Lewis calls it (97). Without any concrete description, the reader must infer the kind of “brown plain” in which distances collapse, time evaporates, and the border between the “domesticated” farmland and the outlying “wilderness” blurs completely. Importantly, the landscape’s absent presence serves a narratological purpose. Soon after his arrival, Waldo learns that his gentle and loving father, Otto, had died in his absence, passing the role of farm-keeper on to the devious and cruel Bonaparte Blenkins. In one fell swoop, the only home Waldo has ever known undergoes an unhomely inversion—a twist of fate that had already been foretold in Waldo’s failure to recognize the landscape of his “old home farm.” In a paradigmatic example of how South African reality can at once creep in on one’s consciousness, creep up on one, and creep one out, landscape’s eerie presence arises in the narrative without ever becoming formalized in description.

Whereas the estranging presence of landscape occurs minimally and often indirectly in *African Farm*, Nature and its homely metaphysics feature prominently. Similar to how the land
problem in *Thoughts* transmutes into a question of South Africa’s “natural” unity, existential crisis in *African Farm* resolves into the transcendental unity of Nature. Nature performs much of its metaphysical work at the very heart of the novel. In the first chapter of part two, “Times and Seasons,” *African Farm* shifts dramatically in tone as the narrator adopts the inclusive third-person plural “we” and charts how the disenchantment following from Waldo’s crisis of faith eventually, though painfully, finds reprieve upon awakening to the deep enchantment of Nature. It is in this sense that Schreiner’s Nature becomes homely, offering Waldo a way home from his theological exile. The depiction of Nature in *African Farm* adopts elements from two writers of particular importance to Schreiner: the American philosopher-poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, beloved to Schreiner through his *Essays*, and the British polymath Herbert Spencer, whose social Darwinist-inflected *First Principles* she devoured rapturously. Nature in *African Farm* represents a modified Emersonian transcendentalism stripped of its divinity and infused with a secular, more Spencerian sense of reality’s absolute unity: “Not a chance jumble,” as Schreiner writes, but “a living thing, a One” (118).

But just as Schreiner’s insistence on spiritual unity in *Thoughts* intimated an unspoken anxiety, so, too, does the resolution of Nature into a miraculous Whole suggest something that haunts *African Farm* at its core. Why, we might ask, does Schreiner need to trade one transcendentalism (God) for another (Nature)? What compensation do the figures of “Universal Unity” and “Universal Life” (260) offer for struggling characters such as Waldo and Lyndall? In spite of the metaphysical recompense furnished by Nature in God’s absence, this trade still comes at a cost. To see why, I turn to specific passages from “Times and Seasons,” some of the most lyrical in the novel, and whose lyricism, I argue, belies certain uncanny aspects that are otherwise obscured by Nature’s enchantment.
The Creeping of the Ecological Uncanny in “Times and Seasons”

Like a miniature Bildungsroman of modern humanity, “Times and Seasons” narrates “our” passage from crisis to redemption. Waldo stands in here as the modern every(wo)man. Facing the alienating reality of a universe no longer shepherded by God’s presence, Waldo experiences a profound existential crisis. The novel figures this crisis as a disturbing moment of self-recognition. Here, “selfhood” happens to Waldo (and to all of “us”) like a scene from some Hegelian horror film in which the self becomes divorced from its surroundings as part of its violent initiation into self-consciousness: “One day we sit there and look up at the blue sky, and down at our fat little knees; and suddenly it strikes us, Who are we? This I, what is it? We try to look in upon ourself, and ourself beats back upon ourself. Then we get up in great fear and run home as hard as we can. We can’t tell anyone what frightened us. We never quite lose that feeling of self again” (103). Self-consciousness comes upon us suddenly and obscurely, inspiring an anxiety that never leaves us. Schreiner captures this fear rhetorically in her recursive gesture—“ourself beats back upon ourself”—which turns on the uncanny doubling of an alienated self. We could read this as the novel’s existential take on Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind, in which the individual “reflect[s] itself into itself out of its immersion in the external world” (57). But Schreiner’s passage also suggests the possibility for a Hegelianism stripped of the potential for self-knowledge. In the face of self-inquiry (“This I, what is it?”), the self may resist—that is, “beat back” upon—itself. Self-consciousness therefore does not resolve the mystery of selfhood or of consciousness; there is no dialectical path toward (self-)transcendence here.

Within the narrative logic of “Times and Seasons,” Nature appears as a metaphysical balm to alleviate the trauma of existential awakening. What was lost with existential awareness and the crisis of faith is regained through a clarity of vision that no longer sees Nature through a glass darkly:

From our earliest hour we have been taught that the thought of the heart, the shaping of the rain-cloud, the amount of wool that grows on a sheep’s back, the length of a drought, and
the growing of the corn, depend on nothing that moves immutable, at the heart of all things; but on the changeable will of a changeable being, whom our prayers can alter. . . . Was it possible for us in an instant to see Nature as she is—the flowing vestment of an unchanging reality? When a soul breaks free from the arms of a superstition, bits of the claws and talons break themselves off in him. It is not the work of a day to squeeze them out. (114)

By imagining Christian theology as a superstition with a talon-like grip that sinks its claws into the believer and keeps her locked in a false conception of reality, this passage also implicitly laments the inevitable pain required to remove those sunken talons. With the lifting of the theological veil, the revelation of Nature comes all at once, but the pain of its sudden apparition does not fade so swiftly. And the suddenness of the transfer is indeed at issue here: according to Schreiner’s imagery, one does not wriggle one’s way out of superstition’s claws slowly; one must wrest oneself away abruptly and with enough force that the claws break off in the flesh.

According to “Times and Seasons,” when one breaks from the talons of theology, one rushes straight into the embrace of Nature and opens one’s eyes to her wonders. The turn from God to Nature brings a strange and unanticipated world into focus. The apparent disorder resolves into a miraculous internal order:

And now we turn to Nature. All these years we have lived beside her, and we have never seen her; now we open our eyes and look at her. The rocks have been to us a blur of brown; we bend over them, and the disorganized masses dissolve into a many-coloured, many-shaped, carefully-arranged form of existence. . . We have been so blinded by thinking and feeling that we have never seen the world. (116)

With its celebratory lyricism, this passage moves swiftly from the pain of theological disillusionment toward the wonder of Nature’s reenchantment and eventually (despite the passage’s critique of “thinking”) to the miracle of Enlightenment rationality. Indeed, this passage goes on to reveal a number of other “wonder[s] sleeping in [the karoo’s] teeming bosom,” including “[t]hat wonderful people, the ants,” “that smaller people . . . who live in the flowers,” as well as ground spiders, horned beetles, green flies, and spotted grubs (117). The narrator also notes that “we look into dead ducks
and lambs,” and goes on to discuss the dissection of a drowned gander (117–18). Nature offers miraculous wonders, and its mysteries of life and death animate scientific curiosity.

What I find significant about these passages is that they move a bit too quickly toward rational illumination, papering a bit too neatly over both the pain of disillusionment and the unsettling possibilities of a Nature that so suddenly reveals itself as having always already been right under “our” noses. If removing the broken-off talons of superstition “is not the work of a day,” then neither is coming to terms with an unfamiliar order of reality. The celebratory embrace of Nature therefore carries with it a hint of repression. As Susan R. Horton has noted, Schreiner herself often experienced the monochromatic Karoo where she set African Farm as a kind of “repressed melancholy.” Schreiner’s daughter and biographer, Lyndall Gregg, retells her mother’s sardonic joke that God had fashioned the Karoo at night, and “when he saw it in the morning, . . . was so angry that He threw stones at it. Anyone who knows the Karoo and those ironstone kopjes,” Gregg goes on to explain, “can well understand the deep depression they will induce” (qtd. in Horton 176–77). The South African-born historian Noël Mostert has also emphasized the repressed melancholy that quite literally hides within the Great Karoo landscape: “an ‘arid emptiness’ where the fossils of creatures that walked two hundred million years ago ‘are embedded now in pale outline in the reddish, bluish and green shales of its mesas’ ” (qtd. in Horton 177). In a true Freudian sense, such repression signals an unconscious recognition of Nature’s strange and chilling reality. Mostert’s gesture to the eerie temporality of fossils is surprisingly on point here. Indeed, what the narrator of “Times and Seasons” wishes to see as the Karoo’s arid emptiness turns out to be crowded with fossilized creatures:

Historically, close attention to the fossil record has yielded some of the most unsettling scientific theories. Take, for example, the discovery of the American mastodon in the nineteenth century. When compared with other similarly confounding fossils from elsewhere in the world, the mastodon remains led French paleontologist Georges Cuvier to the theory of extinction. In this way, the fossil record provided a strange and uncanny mirror, one that pointed to the possibility that any species—humans included—might be wiped off the face of the planet. See Elizabeth Kolbert, The Sixth Extinction 23–46.
Here masses of rainbow-tinted crystals, half-fused together; there bands of smooth grey and red, methodically overlaying each other. This rock here is covered with a delicate silver tracery, in some mineral, resembling leaves and branches; there on the flat stone, on which we so often have sat to weep and pray, we look down, and see it covered with the fossil footprints of great birds, and the beautiful skeleton of a fish. We have often tried to picture in our mind what the fossilized remains of creatures must be like, and all the while we sat on them. (116)

The final sentence subtly belies the tranquility of Nature’s beautiful revelation. On the one hand, it plays on the trope woven throughout the novel in which theological blindness gives way to the clear vision of Nature. On the other hand, and despite the narrator’s tone of wonder, this sentence offers a literally unsettling image in which the seated, praying believer stands up and turns her eyes from the sky to the ground to see that a more immediate reality has lurked underneath her all along. Nature suddenly appears closer than she ever thought possible, forcing her to trade the dream of history for its physical embodiment in the fossils under her feet.

While the novel attempts to cast these fossils as specimens of natural Beauty, this gesture strikes the reader as a lyrical act of repression that disavows both their strangeness and the suddenness of their appearance. Allegorical readings of farm novels often interpret such strange phenomena as evocations of the ghost of history—that is, of a kind of recuperative gesture in which the violence of dispossession resurfaces in order symbolically to dispossess the dispossessionists. Readings like this tend to revert to politics to resolve narrative weirdnesses.9 I suspect, however, that something stranger is at work in this context. Here, it is not the ghost of human history that resurfaces. Instead, Nature’s revelation represents the ghost of pre-history erupting back into the present. I want briefly to return to Mostert’s allusion to the repression of the Great Karoo’s rich

9 See, for example, Julie Hakim Azzam’s *The Alien Within: Postcolonial Gothic and the Politics of Home*. The gothic figure of the returned corpse guides Azzam’s reading of (briefly) Shreiner’s *African Farm* as well as Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist* and Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*. Azzam argues that the resolution of Gordimer’s novel—in which the African laborers finally bury the unknown black corpse and symbolically reclaim the farm—lays to rest “the ghost of history.” Azzam sees this as a too-easy politics suggesting that South Africa can heal if only white South Africans return the land to their black predecessors. By contrast, she reads the complex racial, gendered, and sexual dynamics in Coetzee’s novel in terms of a more fraught politics that prevents the ghost of history from ever finally being laid to rest. See also Loren Anthony, “Buried Narratives: Masking the Sign of History in *The Story of an African Farm*.”
fossil record and that record’s intimation of vast nonhuman timescales. Pointing to fossils here serves as a reminder of how densely packed the apparently empty Karoo actually is, but it also signals an uncanny threat. Indeed, close attention to the fossil record has yielded some of the most historical (and unsettling) scientific theories. Take, for example, the discovery of the American mastodon in the nineteenth century. French paleontologist Georges Cuvier had the fossil remains shipped from New York to Paris, where he could compare them with similarly confounding fossils from elsewhere in the world. His method of comparative paleontology eventually led him to the conclusion that the remains belonged to a creature that had once walked the earth but had since completely died off. The theory of extinction was born. The study of Nature’s past therefore offered a strange and uncanny view into a future when any species—humans included—might be wiped off the face of the planet.¹⁰

Clearly, something obscure and potentially disquieting hides beneath the wondrous surface of Nature, and the narrative of “Times and Seasons” itself seems to repress it. As the episode with the fossils suggests, what hides beneath Nature’s surface is the uncanny force of ecological reality, the unsettling intimation of which threatens to disrupt the reassuring unity of Nature, though it never fully succeeds in doing so. Indeed, the narrative transition from God to Nature is too forceful; it disavows any pain involved in such a transfer of sympathies, preferring to bask in the miraculous new transcendentalism of Nature’s “Universal Unity.”

**Schreiner’s Ecological Realism and Waldo’s World-without-us Vision**

The apparent stalemate in *African Farm* between transcendent Nature and unsettling ecological reality reflects another conflict in the novel between, on the one hand, an allegorical mode that seeks to draw connections across an otherwise disjointed text and organize it into a conceptual

¹⁰See Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction* 23–46.
unity, and, on the other hand, an uncanny realism that works against this holistic desire by insisting on the strangeness of ecological actuality.

At first (and even second) reading, neither allegory nor realism appears to win out. I want to argue, however, that in the end, realism has a slight edge on allegory. To see why, I must first turn to some peculiar examples of landscape visions from Schreiner’s later work, *Thoughts on South Africa*, for comparison.

As I’ve already mentioned, the opening chapter of *Thoughts* presents a lengthy geographical survey of South Africa. Within this survey, Schreiner offers several “closer” looks at particular environments that feature uncanny encounters with natural phenomena. She describes, for instance, the dramatic compression of distance made possible by the veld’s vast openness: “In the still, clear air you can see the rocks on a hill ten miles off as if they were beside you; the stillness is so intense that you can hear the heaving of your own breast” (38; my emphasis). The landscape is literally breathtaking, both beautiful and startling in the double sense of the word “stunning.” In another example, Schreiner includes a brief biological survey, explaining how imitative adaptation has allowed plants and insects to survive in the Karoo’s exceptional conditions. She tells of one “curious little plant” with “sharp-pointed green leaves” whose “resemblance to the lichen growing on the rocks, besides which it is always found, is so great, that not till you tread on it, and your foot sinks in, do you discover the deception” (39–40). Similarly, she describes a “large square insect with hardly any power of flight [that] protects itself by lying motionless on red stones, which it so exactly resembles in color, having even the rough cleavage marks upon it, that it is impossible to detect it, though you know it to be there” (40). In both cases, Schreiner not only expresses wonder at the principles of imitative adaptation at work in the Karoo, but she also intimates the startling effects they have on human travelers passing through: both the prickly plants and the red insects make their otherwise invisible presence known suddenly and painfully.
In her survey, Schreiner also indulges in more traditional landscape visions, the likes of which she largely avoids in *African Farm*. These visions read like traveler’s guides meant to help explorers frame an optimal landscape experience. Schreiner’s guide-like passages begin by emptying out the landscape, only to reveal it as a “teeming bosom” of life that was never “empty” in the first place. In one instance, detailing how to view the Karoo, Schreiner recommends that the reader travel twenty miles away from “some solitary farm-house” until she can “ride without seeing a living thing, nor passing even a herd of sheep or goats, or a korhaan or mierkat.” With no other creature in sight, Schreiner tells her reader to settle down “in a narrow plain between two low hills” where “the horizon is bounded by a purple mountain thirty miles off”:

You put your saddle down . . . and you seat yourself beside your saddle on the ground. . . . In the red sand at your feet the ants are running to and fro, carrying away the crumbs that may have fallen from your saddle-bag; and in the stillness you can hear your horse break the twigs from the bushes as he feeds; he moves further off, and you cannot hear even that. Then you notice on the red sand a little to the right, at the foot of a Karoo bush, a scaly lizard, with his head raised, and his belly palpitating on the red sand, watching you. (40)

This vision involves a meticulous emptying out of the vast landscape, only to reveal that this apparent emptiness still teems with life—and, most importantly, that *this life is right next to you, watching your every move*. As with the view of the far-off stones that drastically compresses distance, this vision and others like it undermine the “imperial eyes” of the traditional landscape viewer by collapsing vast distance (and solitude) into radical closeness (and intimacy).11

In all of these cases, however, despite the sudden revelation of proximity in vastness, the unsettling qualities of these uncanny phenomena quickly pass, and the traveler returns to self-reflection. The “oppressive, weird, [and] fantastic” (38) closeness of distant stones, the plants and insects hidden in plain sight, and the watchful lizard all still bring the traveler’s thoughts back to herself. Schreiner still revels in her solitude despite the disquieting proximity of these ecological strangers. Indeed, she insists that such encounters do not induce anxiety so much as self-awareness:

11 I take the term “imperial eyes” from the title of Mary Louise Pratt’s classic study of colonial travel writing.
“It is not fear one feels, with that clear, blue sky above one; that which creeps over one is not dread. It was amid such scenes as these, amid such motionless, immeasurable silences, that the Oriental mind first framed its noblest conception of the unknown, the ‘I am that I am’ of the Hebrew” (41). 

*Thoughts* retreats to higher metaphysical ground, fleeing uncanny encounter by entering the undiscovered country of the “I.” Densely populated vastness condenses into an empty dwelling for the solitary self.

Like *African Farm*, *Thoughts* attempts to find a higher home in abstraction. Unlike the novel, however, *Thoughts* offers a much more peaceful “return to the self” that remains unburdened by any sense of alienation; retreating to the “I” is not only noble, but also grounding. In *African Farm*, by contrast, the Hegelian nightmare that decouples the self from the world proves terrifying and painful and must be soothed by the turn to Nature. What is crucial, however, is that in *African Farm*, the subject’s return to herself does not ultimately solve anything: Lyndall’s homegrown feminism leads her into a fatal impasse—pregnant, in ill health, and refusing the warmth of others—while Waldo’s search for himself in the world at large leads to more profound disenchantment and the realization that “the ideal [is] always more beautiful than the real” (226). Far from the mid-narrative transcendentalism of Nature, and despite the novel’s brief eleventh-hour appeal to “the Divine compensation of Nature” (267), *African Farm* ends on an obscure note of existential tragedy. As Waldo proclaims in his unfinished letter to Lyndall, who dies before he can send it: “Ah, all dreams and lies! No ground anywhere” (259).

Furthermore, although the novel ends with human tragedy, it is the ecological uncanny that has the last word. *African Farm’s* final scene depicts Waldo in contemplation while sitting in the sunshine on the farmhouse *stoep*. As he sits, he reaches out to a group of chickens clucking around him, seeking a moment of connection. The chickens refuse to come to him, and, in this moment of refusal, Waldo dies. These events unfold unbeknownst to Em, who brings Waldo a glass of milk and

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finds him in apparent slumber. She places the glass next to him and reenters the house, consoling herself that he will wake soon and will be happy for the milk. The novel ends, however, with a grim subversion of Em’s perspective: “But the chickens were wiser” (270). In the novel’s final moments, Waldo’s death happens like a secret kept not only from Em but also, it seems, from the narrative itself, which inaptly (or perhaps just ironically) titles this final chapter, “Waldo Goes Out to Sit in the Sun.” Waldo does not merge with the landscape or with Nature in this moment, as some critics have suggested. Instead, he dies in disconnection, and in a disturbing rejection of the human desire for intimacy, the chickens wait until Waldo has passed before claiming his corpse as their own and roosting in his remains.

The chickens’ appropriation of Waldo’s body could be read as an uncanny realization of a prophetic vision he has near the beginning of the novel when he speculates with Lyndall and Em about an indigenous rock painting:

“No the Boers have shot them all [Bushmen], so that we never see a little yellow face peeping out among the stones.” He paused, a dreamy look coming over his face. “And the wild bucks have gone, and those days, and we are here. But we will be gone soon, and only the stones will lie on here, looking at everything like they look now. I know that it is I who am thinking,” the fellow added slowly, “but it seems as though it were they who are talking.” (16)

Following Coetzee, Loren Anthony has castigated Schreiner for this passage, arguing that it trades history for Nature, the violent reality of displacement for the dream of “the great transcendental sweep of time” (Anthony 12). In doing so, Schreiner allows history to speak, but only on the order of the repressed: hence it is the Bushmen speaking through the stones, and thus “the sign of history cannot be fully erased” (12). While Anthony’s postcolonial reading of repressed history’s irruption back into the text is powerful (particularly given Waldo’s upsetting characterization of the Bushmen as “so small and so ugly” [16]), I also think that it sweeps some of Schreiner’s strangeness under the rug. The figure of the talking stones, for instance, is not a momentary reference so easily connected
to the repressed history of displacement. Indeed, Waldo speaks insistently and at length about the stones and the message they bear:

“Lyndall, has it never seemed to you that the stones were talking to you? Sometimes,” he added, in a yet lower tone, “I lie under there with my sheep, and it seems that the stones are really speaking—speaking of the old things, of the time when the strange fishes and animals lived that are turned into stone now, and the lakes were here; and then of the time when the little Bushmen lived here . . . and used to sleep in the wild dog holes, and in the ‘sloots,’ and eat snakes, and shot the bucks with their poisoned arrows.” (15–16; my emphasis)

Rather than speaking of a repressed history extending back only two centuries or so, the stones speak from the perspective of geological time, endowing Waldo with a vision that stretches long before any human presence and (in the passage quoted above) projects forward to another time after human habitation in the Karoo comes to an end. More than just an image of Nature as a timeless process, this moment indulges in a compelling, even disturbing, vision of what in his thought experiment Alan Weisman called “the world without us.” Waldo’s vision implies more than the erasure of history: it is the radical recognition of the disparity between the narrow time line of human history and the vast span of geological time. What makes Waldo’s world-without-us vision more disturbing is that it comes to him in a moment of perceived interobjectivity, where he seriously entertains the possibility that he has confused his thoughts with the speech of the stones. Even after he has admitted the absurdity of the thought, he once again asks, “Has it never seemed so to you, Lyndall?” (16).

Waldo’s world-without-us vision might be easier to dismiss as an allegory of repressed history if the narrative of African Farm didn’t so frequently adopt nonhuman perspectives. At several points in the novel, the narrative focalization shifts suddenly in and out of animal consciousnesses. Curiously, much like Waldo’s passing among the chickens, these moments all occur in circumstances surrounding death. A gray mouse boldly skirts around the room in the quiet that ensues upon Otto’s death (62). Waldo’s dog, Doss, nervously waits as Lyndall tells her lover she cannot marry him and that she “cannot bear this life” (209), a comment that portends her own death. Although Waldo’s
interobjective experience with the stones may seem extreme, it is not exceptional in the novel. Indeed, his unsettling vision of Nature’s reclamation obscurely prophesies the chickens’ strange claim to his body at novel’s end.

And yet, despite my reading’s attempt to suture disparate parts of the novel into a unified meaning, these moments of nonhuman perspectives ultimately reassert the novel’s disjunctive structure (what Joseph Bristow calls its “jolting” episodic narrative [ix]) and aesthetics (what Susan Horton sees as its characteristically impersonal modernist style [181]). From a certain perspective, such flirtation with nonhuman focalization may seem more connective than disruptive, zooming as they do in and out of different points of view in such a way that, as Timothy Morton says of a similar passage in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*,\(^{12}\) brings the “environment as such . . . to the fore” (*Ecological Thought* 107). But Woolf’s careful control of indirect discourse allows her prose to shade smoothly between perspectives within the space of a single sentence. Schreiner’s passages, by contrast, emphasize disconnection: they inhabit the minds of these animals at much greater length, and they do so, as I have mentioned, at moments in the narrative when death ruptures connection, or at least threatens to do so. It is in this sense that such instances of nonhuman focalization invoke the uncanny effects of Schreiner’s ecological realism and undermine any simple understanding of Nature’s metaphysical unity.

Returning to Waldo’s world-without-us vision, what is more important than its potentially disjunctive function in the narrative is its implicit testament to the impossibility of any final human claim to ownership of the Karoo. This is precisely the kind of vision that causes Coetzee’s semi-fictionalized avatar in *Boyhood* to abandon the dream of inheriting the family farm: “Voëlfontein

\(^{12}\) Morton cites the following passage: “There’s a fine young feller aboard of it, Mrs. Dempster wagered, and away and away it went, fast and fading, away and away the aeroplane shot; soaring over Greenwich and all the masts; over the little island of grey churches, St. Paul’s and the rest till, on either side of London, fields spread out and dark brown woods where adventurous thrushes hopping boldly, glancing quickly, snatched the small snail and tapped him on a stone, once, twice, thrice” (qtd. in *Ecological Thought* 107; Woolf 28).
belongs to no one. . . . The farm exists from eternity to eternity” (95). In Boyhood, the boy John initially sees Voëlfontein as a self-enclosed “kingdom in its own right” (91), only to realize the unsettling truth that the “farm is not his home; he will never be more than a guest, an uneasy guest” (79). Similarly, any possibility for Schreiner’s farm to provide a home is consistently destabilized by the persistent ecological undercurrent that runs throughout the novel, allowing the uncanny force of life to creep in through the narrative cracks—much like Schreiner describes the miraculous teeming of life in the desolate Karoo, where even in “the crevices of the rocks little flowering plants are growing” (Thoughts 38). Although in the end neither the uncanny force of Schreiner’s evological realism nor Waldo’s world-without-us vision fully undermines African Farm’s metaphysical sympathies or its allegorical predisposition, the novel nevertheless conjures a disruptive ecological realist vision at the heart of the English farm novel—a vision that will continue to occupy the genre into the twentieth century. In particular, the vision of the world without us and its prophecy of ecological reclamation returns more forcefully in Doris Lessing’s The Grass is Singing and J. M. Coetzee’s In the Heart of the Country, which I take up in the following chapters. Whereas in Schreiner the uncanny work of ecological realism only begins to creep into the narrative, in Lessing and Coetzee it infiltrates with an increasingly apocalyptic vengeance.
Chapter 6

Farmworld Apocalypse: Doris Lessing’s Ecological Realism

Doris Lessing spent her childhood on a farm in Banket, a small town in Southern Rhodesia some 55 miles from Salisbury in the heart of Mashonaland. Her father, Captain Alfred Tayler, moved his family to southern Africa in 1925 after attending London’s Empire Exhibition, which had sold him on the dream of getting rich quick on maize in the far-flung colony. The Taylers arrived in Rhodesia hopeful, and while the rest of his family remained in Salisbury, Alfred set out to find the perfect plot of land. His scouting excursion led him to settle his family in the maize-growing district of Lomagundi. “It was in the north-east of Southern Rhodesia, very wild and with few people in it, and it stretched all the way up to the Zambesi escarpment” (Lessing, Under My Skin 50).

Lessing reflects that soon after her family had landed in southern Africa, it became obvious that the promise of wealth had been a false lure. “[My parents] must have realized by [then] that the enticements of the Empire Exhibition had little to do with reality. Fortunes had been made out of maize during the war, but were not being made now. But maize was what [my father] wanted to grow. And that area was still being ‘opened for settlement’ ” (50). Yet the impracticality of the situation was not limited to the economic situation of colonial maize farmers. The particular site her father had chosen was also problematic; it was perched on the top of a hill, so that all building materials, consumables, and belongings had to be hauled up and down steep slopes by a team of oxen. Adding to the difficulty was the fact that many of these “virgin” acres had yet to be cleared of trees and stones. Before cultivation could begin, then, a great deal of time and labor was required. It took years to make the Tayler farm even partially operational, and although her parents continued to work the land for the next two decades, it never became profitable.
What the farm lacked in economic and agricultural viability it made up for in picturesqueness. As Lessing recounts, “It was the beauty of the place, that was why my father chose it, and then my mother approved it”:

From the front of the house you looked north to the Ayreshire Hills, over minor ridges, vleis and two rivers, the Muneni and the Mukwadzi. To the east, a wide sweep of land ended with the Umvukves, or the Great Dyke, where crystalline blues, pinks, purples, mauves, changed with the light all day. The sun went down over the long low ranges of the Huniyani Mountains. In the rainy season it was extravagantly, lushly beautiful, mostly virgin bush, but even where it had been cut for mine furnaces the bush had grown up fresh and new. (54)

Given how sparsely populated the Lomagundi region was at the time, the Tayler family was given permission to graze their livestock on adjacent government land that had yet to be allocated. The apparent emptiness of this vast space gave a young Lessing the impression that “‘our’ land went on indefinitely” (52). Yet despite this imaginative expansiveness, Nature was always very close by: “The real bush, the living, working, animal-and-bird-full bush, remained for twenty years, not much affected by us in our house, and right until my parents left it in the middle of the Second World War, you might startle a duiker or a wild cat or a porcupine only a few yards down from the cleared space” (54–55). This play of scales—the vastness of space and the proximity of the living bush—contributes to Lessing’s sense of her childhood home as an “Eden” imbued with a mythic quality. “Every writer has a myth-country,” she writes in her memoir, African Laughter, and she insists that her myth-country is “the bush I was brought up in, the old house built of earth and grass, the lands around the hill, the animals, the birds” (35).

Considering her youth in Rhodesia and her deep attachment to her southern African surroundings, it is unsurprising that Lessing would have been drawn to the writing of Olive Schreiner. Lessing first read Schreiner at the age of fourteen and immediately felt a kinship with her literary “elder sister” (Under My Skin 202). As she recorded in her afterword to the 1968 edition of African Farm, Lessing initially responded to the novel’s “magnificent” sense of the African setting. Schreiner’s South Africa was the same Africa that Lessing knew intimately from her own childhood.
and felt was equally “[hers] and everyone’s who knows Africa” (Small Personal Voice 98). The immediacy of her identification with the novel and its peculiar mise-en-scène allowed it to “become part of me, as the few rare books do” (99).

Lessing’s praise of the magnificence of Schreiner’s South Africa—and, moreover, of the homely comfort it provides—may seem surprising given the uncanny ethos of the landscapes in African Farm. And yet, despite the strange (and estranging) form that Schreiner’s realism takes in that novel, Lessing understands well its fidelity to the strange (and estranging) reality of life in the southern African bush. When she writes that her family’s Rhodesian farm is her “myth-country,” she does so with more than romanticized nostalgia. Lessing understands the difficulty and danger of life in the bush. Furthermore, as her many uncompromising critiques of colonial (and neocolonial) barbarity indicate, she is fully aware of the play of history, ideology, and privilege that underwrite her childhood experiences. Thus, when writing about these experiences, or when recasting them in fictional encounters with the “living bush,” Lessing emphasizes that her gesture to the mythic “does not mean something untrue, but a concentration of truth” (African Laughter 35).

Something of this “truth” about the southern African bush appears in a scene from Lessing’s 1962 novel The Golden Notebook in which Anna Wulf recalls a scene from her Rhodesian youth when she hiked down to a nearby vlei to shoot pigeons for a pie. Along the road, she and her companions encounter “a festival of insects” that “seemed to riot and crawl” after the early morning rain. They find that this festival involves both butterflies and grasshoppers. While “a million white butterflies with greenish-white wings hovered and lurched” over the low grasses, “on the grass itself and all over the road were a certain species of brightly-coloured grasshopper, in couples. There were millions of them too” (397). In her recollection of this episode, Anna places these species in opposition. The butterflies are “extraordinarily beautiful. As far as we could see, the blue air was graced with white wings. And looking down into a distant vlei, the butterflies were a white glittering
haze over green grass” (398). At once distant and fluttering softly, the butterflies conjure a sense of calm. By contrast, Anna and her companions find the riot of mating grasshoppers obscene and unsettlingly close:

It was grotesque, and we were all not so much embarrassed as awed. We stood laughing, but our laughter was too loud. In every direction, all around us, were the insects, coupling. One insect, its legs firmly planted on the sand, stood still; while another, apparently identical, was clamped firmly on top of it, so that the one underneath could not move. Or an insect would be trying to climb on top of another, while the one underneath remained still, apparently trying to aid the climber whose earnest or frantic heaves threatened to jerk both over sideways. Or a couple, badly-matched, would right itself and stand waiting while the other fought to resume its position, or another insect, apparently identical, ousted it. But the happy or well-mated insects stood all around us, one above the other, with their bright round idiotic black eyes staring. (397–98)

In contrast to the distant butterflies, the grasshoppers appear up close and personal; Anna’s narration even “zooms in” on individual couples and their obscene acts of sexuality and violence. Despite her claim to the contrary, the millions of “bright round idiotic black eyes staring” back at them upsets the group’s sensibility: “ ‘Much better watch the butterflies,’ said Maryrose, doing so” (398). But in this scene, surrounded by an orgy of innumerable insects (note the repeated rhetoric of “millions”), there is no escape into romanticization. Paul insists on the truth of the matter: “ ‘But my dear Maryrose,’ said Paul, ‘you are doubtless imagining in that pretty way of yours that these butterflies are celebrating the joy of life, or simply amusing themselves, but such is not the case. They are merely pursuing vile sex, just like those ever-so-vulgar grasshoppers’ ” (398).

This episode demonstrates how close Lessing’s view of southern African reality is to Schreiner’s uncanny realism. Importantly, for Lessing as for Schreiner, the potentially unsettling reality of Nature is linked to the process of existential awakening. Much like her literary forebear, Lessing claims to have “lost religion in a breath” when still a young girl in the bush (Under My Skin 124). Yet unlike Schreiner, who remained hesitant to leave transcendentalism behind altogether, Lessing is more fully able to see the implications of uncanny Nature’s place in her own coming of age. In Under My Skin, Lessing tells the story of a disturbing encounter she had as a young girl with a
chameleon in the bush. While pulling apart leaves and closely examining their pores and veins, the sudden appearance of a lizard shocks young Doris: “On the bush is a chameleon. I watch it creep with its slow rocking motion up a branch. And then suddenly . . . I rush screaming up the hill to my mother, sitting in her chair, beside my father, looking out over the bush” (62). Doris responds to her mother’s worried questioning by leading her back to the chameleon, which has moved “quietly a little further up the branch, its eyes swivelling about”:

I am in shock, it is like a dream. I saw the chameleon’s insides come out and . . . it happens again, and I scream. “Shhh. . .” says my mother, holding me tight. “It’s all right. It is catching flies, can’t you see?” I am shuddering with disgust and fear—but with curiosity too. I stand safe inside her firm grasp. “Wait,” she says. The club-like tongue of the chameleon darts out, a thick fleshy root, and disappears back inside the chameleon. “Do you see?” says my mother. “It’s just its way of feeding itself.” I collapse into sobs, and she carries me back up the hill. But I have acquired adult vision; when I see a chameleon, part of my knowledge of it will be that it darts out its enormous thick tongue, but I won’t really see it, not really, ever again, not as I saw it the first time. (62)

Two things interest me about this encounter. First is that, even in her retrospective account, Lessing is careful to leave out the detail that initially frightened her and sent her running to her mother. Even when they return to the chameleon, the cause of her terror still remains somewhat obscure: young Doris must first learn that what she initially sees as the chameleon’s “insides” is actually just its tongue. The postponement of this detail not only emphasizes its traumatic impact but also speaks to how the child’s uncanny experience of the radically alien (at first entirely inexpressible; then, vaguely, “insides”) gets revised into banal, everyday knowledge (“tongue”). This leads to the second point: adult vision in all its banality cannot see the “real” chameleon as it actually is. Lessing writes that after this moment she will never “really see it, not really, ever again”—or at least, “not as I saw it the first time.” This last clause signals a pulling away from an otherwise insistent sense of having once observed reality in all its strangeness. Lessing figures this sudden distancing as an irreversible side effect of the transition between childhood and adulthood, between the immediacy of experience and the social mediation of knowledge. Socialization, she suggests, programs an unbridgeable gap.
between ourselves and reality. Society uses various modes of categorization that make otherwise unfamiliar things familiar. These categories offer ready-made boxes in which to put what Timothy Morton calls “strange strangers.” And of course, once we put an entity in a box, we find ourselves just “looking at the box” and “not at the strange strangers” at all (Ecological Thought 41).

Unlike Schreiner, Lessing retains the strangeness of the uncanny encounter. Even in the parts of African Farm where uncanny phenomena avail themselves, Schreiner’s narrative reverts to transcendental lyricism. In other words, Schreiner remains awkwardly situated between, on the one hand, her anti-Victorian, proto-modernist aesthetics, and, on the other hand, her fidelity to Romantic tropes. In a letter to Havelock Ellis, for instance, she ventriloquizes Percy Bysshe Shelley when she writes, “Genius does not invent, it perceives!” before going on to say that this adage “agrees with the true fact . . . that men of genius are always childlike. A child sees everything, looks straight at it, examines it, without any preconceived ideas which hang like a veil between them and the outer world” (qtd. in Spillman 181). Lessing, too, looked straight at that chameleon and examined it without any preconceived ideas, but the encounter fundamentally changed her, or so her story goes. Whereas Schreiner insists on the possibility, via genius, of continuing to see Nature as it really is, Lessing’s tale of the chameleon insists on its impossibility. And yet, though Lessing is fully cognizant both of how Nature comes to be mediated by social and ideological veils, her story gestures to an underlying reality that exceeds the social filter, a reality that lies beyond the “veil” of human knowledge despite being tantalizingly (if disturbingly) close. These examples mark Lessing’s investment in a form of ecological realism.

1 Shelley was, in turn, influenced by Edward Young’s Conjectures on Original Composition (1759) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria (1817).
Lessing’s Realisms

This assertion about ecological realism may seem surprising given that Lessing’s literary legacy remains most closely associated with her commitment to social realism. The ideological thrust of this realism can be traced throughout Lessing’s literary career, from her intellectual awakening in the Communist Party in the 1940s and 1950s to her “psychological” fiction of the 1960s, to her experiments with science fiction in the 1970s and 1980s, and onward. Throughout each of these major periods in her artistic development, Lessing’s commitment to social realism reflects her desire to liberate the individual from self-delusion and come to an understanding of how he or she relates to the social totality as a whole. In this sense, penetrating knowledge of the self has a transformational potential for society.

Lessing’s commitment to social critique began when she was a young woman in colonial southern Africa. She had dropped out of an all-girl Catholic school at the age of 13 and began her self-education in earnest at 15, when, as a nursemaid, she learned about politics and sociology from reading materials furnished by her employer. In 1937, at the age of 18, she returned to Salisbury, the capital of Southern Rhodesia (now Harare, Zimbabwe), to work as a telephone operator. After a marriage, two children, and a divorce, Lessing’s continued interest in social and political issues drew her to a community organized around a British socialist publishing group, the Left Book Club. By 1942 she had become involved with the Communist Party, and in 1943 she married Gottfried Lessing, one of the founding leaders of the Southern Rhodesian Communist Party.

As she relates in Under My Skin, Lessing’s relation to Communism was always tenuous. Although drawn by Communism’s social vision, the “crudities” of the party’s language limited the potency of this vision, reducing it to drama: “Histrionic, that’s what I see now. We were playing a role. The play had been written by ‘History’—the French Revolution, where the language was first used, and the Russian Revolution—and we were the puppets who mouthed the lines” (275). Lessing
was too interested in the complexities of the individual psyche to mouth narrow-minded party pieties. In Gottfried’s estimation, his wife’s interest in tales, legends, myths, and fairy stories marked her as more Freudian than Marxist, which made her “unsuitable material as a Communist cadre” (293). They divorced in 1949, and Lessing left Southern Rhodesia the same year with the manuscript of her first major work of fiction—and the one major artifact of her “Communist” period—in hand. *The Grass is Singing* was published in 1950, one year after Lessing returned to England. Though the novel reflected a radical concern with the barbarity of colonial ideology and its entrenched racism and sexism, Lessing’s commitment to Communism was fading. “I joined the Communist Party in, I think, 1951, in London, for reasons which I still don’t fully understand, but did not go to meetings and was already a ‘dissident,’ though the word had not been invented” (275). She left the party five years later and began her literary career in earnest.

The year 1956 marks the beginning of Lessing’s “psychological” period, when she began to experiment with literary forms that could support her social vision. In her 1957 essay “The Small Personal Voice,” Lessing offers an artist’s statement in which she attests her allegiance to literature’s “highest point” in nineteenth-century realism. She privileges the realist novel for what she sees as its firm commitment to a common “climate of ethical judgment,” a climate that modernism, with its “confusion of standards” and “uncertainty of values,” had all but compromised (*Small Personal Voice* 4–5). Realism, by contrast, defines an “art which springs so vigorously and naturally from a strongly-held, though not necessarily intellectually-defined, view of life that it absorbs symbolism” (4). A strong investment in a particular ethics and worldview would relieve literature from modernism’s erstwhile need for a symbolic economy and support a total social vision that would resist modernist aesthetics of fragmentation.

These themes of fragmentation and unity structure the narrative experiment of Lessing’s first major work during this period, 1962’s *The Golden Notebook*. This novel oscillates between the story of
Anna Wulf and the various notebooks in which she recalls her experience in southern Africa (black), reviews her political life as a disillusioned Communist (red), composes a semi-autobiographical novel (yellow), and keeps a personal diary (blue). In her 1971 introduction to *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing describes the novel’s twin themes in terms of “breakdown” and “unity.” These two themes fold into one another. For one thing, the very structure of the novel breaks Anna down, compartmentalizing her life and experience. And yet her tactic of keeping several different notebooks is meant precisely to construct a sense of order and ward off the chaos of formlessness. Nevertheless, the various personal, social, and political pressures in Anna’s life eventually lead to a mental breakdown in which she recognizes the falsity of these distinctions and attempts to unify herself through the radical act of consolidating her notebooks into the eponymous golden notebook. This self-consolidation concerns more than just Anna Wulf; it also involves her erstwhile lover, Saul Green. Although the two had been locked in an agonistic relationship of mutual envy, the novel’s final section brings them together into a new relation of mutual support. From breakdown—both the social breakdown of the individual into false compartments and the psychic breakdown of the individual into madness—comes unity—both a fully consolidated individual and a renewed sense of the social totality. As Lessing writes: “In the inner Golden Notebook, . . . you can no longer distinguish between what is Saul and what is Anna, and between them and the other people in the book” (*Golden Notebook* xii). This theme of the consolidation of the individual within a new social vision also drives the other major achievements of Lessing’s “psychological” period—her epic *Children of Violence* series (1952–1969), as well as her dystopian semi-autobiographical novels *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) and *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974).

The psychological emphasis of Lessing’s work became more complicated in the late 1960s, when she came under the tutelage of Idries Shah, a teacher and prolific writer on the subject of the

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Sufis. Lessing discovered in Sufi thought a spiritual holism that she had found so painfully lacking in Communism. According to Shah’s account, Sufism must not be understood as a rigidly codified system of beliefs; instead, it is a constantly evolving set of spiritual tools meant to assist in gaining an objective perspective on psychological limitations and to develop techniques for transcending them. Paraphrasing Shah in a review of his book *The Sufis*, Lessing explains that Sufism recognizes “a central transforming force [that] is always at work in the world—the force of evolution itself” (*Time Bites* 257). Recognizing this evolutionary force has important implications for both individual and society—a lesson Lessing emphasizes when she uses a quote from Shah’s *Caravan of Dreams* as an epigraph to her autobiography, *Under My Skin*:

The individual, and groupings of people, have to learn that they cannot reform society in reality, nor deal with others as reasonable people, unless the individual has learned to locate and allow for the various patterns of coercive institutions, formal and also informal, which rule him. No matter what his reason says, he will always relapse into obedience to the coercive agency while its pattern is within him.

Shah’s words succinctly reflect the thematic concerns of breakdown (of the individual) and unity (of society) that had occupied Lessing in *The Golden Notebook*. And yet, the mystical insight of Sufi wisdom also takes these themes to a place beyond psychological realism. As Lessing herself puts it, and in terms that seem like an uncanny echo of D. H. Lawrence, Sufism reveals that “Man is not alone; is not a glorious individual—or not in the way he thinks. His ‘personality,’ what he ordinarily knows of himself, is an assembly of shadows, of conditioned reflexes; his real individuality is hidden and will emerge slowly during the process of learning” (*Time Bites* 259). The self-knowledge that develops during mystical practices can therefore be objective, and it is required for the manifestation and evolution of a greater whole: “Sufism, then, emphasises . . . that to want something for oneself before one has reached the stage of being able to see oneself as part of something greater, and which must grow as a whole, is self-defeating” (259).
With her epic series of novels known collectively as *Canopus in Argos: Archives* (1979–1983), Lessing turned from her period of “inner space” fiction to experimentation with “outer space” fiction. Lessing began to approach science fiction in the late 1970s for its ability to expand the human mind. Not unlike Sufism’s evolutionary perspective, science fiction requires a simultaneous backward- and forward-looking gaze that aims to provide a clear view of the social present:

What a phenomenon it has been—science fiction, space fiction—exploding out of nowhere, unexpectedly of course, as always happens when the human mind is being forced to expand: this time starwards, galaxy-wise, and who knows where next. These dazzlers have mapped our world, or worlds, for us, have told us what is going on and in ways no one else has done, have described our nasty present long ago, when it was still the future and the official scientific spokesmen were saying that all manner of things now happening were impossible—who have played the indispensable and (at least at the start) thankless role of the despised illegitimate son who can afford to tell truths the respectable siblings either do not dare, or, more likely, do not notice because of their respectability. They have also explored the sacred literatures of the world in the same bold way they take scientific and social possibilities to their logical conclusions so that we may examine them. How very much we do all owe them! (*Canopus in Argos* xii)

Predictably, Lessing’s shift to science fiction dismayed mainstream critics like John Leonard of *The New York Times*, who, with reference to *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* (1982), complained that “[Lessing] now propagandizes on behalf of our insignificance in the cosmic razzmatazz.” But just as she dismissed claims that *The Golden Notebook* propagandized on behalf of Women’s Liberation, Lessing also rejects critics’ stereotyping of science fiction: “What they didn’t realize was that in science fiction is some of the best social fiction in our time.” Indeed, throughout *Canopus in Argos*, Lessing sponsors an intergalactic vision that, like Ursula K. Le Guin’s contemporary novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, privileged the social and cultural aspects of future worlds over functional developments in science and technology. Like her inner space fiction, then, Lessing’s outer space fiction retains her powerful commitment to social realism. No matter how apparently speculative her work becomes, Lessing labors to narrate self-transformation in the interests of social evolution. This would continue through to her final narrative experiments in *The Sweetest Dream* (2001), *The Cleft* (2007), and *Alfred and Emily* (2008).
Given this history, Lessing’s aesthetic ideology clearly aligns with that of Georg Lukács and Njabulo Ndebele, both of whom champion realist fiction as a critical mode for articulating the relationship between individual and society. If this is the case, then what can be made of my earlier proposal regarding Lessing’s ecological realism—a realism that would, of necessity, gesture beyond the ends of the human social totality?

In seeking to answer this, it should be recognized that Lessing is a child of the twentieth century and that that century’s unprecedented violence marked her indelibly. As she admits in *Under My Skin*, “I used to joke that it was the war that had given birth to me, as a defence when weary with the talk about the war that went on—and on—and on. But it was no joke” (10). Born in 1919, Lessing’s early childhood played out in the aftermath of World War I, and twenty years later her political coming of age unfolded in relation to the events of World War II. Her ongoing struggle to imagine total social transformation moves in counterpoint with society’s ever-more-total destructive capacity.

This counterpoint emerges most clearly in Lessing’s early essay “The Small Personal Voice” (1957). As I have already described, this essay announces Lessing’s artistic commitment to literary realism, and on the surface it seems to confirm the value that Lukács celebrated in realism; in Lessing’s words, realism offers a renewed “climate of ethical judgment” to banish the “uncertainty of values” that haunted modernism. The kind of social commitment Lessing advocates in this essay appears at first to represent an unshakable faith in humanity and its future. And yet, on closer inspection, this commitment follows a negative logic. Rather than insisting on any intrinsic cohesive force that links all of humanity, Lessing stresses that the twentieth century has generated a universal sense of fear and anxiety that unites the species in shared vulnerability. As “the traditional interpreters of dreams and nightmares,” artists have a special role to play in bringing this second-

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3 See my discussion of Lukács and Ndebele in chapter 4. See also Lazarus.
order unity to light; indeed, it is their social responsibility to do so, a duty they would be avoiding if they “refused to share in the deep anxieties, terrors, and hopes of human beings everywhere” (7).

For Lessing, who writes in the shadow of World War II, nothing produces a sense of universal vulnerability so much as the atomic bomb. Reflecting on the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, she writes: “Yesterday, we split the atom. We assaulted that colossal citadel of power, the tiny unit of the substance of the universe” (7). It is here that we can detect the first rift in Lessing’s social vision, which she defines negatively in terms of universal destruction:

Everyone in the world now, has moments when he throws down a newspaper, turns off the radio, shuts his ears to the man on the platform, and holds out his hand and looks at it, shaken with terror. The hand of a white man, held to the warmth of a northern indoor fire; the hand of a black man, held into the strong heat of the sun: we look at our working hands, brown and white, and then at the flat surface of a wall, the cold material of a city pavement, at breathing soil, trees, flowers, growing corn. We think: the tiny units of the matter of my hand, my flesh, are shared with walls, tables, pavements, trees, flowers, soil . . . and suddenly, and at any moment, a madman may throw a switch, and flesh and soil and leaves may begin to dance together in a flame of destruction. We are all of us made kin with each other and with everything in the world because of the kinship of possible destruction. (9)

Lessing’s logic in this passage is strange. It begins by proposing a radical unity that goes beyond the social and includes material reality as well, linking animal, vegetable, and mineral. But this unity emerges only negatively as a secondary response to the threat of universal devastation. Rather than being an intrinsic order, “the kinship of possible destruction” is made. The social fabrication of this kinship begins with a recognition that the source and the scale of atomic devastation lies absolutely beyond human comprehension: the atom bomb represents an unsettling encounter between unimaginably minuscule operations of material reality and unimaginably wide-ranging effects of terror and sorrow within the social cosmos. The discontinuity between such a tiny reality and the colossal amount of energy it contains opens up a horrifying gap. Hence, at the same time that she proposes a radical unity between material and social strata, the atomic event that fabricates this kinship also explodes it. Given the catastrophic nature of her example, Lessing’s vision of the social totality seems like a weak form of recompense: unity only comes in response to the fear of being
blown to bits. As with Schreiner’s turn to a unified Nature following God’s disappearance, Lessing’s turn to social commitment in the face of atomic devastation simply papers over the abyss of terror that continues to yawn despite the soothing gesture toward universal kinship.

This fragile logic of committedness invites us to read Lessing beyond the social realism both she and her critics believe her work to exemplify. As Katherine Fishburn rightly insists, “Doris Lessing has never truly been the realist (we) critics thought her,” and the assumption of her commitment to realism “has had the unforeseen consequence of deflecting critical attention away from those very qualities of her fiction that serve to undermine and de(con)struct realistic texts” (“Worlds within Words” 187, 186). Fishburn focuses in particular on how Lessing’s fiction works to undo the realist marriage plot as well as other “language systems, be they political, social, or mythic” (188), and in light of this dismantling project, she claims that Lessing might be better understood as a “meta-fictionist” and a “meta-physician.” While I agree with Fishburn’s assessment that Lessing’s realism contains the deconstructive power of metafiction, I wish to move in the opposite direction and suggest that Lessing’s fiction may in fact sponsor a profoundly anti-social vision—one that does not deconstruct the novelist’s realism so much as it undermines her insistence on the metaphysical unity of the social.

Appropriately enough, Lessing’s anti-social vision has an apocalyptic edge. While destruction in Lessing is often accompanied by the potential for regeneration, what is intriguing is that such potential rarely promises human resurrection. Take, for example, Mother Sugar’s comments to Anna near the end of The Golden Notebook: “Consider . . . the creative aspects of destruction! Consider the creative implications of the power locked in the atom! Allow your mind to rest on those first blades of tentative green grass that will poke into the light out of the lava in a million years’ time! . . . [It] is possible after all that in order to keep ourselves sane we will have to learn to rely on those blades of grass springing in a million years” (521). In proposing that Anna should imagine the far-future
regeneration of Nature as a meditative practice to soothe her present anxieties, Mother Sugar advocates for a shift of consciousness, but one that makes a decisive shift away from the social cosmos. The continuity of life in her fantasy of destruction resides outside the human sphere, and as such one must “learn to rely on those blades of grass” more than one’s own comrades. It is here that the possibility of an ecological realism creeps up from below.

Thus, from the initial crack in Lessing’s social realism emerges a single blade of post-apocalyptic grass, suggesting the need to think about humanity’s future in terms that go beyond the social totality, which, in itself, is extremely fragile. What this requires is nothing less than a revised ontological perspective. While the language of ontology could not seem further away from Lessing’s social(ist) ethos, it is closely linked to the ecological vision that gleams in her fantasies of catastrophe.

Nowhere does this link between ecology and ontology feature more powerfully than in Lessing’s writing about Africa. Africa is, somehow, the primal scene of ontological revelation within Lessing’s corpus. I have already suggested this in my reading of her childhood encounter with a chameleon, but this link appears in her African fiction as much as her African memoirs. Take, for instance, her short story “A Sunrise on the Veld,” a tiny parable of ecological realism’s uncanny power to reorient one’s ontological perspective.

The protagonist of this story is a boy who exults in his youth and its intimation of immortality. He rises early one morning and follows a path that leads him beyond the cultivated part of his parents’ farm. Alone in the bush, he feels overcome with the “joy of living” and wildly inflates his sense of self: “I contain the world. I can make of it what I want” (African Stories 62). The

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4 In the dedication for her Canopus in Argos novels, Lessing entertains an even less specific form of apocalyptic optimism: “For my father, who used to sit, hour after hour, night after night, outside our house in Africa, watching the stars. ‘Well,’ he would say, ‘if we blow ourselves up, there’s plenty more where we came from!’ ”
boy gives voice to this feeling, singing at the top of his lungs and listening for his song to echo down the river gorge. As he listens, the voice that returns to his ears undergoes a sinister transformation:

And for minutes he stood there, shouting and singing and waiting for the lovely eddying sound of the echo; so that his own new strong thoughts came back and washed round his head, as if someone were answering him and encouraging him; till the gorge was full of soft voices clashing back and forth from rock to rock over the river. And then it seemed as if there was a new voice. He listened, puzzled, for it was not his own. Soon he was leaning forward, all his nerves alert, quite still: somewhere close to him there was a noise that was no joyful bird, nor twinkle of falling water, nor ponderous movement of cattle. . . . In the deep morning hush that held his future and his past, was a sound of pain, and repeated over and over: it was a kind of shortened scream, as if someone, something, had no breath to scream. (63)

Sobered, the boy follows this other voice until he comes upon what at first appears to be a fantastical creature, a “strange beast that was horned and drunken-legged,” whose ragged flesh has raw patches that “were disappearing under moving black and came again elsewhere” (63). As with Lessing’s chameleon encounter, it takes a moment for the boy to process what he is actually witnessing: “it was a buck.” More attentive now, the boy notes that the grass around him is “whispering and alive” and that the “ground was black with ants, great energetic ants that took no notice of him, but hurried and scurried towards the fighting shape, like glistening black water flowing through the grass” (63).

By the time the boy understands what is happening—that the ant swarm is eating the buck alive—it’s too late. He picks up his gun, thinking to end the buck’s suffering, when he is seized by a realization that swiftly reverses his previous feeling of omnipotence: “All over the bush things like this happen; they happen all the time; this is how life goes on, by living things dying in anguish. . . . I can’t stop it. I can’t stop it. There is nothing I can do” (64). For the first time in his life, the boy understands the meaning of fatality—not just mortality, that everything dies, but fatality, that everything is ultimately helpless in the face of fate. This knowledge affects something of an ontological reconstitution of the boy: “It had entered his flesh and his bones and grown in to the furthest corners of his brain and would never leave him” (64).
For my purposes, this story’s importance lies not in the boy’s facile recognition that this horrific scene represents “what living is,” but rather in a remarkable confluence of affects that links the boy, the ants, and the buck in a web of anxiety, complicity, and biological necessity:

Suffering, sick, and angry, but also grimly satisfied with his new stoicism, he stood there leaning on his rifle, and watched the seething black mound grow smaller. At his feet, now, were ants trickling back with pink fragments in their mouths, and there was a fresh acid smell in his nostrils. He sternly controlled the uselessly convulsing muscles of his empty stomach, and reminded himself: ants must eat too! At the same time he found that the tears were streaming down his face, and his clothes were soaked with the sweat of that other creature’s pain. (64–65).

As he witnesses the ants strip the buck to a clean-picked skeleton, the boy is at once horrified by the brutality of the scene, moved by the buck’s suffering, disturbed by his powerlessness to ease his pain, understanding of the ants’ need for sustenance, and newly aware of his own vulnerability. It is this nexus of affects that prevents the boy from reducing his experience to a trite aphorism and—most importantly—gets him thinking. Even at the end of the story, when he tries to brush off the whole experience, the boy admits, “the death of that small animal was a thing that concerned him, and he was by no means finished with it. It lay at the back of his mind uncomfortably. Soon, the very next morning, he would get clear of everybody and go to the bush and think about it” (65).

In “A Sunrise on the Veld,” the voice of ecology speaks through the buck’s uncanny scream (uncanny because it returns to the boy as the distorted echo of his own voice) and through the eerie susurration of the carnivorous ants in the grass. For the boy in the story, the resonance of this voice is revelatory, transforming his thinking and the very sense of his being. This, I contend, is the power of ecological realism in Lessing’s African fiction. Importantly, this mode of realism is not the only one at play in this corpus. In other African stories, Lessing explores subject matter more characteristic of social realism, such as colonial ideology and the complex web of race relations.\footnote{For instance, Lessing’s story “The Antheap” narrates the coming-to-consciousness of two boys (one white, one coloured) learning their own complex interrelationship: “Slowly the little boy [Tommy], sitting alone on his antheap, came to an understanding which is proper to middle-aged people, that resignation in knowledge which is called irony.}
Most interesting for my purposes, however, are those fictions that bring both of Lessing’s realisms into play. Perhaps the best example of this is her first major work of fiction, *The Grass is Singing*.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I want to explore Lessing’s contribution to the farm novel genre and how it brings her realisms into conversation. In particular, I am interested in how *The Grass is Singing* plays these realisms against each other to revise the Manichean allegory of colonial relations and to bring to light a *settler* colonial allegory in which the novel’s ecological others usurp the narrative. In *The Grass is Singing*, this revision has something to do with a desire for a socially derived concept of “Nature” that comes up against the reality of ecology. The desire for Nature in this novel turns out be deadly. Unlike the boy in “A Sunrise on the Veld,” who allows the uncanny voice of ecology to resonate and attempts to reorient himself within the wider scheme of things, the novel’s protagonist, Mary Turner, refuses to listen. Her refusal gives rise to an eco-apocalyptic vision of the land taking back her farm. This vision consumes her. Though in the context of the novel Mary’s terrifying vision appears to be a form of hysteria, as I will argue, something stranger is afoot. While Mary’s murder plays out on the level of social realism, her apocalyptic vision plays out on the level of ecological realism. The crossing of these levels—the intermingling of these two realisms—produces an effect that seems hallucinogenic, and yet it offers a glimpse of something real beyond the social mask of Nature. Ecology speaks through this mask with its uncanny voice.

**Nature and Genre in *The Grass is Singing***

Given Lessing’s debt to Schreiner, it seems appropriate that her first novel is rather difficult to categorize in terms of genre. Most obviously, it is a farm novel. But like its predecessor, this

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Such a person may know, for instance, that he is bound most deeply to another person, although he does not like that person, in the way the word is ordinarily used, or the way he talks, or his politics, or anything else. And yet they are friends and will always be friends, and what happens to this bound couple affects each most deeply, even though they may be in different continents, or may never see each other again” (*African Stories* 373).
identification does not account for the several generic transformations that occur throughout the novel. *The Grass is Singing* begins, in fact, as a whodunit, with a newspaper clipping announcing a “MURDER MYSTERY.” The headline refers to the case of local farmer Dick Turner's wife, Mary, who was murdered at the hands of their houseboy, Moses. Yet strangely, at the same time that the novel purports to be a murder mystery, this newspaper report also short-circuits that genre's traditional teleology. Instead of building up to the final reveal of the murderer and his motive, the Special Correspondent already knows “whodunnit” and dismisses the need to determine a motive. The clipping reports that “No motive has been discovered,” but in truth the white establishment has already judged the event a motiveless crime perpetrated by an unthinking and unfeeling black African who just happened to be caught stealing from his mistress and reacted badly: “It was thought he was in search of valuables” (1). With the perp in custody and no crime to solve, the murder mystery genre hits a dead end on the novel's first page.

Given its evident spareness and bias, information is clearly missing from this account. The clipping doesn't mention, for instance, that Mary and Moses had become entangled in a Manichean dialectic of sexual desire and disgust. Salvaging this missing information requires different generic conventions that can more clearly reveal the bigger picture. At this point, *The Grass is Singing* becomes a social realist novel, with the narrative shifting from the Special Correspondent to Tony Marston, from whose perspective the rest of the story will be told.

Tony is a recent transplant to southern Africa whose resistance to the fiction of Moses as a motiveless perp marks him as an exemplary social critic: “the important thing, the thing that really mattered, so it seemed to him, was to understand the background” (17; my emphasis). Tony arrived in Southern Rhodesia looking to make it big as a farmer, but farming quickly “lost its glitter to him” (25) as he came to terms with the deep-seated prejudices that govern social life in the colony and realized that he and his fellow newcomers “could not stand out against the society they were
joining” (12). Despite the pressure to adopt his peers’ bigoted views, however, Tony preserves a sense of justice that refuses to condemn Moses on a whim. With his supposedly naïve perspective intact, Tony becomes a pseudo-detective figure in search of the “real” truth of the event. Revealing the real story takes much more than simply analyzing colonial ideology; it requires understanding how this ideology infects the whole web of social relations, shaping interactions between men and women and between Europeans and Africans. Therefore, and much like Lessing’s retrospective account of the chameleon, Tony’s investigation only arrives at the real story circuitously, and “circuitously it would have to be explained” (17).

The circuitous path of Tony’s social-realist whodunnit requires the introduction of additional genre conventions—this time from the Bildungsroman. In thinking about the case of Mary Turner, Tony “clung obstinately to the belief . . . that the causes of the murder must be looked for a long way back, and that it was they which were important” (24). Examining these causes requires the novel to shift gears yet again, this time leaving Tony behind and adopting a third-person narration that recounts Mary’s life story. The account begins with her childhood on a Rhodesian farm, growing up as the only child of a father who was an alcoholic and a mother who succumbed to the stresses of rural life. Despite these depressing origins, Mary goes on to become the product of a “vanished Golden Age”: she receives an education from a good boarding school, works as a personal secretary, lives comfortably in a girls’ club, and enjoys an active social life. Yet her extroverted nature also belies a rather surface existence in which she spends her spare time either reading sentimental schlock or flirting innocently with young men, though refusing their advances.

After overhearing gossip-mongers speculate about her sexlessness at a dinner party, Mary throws herself into the hunt for a husband. She eventually marries Dick Turner, a struggling farmer still in debt to the Land Bank after five years of profitless cultivation. Dick seems to come right out of the Afrikaans tradition of the plaasroman: he exhibits all the characteristics of the farmer as a hard-
working *naturmens*, struggling under debt but still animated by a profound—even ontological—identification with his land: “He worked as only a man possessed by a vision can work, from six in the morning till seven at night, taking his meals on the lands, *his whole being concentrated on the farm*” (46; my emphasis). 6

As she prepares to leave her life in town and move to the country, Mary adopts her husband’s pastoral attitude: “She said to herself, with determination to face it, that she would ‘get close to nature.’ It was a phrase that took away the edge of her distaste for the veld. ‘Getting close to nature,’ which was sanctioned, after all, by the peasant sentimentality of the sort of books she read, was a reassuring abstraction” (50). Faced with returning to the landscape of her childhood, Mary conjures the treacly romanticism of her favorite popular novels as an imaginative homemaking strategy.

Yet Mary’s longing to “get close to nature” undergoes a series of challenges in the first twelve hours of her life on the farm. After arriving at dusk, Dick vanishes into the house, leaving her alone in the dark. At first comforted by “the homely sound” of fowls stirring and cackling, once she approaches the house, a series of creepy moments disrupts this provisional comfort:

She stopped before the house, and put out her hand to touch the leaves of a plant standing in a tin on the wall of the veranda. Her fingers were fragrant with the dry scent of geraniums. Then a square of light appeared on the blank wall of the house, and she saw Dick’s tall shape stooping inside, hazed by the candle he held in front of him. She went up the steps to the door, and stood waiting. Dick had vanished again, leaving the candle on the table. In the dim yellow light the room seemed tiny, tiny; and very low; the roof was corrugated iron she had seen from outside; there was a strong must smell, almost animal-like. (53)

The scent of geraniums gives way to a bizarre shadow-play in which Dick’s “tall shape” becomes “hazed” and distorted before suddenly vanishing for a second time. The empty room he leaves

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6 Dick also has all the characteristic problems afflicting the Afrikaner farmer whose lineal consciousness so frequently comes under threat in the *plaasroman*. Not only does he fail to produce an heir, but Dick perpetually remains “very far from getting what he wanted. He was pursued by bad luck. The farmers about him, he knew, called him ‘Jonah.’ If there was a drought he seemed to get the brunt of it, and if it rained in swamps then his farms suffered most. If he decided to grow cotton for the first time, cotton slumped that year, and if there was a swarm of locusts, then he took it for granted, with a kind of angry but determined fatalism, that they would make straight for his most promising patch of mealies” (46).
behind undergoes a foreboding transformation by candlelight, shrinking into a claustrophobic space and emitting strong “animal-like” smells that displace the familiar scent of the geraniums. This quietly sinister moment follows her into the house, a decidedly uncomfortable space furnished improvisationally with petrol boxes for cupboards and sacking cloth for doors. The discomfort of Dick’s house transports Mary back into the farmhouse of her childhood. While sitting with her husband, she senses the discomfiting presence of her emotionally tortured mother and, even more so, she feels “possessed” with the thought that her father, from his grave, had sent out his will and forced her back into the kind of life he had made her mother lead” (55–56; my emphasis). Mary’s optimistic arrival at the farm is thus met with a foreboding sense of cyclical history that seemingly condemns her to repeat her mother’s desperate and desolate existence as a farmwife. This sense finds only partial relief by morning. Mary’s first daytime view of the farm offers a glimpse that is at once expansive and claustrophobic. The farmland radiates outward in a series of concentric circles of “pale sand,” “stretched bush, undulating vleis and ridges, [and] bounded at the horizon by kopjes” (59). Despite feeling “closed in” by these circles, Mary’s sense of claustrophobia is outpaced by the landscape’s potentially redemptive beauty: “But she shaded her eyes and gazed across the vleis, finding it strange and lovely with the dull green foliage, the endless expanses of tawny grass shining gold in the sun, and the vivid arching blue sky” (59). Despite its eerie beginnings, her new life may yet offer comfort.

From this point on, a new dialectic characterizes the narrative, which oscillates between Mary’s pastoral desire and unsettling subversions of it. It is after their arrival on the farm, when the novel most clearly takes on the features of the plaasroman, that its genre conventions break down further. In the ensuing chapters, Mary continues her struggle to develop a sense of home on Dick’s farm. Part of Mary's problem is that she remains sequestered and alone in the farmhouse, such that her point of view remains limited and compartmentalized. However, when Dick falls ill with malaria
and she takes up some of his responsibilities, this provides her with a new, more holistic view of the farm. “She spent several evenings over Dick’s books when he was asleep. In the past she had taken no interest in this: it was Dick’s affair. But now she was analyzing figures[,] . . . seeing the farm whole in her mind. . . . The illness, Dick’s enforced seclusion and her enforced activity, had brought the farm near to her and made it real” (130; my emphasis). Mary feels most at home at this part of the novel, when she gains a view of the farm as an agricultural and economic whole, a self-contained entity over which she holds dominion in her husband’s stead. As she becomes more involved with farm affairs—both in the fields and the office—Mary becomes increasingly naturalized to the temporality of agriculture: “the farm was having the same effect on her that it had had on Dick; she was thinking in terms of the next season” (150).

But as soon as she begins to settle into the rhythms of farm life, her sense of its uncanny nature returns: “When Mary heard that terrible ‘next year’ of the struggling farmer, she felt sick. . . . Time, through which she had been living half-consciously, her mind on the future, suddenly lengthened out in front of her. ‘Next year’ might mean anything. . . . Nothing could change: nothing ever did” (149). The promise of futurity (to the farmer: progress, profit, longevity) reverts back into the stasis of cyclical time (failure, debt, desperation), returning Mary to a desolate state. Bright visions of prosperity give way to obscure prophecies of destruction: “Often in the night she woke and thought of the small brick house, like a frail shell that might crush inwards under the presence of the hostile bush. Often she thought how, if they left this place, one wet fermenting season would swallow the small cleared space, and send the young trees thrusting up from the floor, pushing aside brick and cement, so that in a few months there would be nothing left but heaps of rubble about the trunks of trees” (183).

Mary’s nightmare vision introduces a new kind of problem, one that will return in full force later on in the narrative. Given the novel’s shifting genre configuration, it is not immediately clear
how to read such a passage. A conventional reading might suggest that this prophetic experience represents a hysterical response to the stress of rural life—the very stress that took her mother to her grave. Such a reading makes sense given Mary’s evident anxiety about reprising the desolation of her childhood. This also helps explain why it’s the cyclical temporality of farm life that precipitates this vision. The sensation of being stuck in a repeating cycle that fails to produce any profits instigates a temporal ouroboros. An ouroboros is a kind of strange loop, figured as a serpent swallowing its own tail—a perverse and self-destructive cyclicity that could be said to drive Mary’s vision of the farm turning in on itself and “swallowing” itself into oblivion. This reading neatly situates Mary’s vision within a psychological and historical context in a way that helps to explain the events that are yet to unfold. In other words, such a reading responds to the social realist directive laid out by Tony Marston.

In reducing Mary’s nightmare vision to an instance of anxiety-fueled hysteria, however, the conventional symptomatic reading largely ignores the content of this vision, preferring to focus on its psychological structure. What, then, can be said about the elements that lie on the “surface” of Mary’s experience? For instance, if her prophecy really reflects a deep-seated anxiety about the cyclicality of time and history, then why is it framed in terms of a conflict between the “frail shell” of the brick farmhouse and the “hostile bush” that surrounds it? Why is the vision an eco-apocalyptic one in which the “cleared space” of domesticated farmland is reclaimed by native flora? And what kind of temporality is involved in the image of trees “thrusting up from the floor, pushing aside bricks and cement, so that in a few months there would be nothing left but heaps of rubble”? Is the temporality of Nature’s reclamation the same as the cyclical temporality of life on an unproductive farm?

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7 Coincidentally, this is the image that Timothy Morton uses in *Dark Ecology* as a sign emblematizing the “strange loop” of ecological thinking. More on this in the next chapter.
The conventional symptomatic reading neglects to consider any of these questions. Presumably, this is because such questions seem to lie outside the very interpretive limits set up by the novel itself, which, from the beginning, organizes a story about human relations—that is, about the social cosmos of colonial Rhodesia. To consider the bush as the bush or the trees as trees therefore seems beside the point, even structurally irrelevant. What it comes down to, then, is an issue of genre and how genre conventions guide our reading. Although the novel has thus far presented itself as a generic chameleon, changing its conventions to suit the needs of the story, in every case—social realism, Bildung, farm novel—the genre conventions still frame human relations. And isn’t this just what all literary genres do anyway (nature writing included)?

What seems more difficult to entertain is the notion that, in a novel where narrative conventions have been so consistently slippery, genre might reveal itself as just another easily dissolvable human construct. Just like metaphysical constructs have a tendency to break down in the face of the mathematics of chaos theory and quantum physics, I argue that genre in The Grass is Singing seems to break down in the face of the novel’s nascent ecological realism. As I will show in the following section, Nature is an overdetermined figure in Lessing’s novel, always being asked to serve as a cipher for some repressed aspect of human relations, and race relations in particular. Alternatively, Nature serves as a generic ideal, as in Mary’s longed-for pastoralism. Either way, Nature remains little more than a construct, a social mask. But when Mary “gets close to nature,” as is her desire, what she finds is not beautiful birdsong or the calming whisper of an evening breeze, but the incessant and maddening buzz of the cicada. Indeed, when she places her ear near the mask of Nature, it is the uncanny voice of ecology that she hears speaking through it.
Ecology’s Uncanny Voice

At the point of her first apocalyptic vision, Mary has strived to establish a sense of home on Dick’s farm. She works against her sense of claustrophobia in the encircling veld through recuperative landscape visions that feature expansive grasses and lofted skies. She also works against her sense of disconnection by developing a holistic view of the farm. But the novel has consistently denied her these homely pleasures through a series of unsettling moments and encounters, and her view of the farm quickly disintegrates from a reassuring sense of wholeness to a terrifying sense of fragmentation.

As the story continues, Mary becomes increasingly entangled in a Manichean push and pull of sexual attraction and disgust with her houseboy, Moses, and this colonial dialectic pushes her toward mental breakdown. In a final effort to stave off madness and calm her hysteria, Mary makes one more attempt at finding a recuperative landscape view. From her bedroom window she gazes out upon the farm as morning dawns. Instead of the holistic vision she hoped for, however, this last-ditch landscape vision seems literally to collapse. In this moment, Nature comes too close for comfort, inducing claustrophobia and thrusting Mary into an eco-apocalyptic nightmare in which the earth violently reclaims the farm.

Mary’s apocalyptic vision is clearly the product of a psychotic break. And yet, I submit that it may well also represent the novel’s most radical gesture toward the kind of truth encapsulated in Lessing’s understanding of the mythic: not a direct view of the really real, but the closest one can get to it—“a concentration of truth” (African Laughter 35). Thus, while Mary’s breakdown plays out on the plane of social realism (landscape, Nature), the vision that this breakdown instigates points to a more obscure realism that can only be glimpsed indirectly (ecology). If it’s even possible to make the distinction, it could also be said that the form of the vision follows from social categories, while its content erupts out of the reality of nonhuman paradigms. Lessing therefore deploys the well-worn...
trope of female hysteria, only to reveal it as yet another social category that allows for the convenient rejection of the strange or the bizarre as unreal. So-called hysteria, it turns out, may furnish a powerful realist perspective—in this case, an ecological realist one.

Mary’s second, more fully-fledged eco-apocalyptic vision begins with a passage spanning a couple of pages in which an initially immense and peaceful sky collapses around her into a claustrophobic enclosure. At dawn, Mary revels in a moment of transcendent beauty:

The red spread out from the center of the sky, seemed to tinge the smoke haze over the kopjes, and to light the trees with a hot sulfurous yellow. The world was a miracle of color, and all for her, all for her! She could have wept with release and lighthearted joy. And then she heard it, that sound she could never bear, the first cicada beginning to shrill somewhere in the trees. It was the sound of the sun itself, and how she hated the sun!

It was rising now; there was a sullen red curve behind a black rock, and a beam of hot yellow light shot up into the blue. . . . The dull red disc jerked suddenly up over the kopjes, and the color ebbed from the sky; a lean, sun-flattened landscape stretched before her, dun-colored, brown and olive-green, and the smoke-haze was everywhere, lingering in the trees and obscuring the hills. The sky shut down over her, with thick yellowish walls of smoke growing up to meet it. The world was small, shut in a room of heat and haze and light. (221–22; my emphasis)

The almost demonic movement of this passage quickly undermines the pleasure Mary takes in the colorful, haze-softened landscape of dawn. As the sun rises into the sky, colors fade, the haze obscures, and the initial feeling of expansiveness quickly closes in; the world shrinks to the size of her farmhouse prison. This passage also recalls a scene from Olive Schreiner’s Thoughts on South Africa, in which the sudden buzz of a nearby cicada interrupts a solitary traveler’s expansive view of the veld landscape. However, unlike in Schreiner’s scene, where the traveler is able to ignore the cicada—a constant companion in southern Africa—in Lessing’s novel, the recognition of the cicada’s ubiquitous presence shatters Mary’s illusion.

As the sky and the environs continue to press in, Mary seeks to salvage her quickly dissolving sense of peace by imagining herself on a prospect that would give her a quintessential landscape view: “The idea of herself, standing above the house, somewhere on an invisible

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8 See Schreiner, Thoughts on South Africa 35. I also discussed this scene in the Introduction, pp. 20–22.
mountain peak, looking down like a judge on his court, returned; but this time without a sense of release” (223–24). If Mary fails to achieve a “release” in this moment, it is because her landscape vision falls short of offering her the usual sense of self-consolidation. In fact, from her imaginary prospect she views herself with a “momentarily pitiless clarity” that proves radically un-consolidating: “And time taking on the attributes of space, she stood balanced in mid-air, and while she saw Mary Turner rocking in the corner of the sofa, moaning, her fists in her eyes, she saw, too, Mary Turner as she had been, that foolish girl traveling unknowingly to this end” (224). Mary’s vision of herself splits into a duality between her present self (on which she passes judgment for who she has become) and her former self (on which she passes judgment for her naïveté).

Perversely, Mary’s deflated landscape vision provides her with an uncanny double-vision of herself. This divisive view finally causes her sense of reality to shatter and initiates an elaborate vision not only of her own demise, but also that of the farm. The very same Nature she had hoped to “get close to” revolts and reclaims the farm:

The conflict between her judgment on herself, and her feeling of innocence, of having been propelled by something she did not understand, cracked the wholeness of her vision. She lifted her head, with a startled jerk, thinking only that the trees were pressing in round the house, watching, waiting for the night. When she was gone, she thought, this house would be destroyed. It would be killed by the bush, which had always hated it, had always stood around it silently, waiting for the moment when it could advance and cover it, for ever, so that nothing remained. She could see the house, empty, its furnishings rotting. (224–25; my emphasis)

This passage continues at length, describing how rats and beetles would initiate this murder-cum-reclamation, followed by rains that would pound endlessly on the roof and grass that would shoot up through the floors. Branches would break through windowpanes and “the shoulders of trees would press against the brick” (225), pushing until the whole house falls into ruin. After its collapse, “the bush would cover the subsiding mass, and there would be nothing left” (225). Neighbors might look for the hut they knew had been there, but they would find nothing but partial, decontextualized signs: “a door handle wedged into the crotch of a stem, or a fragment of china in a silt of pebbles.
And a little further on, there would be a mound of reddish mud, swathed with rotting thatch like the hair of a dead person, which was all that remained of the Englishman’s hut” (226). Architecture and the human become conflated, at once sexualized in a bizarre image that juxtaposes the domestic and the wild (the door handle in the crotch of the tree) and weirdly anthropomorphized as a raped and murdered corpse bathed in blood-red mud. The sense of sexual violence is palpable: “The house, the store, the chicken-runs, the hut—all gone, nothing left, the bush grown over all! Her mind was filled with green, wet grass, and thrusting bushes. It snapped shut: the vision was gone” (226; my emphasis).

The sense of sexual threat that permeates Mary’s apocalyptic vision clearly allegorizes the violence that she anticipates from Moses, whom she believes to be lurking in the woods outside, waiting for his chance to murder and perhaps rape her. This, at least, has been the typical critical response to these passages. Reading the figure of Nature allegorically seems inevitable given that the novel is a social-realist whodunnit turned plaasroman that purports to offer a microcosmic view of Southern Rhodesian (and more broadly, of southern African) society. On this view, the apocalyptic vision at novel’s end relates, as Jean Marquand argues, to similar visions in T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, from whence comes Lessing’s title. Like Eliot’s vision, Lessing’s prophesies the breakdown of the social system: “Lessing sees the farm and by symbolic extension the Southern African system itself as a tottering structure propped up by a slave economy” (Marquard 299). Accordingly, Mary’s emotional breakdown and the vision it sponsors of the farm’s devolution is also understood to emerge from the violent play of sexual desire and disgust that undermines the civility of the colonial farmhouse. But to my view, such a Manichean reading flattens the novel’s complexity. Not only does it see Southern Rhodesia as a mere backdrop for the disintegration of the European mind (thus echoing Chinua Achebe’s important but slightly reductive critique of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness), but it also frames the novel in what has become a standard response in postcolonial scholarship,

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9 See Achebe, “An Image of Africa.”
which attends primarily to questions of complicity and sees (unconscious) Manichean allegory as simply reifying white colonial power and dominance. And, as Katherine Fishburn rightly suggests, the tendency toward this kind of reading has contributed to the lack of recent critical interest in *The Grass is Singing* in particular.

My reading of Nature’s revolt in Lessing’s novel shies away from these flattening tendencies and joins Caroline Rooney in her suggestion that, more than just a backdrop, the Southern Rhodesian environment “is given a *causal* role in inducing the states of the protagonists” (431). I also join Fishburn in her crucial observation that Lessing’s so-called “realism” does not allow for easy allegorical readings. However, even Fishburn’s approach has its limitations. While she resists reading the novel as an *unconscious* Manichean allegory, she nevertheless insists on viewing it as a conscious one; that is, she claims that Lessing herself scripts the allegory to suggest how a certain colonial ideology becomes entrenched in the African as much as in the European mind. Hence, Fishburn argues, “rather than murdering Mary because *Lessing* has scripted him as an allegorical dark figure, he murders her . . . because his *society*, which includes Mary, has scripted him as murderous other” (“Manichean Allegories” 6; my emphasis). In other words, the allegory belongs to the register of Lessing’s own metafiction. In the Lacanian terms privileged by Abdul JanMohamed’s *Manichean Aesthetics*, on which Fishburn draws heavily, *The Grass is Singing* becomes an “imaginary” rather than a “symbolic” text. The characters aren’t so much symbols of “good” and “evil,” say; rather, their lives play out within an “‘imaginary’ colonialist discourse” established within and sustained by the novel. Within this imaginary discourse, the African characters do become symbolically linked to the threatening bush: “for Mary (as other colonials), Africa = native = bush = evil” (8). However, as Fishburn sees it, this imaginary economy belongs to the *world* of the novel rather than to the novel itself. That is to say, the threatening wilderness could be read as mere “background” as in Conrad’s *Congo*, but it could also be read as a critique of the symbolic economy that would cause it to be read
as such in the first place. In this “metafictional” reading, the novel's real tragedy turns out to be Mary Turner's double bind: she is “punished both for honoring and breaking illusions” (191). On the one hand, Mary honors the social convention of marriage, but her union with Dick Turner compromises her sense of agency. On the other hand, her sexual desire for Moses breaks the racist codes governing white colonial behavior, for which her punishment is madness and death.

While I admire Fishburn's reading of *The Grass is Singing* as a meta-Manichean allegory, it continues to read the figure of Nature *only* through its symbolic link to Moses and other dispossessed and maltreated African laborers who are relegated to the novel's background. Postcolonial discourse has scripted such a reading just as inevitably as the (meta-)Manichean allegory has scripted Mary's murder. I therefore propose a different reading of Nature in *The Grass is Singing*—a reading of Nature “from below,” as it were, that undermines what Fishburn calls the metaphysics of Lessing's metafiction. The problem, simply stated, is that, as an allegorical figure, Nature is entirely overdetermined in this novel. Whether as a symbol for darkness, wildness, evil, or “Africaness” (as in the conventional Manichean allegory), or as part of a colonialist imaginary that makes these symbolic meanings possible (as in the meta-Manichean allegory), or even as an allegorical background symbolizing the psycho-sexual violence that drives Mary to madness and hysteria, Nature simply has too many roles to play. As a single figure, Nature cannot carry the weight of these many allegorical burdens—burdens, I hasten to add, that are set up as much by the novel as by its critics. What has yet to be entertained is the idea that Nature appears not as a stand-in at all, but as itself.

What do I mean by this? If, as I claimed in the previous chapter, allegory and realism were deeply at odds in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, in Lessing's novel, allegory becomes a kind of social veil that must be lifted in order to disclose reality. This is, of course, an impossible project. As Lessing demonstrated in her account of the chameleon, any encounter with the “real”
will always be mediated by social codes, and the only way to suggest even a partial recuperation is to strip back the accumulated layers that tame the strangeness of reality into the banality of common knowledge. This is the effect of Lessing’s ecological realism, which attempts, I argue, to strip back the various layers that constitute the allegorical figure of Nature. Although Lessing’s ecological realism never fully reveals what lies beneath (again, impossible), it does manage to expose Nature as a mask through which, to use Lessing’s words, something more mythic may speak with a greater concentration of “truth.” Specifically, it is the uncanny voice of ecology that we hear speaking indirectly through the social construct of Nature. This claim may seem absurd given that it is through Mary’s breakdown that the novel focalizes her eco-apocalyptic vision. However, my claim is not that the natural world surrounding the farm actually revolts. Rather, I am suggesting that Mary’s apparent hysteria endows her with profoundly realist prophetic vision. This vision discloses that what the novel figures as “Nature” does not encompass the totality of all “natural” objects on the farm so much as it represents the uncanny force that has “churned, bubbled, and fermented” (Small Personal Voice 17) beneath the surface of the narrative all along. Lessing reframes hysteria as a speculative mode that trades Nature’s allegory for ecological realism.

This bizarre bait and switch becomes clear in the moments just following Mary’s vision. She comes back to herself, standing in her claustrophobic bedroom with all the windows shut. Feeling that “she could not stay in the house,” she runs outside and toward the trees that “hated her” (226). This is where she believes Moses is waiting to kill her. What she finds there is not Moses, however, but rather a swarm of cicadas, whose shrill sounds have terrorized her throughout the novel, causing her anxiety and even physical pain.10 In a sense, the cicadas, and not Moses, have been Mary’s real

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10 As I have already indicated, this happens most notably when the sun rises, diffusing (and defusing) the landscape vision that leads to her ecological realist prophecy: “One after another the cicadas joined the steady shrilling noise, so that now there were no birds to be heard, and that insistent low screaming seemed to her to be the noise of the sun, whirling on its hot core, the sound of the harsh brazen light, the sound of the gathering heat. Her head was beginning to throb, her shoulders to ache” (221–22).
antagonists during her time on the farm. And here again, Mary finds herself “caught up in a shriek of sound. She opened her eyes again. Straight in front of her was a sapling, its grayish trunk knotted as if it were an old gnarled tree. But they were not knots. Three of those ugly little beetles squatted there, singing away, oblivious of her, of everything, blind to everything but the life-giving sun” (226). This moment presents a very “real” instance of uncanny recognition, as Mary’s initial view of the tree resolves into a composite image of clustered cicadas. This encounter sponsors a moment of clear reflection: “She realized, suddenly, standing there, that all those years she had lived in that house, with the acres of bush all around her, and she had never penetrated into the trees, had never gone off the paths. And for all those years she had listened wearily, through the hot dry months, with her nerves prickling, to that terrible shrilling, and had never seen the beetles who made it” (227). Like the moment in Schreiner’s African Farm where true clarity of vision brings into focus a vibrant (and disturbing) world that is—and always was—closer than ever imagined, Mary finally sees what was in front of her all along. And it’s terrifying. Indeed, the point here is that Mary’s flight into the trees contradicts her imaginary fear of Moses and instead brings her near the very real entities that had animated her fear from the beginning. She has gotten her wish: she has finally come “close to nature.” But again, Nature here is more defined by its uncanny essence than by its “material” presence: it is profoundly unsettling because, even after availing itself, it remains blind and oblivious to her, despite also being extremely loud and incredibly close.

“Nature” therefore does not rise in revolt in the way Mary prophecies; rather, its disruptive (and potentially destructive) power lies in the uncanny force that churns beneath its surface. As it does for Mary, this also proffers an unsettling reversal for the novel’s reader. Trained to search for the deep reasons for strange activity on the surface of a text, we find that what lies hidden beneath is, impossibly, right there, out in the open. In this regard, my rather unorthodox reading of The Grass is Singing could be considered an anti-metaphysical one, precisely because Lessing’s uncanny
ecological realism powerfully dismantles the metaphysical temptations that lead Mary and Dick to believe that they could ever have their “whole being concentrated on the farm.” Such a belief stems from placing too much faith in Nature (and landscape, and the synchrony of idealism) and too little in ecology (and cicadas, and radically nonhuman timescales).

But why, if ecological realism prevails, does Moses still end up murdering Mary? Doesn’t this act refute my reading and tempt the critic to return to an allegorical understanding? Not necessarily.

Mary’s eco-apocalyptic prophecy represents an extension of Waldo’s world-without-us vision from Schreiner’s *African Farm*, which adopts the perspective of geological time and registers human habitation as just a blip in the annals of natural history. As a continuation of this trope, Mary’s vision offers a similar perspective that implicitly pits the massive finitude of natural history against the paltry timescale of human existence. With its uncanny voice, this novel’s ecological realism invokes both a past and a future without any of us. Many allegorically minded critics of *The Grass is Singing* have read the farm as a microcosm of southern Africa and Nature (and its revolt) as an allegory for history—that is, as a prophecy of the “ghost of history” being laid to rest followed by the restitution of land to (black) African hands. My reading, however, suggests that ecology’s eruption through Nature represents a revolt against all inhabitants who would struggle for ownership.\(^{11}\) This means that even the oppressed laborers are subject to ecology’s uncanny dictates. Perhaps this is why, after killing Mary, Moses retreats to the trees and sits on an ant heap, awaiting his arrest. Rather than being symbolically equated to the “evil bush,” Moses, like Mary and all the rest, merely does the *bush’s* “evil” bidding.

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\(^{11}\) This is a tricky and highly controversial point that will have to wait until the next chapter for fuller discussion.
**Coda: Ecological Realism and the Disarticulated World**

In the end, Mary’s eco-apocalyptic vision reveals the farm to be a disarticulated jumble of objects instead of constituting some metaphysically unified and self-contained world. This collapses her previous landscape visions, through which she had attempted to gather the surroundings into a revitalizing sense of expansiveness—visions that otherwise kept Nature at a distance, “over there.” If *The Grass is Singing* represents a model of Lessing’s realism, we would be hard pressed, based on this reading, to call it a social realism. Indeed, social realism would imply the possibility of a totality that would organize the social body into a unified whole. However, based on the way the world of the novel decomposes in the face of the disunity of social as well as material reality, we might instead consider Lessing’s novel to exemplify another realism that dispenses with the totality altogether. In ecological realism, the supposed unity of “reality” suffers under the weight of contradiction, much as it does in Lessing’s review of *The Soul of the White Ant* by the Afrikaner naturalist Eugène Marais, where she comments at length on Marais’s understanding of the termitary as a unified organism:

Marais’s analogy of the termitary with the human body, an organism of which the queen ant is the soul, or breath, invisibly controlling workers, soldiers, the fungus gardens the galleries, hard outer shell (skin, streams of blood, organs) is only a jumping-off place for inspired speculation. A termitary is an animal. Immobile, of course. . . . Then he cracks our thought habits by an invitation to imagine it in movement, but in a time scale different from ours, as if we were able to see the movements of ice in the contractions and expansions of an ice age. He offers a vision of Nature as a whole, whose parts obey different time laws, move in affinities and linkages we could learn to see, parts making wholes on their own level, but seen by our divisive brains as a multitude of individualities, a flock of birds, a species of plant or beast—man. We are just at the start of an understanding of the heavens as a web of interlocking clocks, all differently set: an understanding that is not intellectual but woven into experience. Marais brings this thought down into the plain, the hedgerow, a garden. *(Small Personal Voice 145–46)*

Lessing’s logic requires close attention. While on the surface it seems to relate to the merelological quandary of how different parts could add up to or be contained within a whole, Lessing’s prose somewhat confuses the matter. She begins, for example, by celebrating Marais’s view of Nature as a
unity, but quickly undermines this idea when she reverts to the notion of the whole being broken into different parts, all of which “obey different time laws.” Yet, in spite of these different time laws, she insists that these different parts still “move in affinities and linkages that we could learn to see.” What keeps us from achieving this potential vision is the “divisive” nature of our brains, which (falsely) cuts reality up into a “multitude of individualities.” But the logic turns on itself once again. According to Lessing (reading Marais), reality actually is cut up into different parts. Indeed, what we are “just at the start of understanding” is the precise ways in which reality is disarticulated and differently modulated—right down to the level of “the plain, the hedgerow, a garden.” Although beginning with the unity of Nature—which always remains connected to the unity of her social vision—Lessing concludes with disunity.

So, what does reality really look like according to Lessing? Is there anything like a true unity-in-difference—a single world? Or is reality (both material and social) made up of a variety of partial worlds—“parts making wholes on their own level”—but never coalescing within a single, totalizing container? The uncanny ecological voice that speaks through The Grass is Singing suggests that no such totality exists. The stakes of a disarticulated world will become clearer in the following chapter, as I turn to the yet stranger ecological vision of J. M. Coetzee’s In the Heart of the Country.
Chapter 7

J. M. Coetzee’s Unhomely Ecology: Speculative Realism, Ontology, Contingency

My theme is the endless drift of the currents of sleep and waking, not the storms of human conflict. . . . I would have been far happier under a bush, born in a parcel of eggs, bursting my shell in unison with a thousand sisters and invading the world in an army of chopping mandibles.

J. M. Coetzee, In the Heart of the Country

The previous two chapters have offered a glimpse of the uncanny ethos of ecological realism. However, despite cultivating awareness of unsettling animal, botanical, and geological worlds beyond direct human access, they have stopped short of suggesting a way forward for ecological thinking at large. This is because my readings of Olive Schreiner and Doris Lessing—as well as my historicization of the southern African farm novel in chapter 4—have primarily labored to clear space, making room for an ecological mode of reading that could at once engage with and yet disengage from more socially and politically oriented methods.

The current chapter picks up right where these chapters left off, though it seeks to slough off their critical posturing and adopt a more creative approach. As such, it moves swiftly into new literary and theoretical territory, taking greater risks in an effort to draw out some of the more radical implications of pursuing an ecological realism. In the process, I demonstrate how these implications are surprisingly relevant to contemporary philosophical projects that have newly engaged in the problem of ontology. These projects can be loosely organized under the banner of “speculative realism.”¹ The brand of ontological thinking pursued in these projects—and especially

¹ For an account of the various tributaries of contemporary speculative realism, see Steven Shaviro’s survey, The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism.
in object-oriented ontology (OOO)—also has something to do with contingency, a profoundly ecological principle asserting that evolution follows paths that are constrained by random historical events. Such events might be part of the human historical record (e.g., meteorites, climate change, urban development, etc.), though far more often they are hidden from human view, squirreled away in the genetic material and splayed out along timescales imperceptible to humans (e.g., genetic drift, potentiating mutations, population bottlenecks, adaptation, exaption, etc.). In what follows, and despite the risk of over reading, I elaborate each of these threads and loosely attempt to tie them all together.

This chapter's focus on speculative realism, ontology, and contingency makes a further move toward an ecological realism. Paradoxically, it does so by taking a step back to the question of ecological ethics, a topic that this dissertation has largely (and deliberately) avoided since the beginning. In the first chapter, which focused on Heidegger's homely metaphysics, I argued that we need to resist the zeal for elaborating an ecological ethics long enough to stop and think. Before human thought can meaningfully reimagine its relation to realms of existence beyond itself—and hence before it can dictate behavior toward those realms—it must first come up against its own biases. These biases are intellectual and physiological in nature, both existential and ontological, and without examining them closely, ethics somehow seems too easy. If the dissertation has up to this

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2 See the section in chapter 4 titled “The Ecological Uncanny and Ecological Realism” for a fuller discussion of OOO and its relevance to this project.

3 Genetic drift refers to the variation in the relative frequency of different genotypes within a population, which results from the disappearance of genes that occurs when individuals die or fail to reproduce.

4 A potentiating mutation does not affect the organism that carries it, though that organism might be affected by another later mutation in such a way that it may induce a new ability or feature. Recent work with bacteria has demonstrated the need for two such potentiating mutations to produce beneficial changes. See, for example, Blount, Borland, and Lenski’s “Historical Contingency and the Evolution of a Key Innovation in an Experimental Population of Escherichia coli.”

5 Population bottlenecks occur in a gene pool when a population undergoes a massive reduction in diversity. Such events also entail the redistribution of alleles in that population’s genetic material.

6 Exaption is a neologism created by Stephen Jay Gould and Elisabeth Vrba in 1992 to define a process that works in counterpoint to natural selection (i.e., adaptation). “Exaption” names a trait that was previously shaped by natural selection, but which has been coopted to serve another function. In other words, it describes an “unselected, but useful character” (Gould and Vrba 6).
point represented a long detour in the service of examining some of these biases, then the final chapter's return to ethics is an appropriately strange and difficult one—one that is made possible by the equally strange and difficult farm novel at its center.

**Nihilism versus Ontology**

J. M. Coetzee’s experimental second novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), tells of an Afrikaner father and daughter and their two black servants, Hendrick and Anna, all of whom live emotionally tortured lives on farmland located “in the heart of nowhere” (4, §12). The bizarre and disturbing events of the novel are narrated by the daughter, Magda, an intelligent but tormented woman who first introduces herself as an absence: “instead of being the womanly warmth at the heart of this house I have been a zero, null, a vacuum towards which all collapses inward” (2, §6). Here, in the novel’s opening moments, Magda announces herself as the uncannily absent presence at the “heart” of the story, a figure whose black-hole-like singularity renders her a “nothingness” within the “nowhere” of the farm.

The novel’s strangely doubled nonlocatedness may stink of nihilism. In this chapter, however, I want to argue that what may at first appear to be nihilism actually turns out to be its opposite: a radical new approach to ontology, though one that is shrouded in obscurity. What’s more, Magda is as much an observer of this obscurity as she is a thinker of being. Take, for example, her reflection on these matters from early in the novel: “I stare out through a sheet of glass into a darkness that is complete, that lives in itself, bats, bushes, predators and all, that does not regard me, that is blind, that does not signify but merely is” (9, §23). The way Magda perceives her relationship to the darkness is rather complex, caught up as it is in the rhetoric of vision and blindness. The metaphorical glass through which Magda peers at once separates her from the darkness and filters it

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7 *In the Heart of the Country* uses an experimental device whereby the paragraphs are individually numbered, much like in a philosophical, religious, or other touchstone text.
like a lens. It also establishes a power dynamic, with her sight giving her an advantage over a host of entities both animal and botanical (and other) that are otherwise “blind.” These entities merely exist; they are not bound up in a world of signification. In contrast to the nonhuman inhabitants of this dark realm, which appear to constitute little more than bare life, Magda is invested in her own meaning and meaning-making: “I signify something” (9, §23). In addition to her sight, then, as a hermeneutical being she also enjoys the gift of insight.

But being the sole possessor of (in)sight is a lonely business, and, in a reflexive way, the above passage draws attention to the limits of Magda’s bias. Indeed, the passage turns the rhetoric of vision and blindness on its head, demonstrating how these notions are value-coded in a way that unfairly privileges her and produces the illusion of her exceptionalism. For instance, Magda appears to understand blindness as both a perceptual and cognitive lack. However, her remark that the darkness (taken collectively) “does not regard” her suggests that what she perceives as blindness may simply be inattention. Similar to D. H. Lawrence’s uncanny tree without a face, the entities of this dark realm do not return Magda’s gaze, but they aren’t blind so much as blind to her. And, as Magda herself admits, these entities are “complete” in and of themselves; they need not live in relation to her or even acknowledge her in order to exist. This faint recognition helps clarify why these beings appear to be shrouded in darkness: for all her powers of insight, Magda cannot penetrate this darkness in order truly to know these entities. Blindness turns out to be a two-way street. This recognition shatters the illusory glass separating Magda from the rest of the world and places her on the same ontological plane as everything else. Just like the ecological others that (who?) populate the darkness, she too, at base, “merely is.”

Blindness, then, is something like an ontological equalizer. Following Manuel Delanda and Levi Bryant, we could call the ontology that results from this reading “flat” in the sense that it “democratizes being, asserting not one primary gap between subjects and objects, humans and
world, mind and reality, but rather an infinity of gaps or vacuums between objects regardless of whether humans are involved” (Bryant 279–80). The language of gaps and vacuums returns us to Magda’s rhetoric of incompleteness, her self-image as “a being with a hole inside.” This is the language that caused concern about nihilism, but according to Bryant, incompleteness (rather than holism) is in fact intrinsic to ontology.

Alternatively, given Magda’s sly comparison of herself to a black hole—“a zero, a null, a vacuum towards which all collapses inward”—we could also follow object-oriented ontologist Ian Bogost in calling the ontology that unfolds from this reading “tiny.” Like its flat variant, tiny ontology also recognizes that “all things exist” (11), but it reduces flat ontology’s two-dimensional plane to the spacelessness of a singularity: “If any one being exists no less than any other, then instead of scattering such beings all across the two-dimensional surface of flat ontology, we might also collapse them into the infinite density of a dot” (21). Tiny ontology therefore makes a serious proposal of William Blake’s famous image from “Auguries of Innocence”: “To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour.” If flat ontology is “wide,” democratizing being, tiny ontology is “deep,” inspiring reverence for the being of individual entities. A far cry from nihilism, then, Magda’s observations about being and otherness point toward a new ontology that is both horizontal and vertical, extending far beyond the human and embracing what Steven Shaviro has called “the universe of things.”

In my reading, In the Heart of the Country comes to seem like a speculative fiction, one that scrutinizes the existential and ontological limits of the human in order to imagine perceptual worlds that belong to nonhuman entities, both animate and inanimate. This will undoubtedly seem strange to most critics, and especially to those who have tended to see in Country an allegory of South African history and politics. While my reading does not entirely dispense with historical and political
concerns, it does cast allegorical thinking as a barrier to ecological thought. I have already indicated this by pointing to the shortcomings of Magda’s self-identification as a signifying being. Allegorical thinking is what leads critics to emphasize Magda’s complicity with colonial race and gender politics. But the critics’ charge of complicity seems redundant given that Magda herself is painfully aware of her own complicity and comments on it at length. Critical emphasis on complicity is ultimately stagnating. Magda indicates as much when reflecting on her own twisted homegrown feminism, which reduces her to little more than a raced and gendered being, locked inside the concentric prisons of “skin” and “house”: “I live inside a skin inside a house. There is no act I know of that will liberate me into the world. There is no act I know of that will bring the world into me” (10, §23). The full understanding of her place in the social cosmos may be important, but it is also profoundly limiting.

I prefer, then, to follow Magda’s lead as she struggles to think beyond the social, historical, and material concerns of the human world in order to imagine herself as a contingent being—that is, one who is bound up in and dependent on a much wider universe of entities. Contingency does not mean that every entity “has its proper place within the organic totality and is defined by its relation to all others” (Bryant 276). Indeed, contingency is the opposite of holism, and, as I have already suggested, the ecological realism that emerges in Country meditates on the holey nature of reality. (As Magda wonders, for example, “perhaps in stones there are also holes we have never discovered” [115, §226].) Contingency therefore enjoins us seriously to consider principles otherwise shirked by contemporary environmental rhetoric—negativity, femininity, and incompleteness being foremost among them.8

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8 See Timothy Morton, The Ecological Thought, where he insists on “negativity, introversion, femininity, writing, mediation, ambiguity, darkness, irony, fragmentation, and sickness” (16; also 109, 127) as key principles for the rehabilitation of thinking—ecological or otherwise—in an age of immediacy (e.g., the “Act Now, Think Later!” attitude of environmental activism).
Attending to contingency returns us once again to Magda’s view of herself as an absence, “a straw woman, a scarecrow, not too tightly stuffed, with a scowl painted on my face to scare the crows and in my centre a hollow, a space which the field mice could use if they were very clever” (41, §87). In imagining herself as a decidedly incomplete being, a hollow woman, Magda offers a strange revision of T. S. Eliot’s poem “The Hollow Men.” Eliot’s “stuffed men” speak in “dried voices” that “Are quiet and meaningless / As wind in dry grass / or rats’ feet over broken glass / In our dry cellar” (5–10). Whereas Eliot juxtaposes objects in a logic of disconnection, Magda embodies the principle of interconnection. Her “hollowness” turns out not to be as “meaningless” and isolating as it is for Eliot’s hollow men. Instead, her yonic self-description as a “hole” opens a figurative, womblike space for potential inhabitation. Unlike Eliot’s rats, afloat in the isolated space of the poetic line, Magda’s invites her field mice inside to build a home. This revision of Eliot raises incompleteness to the level of a positive feminine principle. It is also a profoundly ecological one. Thus, in contrast to the earlier image of herself as being imprisoned in her socially constructed and gendered body, Magda entertains “quite another sense of myself, glimmering tentatively somewhere in my inner darkness: myself as a sheath, as a matrix, as protectrix of a vacant inner space. I move through the world not as a knife blade cutting the wind, or as a tower with eyes, like my father, but as a hole, a hole with a body draped around it” (41, §87). It is this “glimmering” sense of being—shrouded in obscurity, radically incomplete, and decidedly feminine—that Magda seeks to discover.

Coetzee’s Realism and the Ethics of Uncertainty

If Magda’s interest in ontology offers a challenge to allegorical thinking, then it does so through an ecological realism that belongs to the lineage I have traced through Schreiner and Lessing. As I’ve argued in chapter 4, this realism is as much a readerly as a literary mode; it requires the reader to resist transforming ecological entities into signifiers and symbols. The reader may see a
literary frog as a representation of this or a reflection of that, but the frog is still a frog, croaking there on the surface of the text, and hence strangely positioned “inside” the text but “outside” the diegetic space of human concern. Ecological realism can only come into focus when the reader chooses not to reduce this uncanny double position to a generic quirk or to allegorical symbolism, and instead accepts it as part of the strange fabric, or mesh, of literary reality itself. Accepting this strangeness for what it is—\textit{strange}—is the surprising task of an ecological ethics.

The challenge of ethics looms large in Coetzee studies, most importantly in the work of Derek Attridge. In his volume \textit{J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading}, Attridge characterizes Coetzee’s fiction as “singular” in its ability to make strong ethical demands on its readers. He also suggests how this ethics might arise from an uncanny realism. Attridge’s reading of \textit{Country}’s singularity begins with a focus on the novel’s formal features. Most relevant here is the novel’s structure, which follows a generally linear chronology of events while also being characterized by frequent digressions and repetitions that, like the numbering of individual paragraphs, draw attention to linguistic, generic, and material aspects of mediation. Within this structure, a strange pattern emerges in which the narrative periodically doubles back on itself, offering what appear to be alternative versions of several key events. These jarring narrative double takes generate uncertainty and cast doubt on the reality of the events depicted. For instance, the novel opens with Magda recounting her father’s return to the farm with a new wife in tow. That night, while the newlyweds are naked in their marriage bed, Magda gruesomely murders them both with an axe. As the narrative continues, the confused reader finds Magda’s father still alive and soon realizes that he had not brought home a mistress: Magda had fantasized the double homicide. Later, however, when her father has an affair with the black servant Anna, Magda again falls prey to jealousy and anxiety and kills her father once more—this time, it seems, for real. This pattern returns on two other occasions in the novel, each
time creating a narrative double vision that blurs the boundary between fantasy and reality. The incongruity of these narrative double takes generates cognitive dissonance in the reader, who registers both versions of any single event as simultaneously real and fictional. *Country* is thus characterized by a deep uncertainty and undecidability that places the whole narrative in question.

It is precisely this ability to generate such (uncanny) undecidability that qualifies the novel as “singular” in Attridge’s sense. Attridge sees the ethical demand created by undecidability as an innovation of Coetzee’s “neomodernism,” which occupies a space between modernism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism. This formal in-betweenness extends modernist techniques in that it pluralizes what Wolfgang Iser calls the narrative “blanks” (i.e., gaps, holes), thus requiring greater ideational investment on the part of the reader in order to make meaningful connections across the text. Coetzee’s neomodernism also exceeds postcolonial practices in that it goes beyond merely offering “illuminating details of the painful history of Western domination” (30). Perhaps most important in Attridge’s discussion of *Country’s* singularity, however, is the novel’s postmodern attention to “how otherness is engaged, staged, distanced, embraced, how it is manifested in the rupturing of narrative discourse, in the lasting uncertainties of reference, in the simultaneous exhibiting and doubting of the novelist’s authority” (30–31). Significantly, Attridge also insists that Coetzee’s novel demands an ethics of reading that goes beyond postmodern skepticism, which tends to cast what is uncertain as mere fantasy or play—as unreal. Like a subject experiencing cognitive dissonance in response to an uncanny encounter, the postmodernist tends simply to reject the object (here, the narrative’s truth-value) in order to diminish discomfort (psychological, philosophical, or otherwise). Rejection is easier than rationalization, and according to this model, *Country* becomes pure fantasy.

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9 The first occasion comes when the narrative presents two versions of Hendrick’s rape of Magda, a violent sexual act committed as retribution for her father’s affair with his wife, Anna. The second occasion comes later in the novel with two different accounts of her father’s burial.

But for Attridge, the singularity of Coetzee's novel resides, finally, in its challenge to the reader not only to remain with the difficulty of uncertainty, but also to derive something more than meta-commentary about this uncertainty. It is only when the reader works within a paradigm of (self-)doubt that she is able to recuperate something “real” from a text so intricately interwoven with fantasy. Indeed, as Attridge attests: “The realist narrative can be saved” (27; my emphasis). But how?

Attridge focuses on the novel’s double takes. Instead of seeing the narrative’s double vision as confusingly pluralizing accounts of the same event, he reads these moments as a “pattern of corrective sequence” (28) in which the narrative actively corrects itself: it offers “first a fantasized version that comes to an abrupt halt, then a more grounded one that carries the narrative on to the next stage” (28). This corrective sequence allows for the reader to locate a realism that abides even in the midst of Madga’s active imagination. Not only is such a reading more interesting; Attridge insists that it is also more ethically responsible than rejecting all action as the disturbed fantasy of a decaying mind. As sinister and unsettling as the novel may seem at points, some of its events must be “real,” such as the scenes in which Spanish voices float down to Magda from an airplane, quoting literature and philosophy that she could not possibly have encountered on the farm. At other moments in the novel, reality suddenly appears like a blunt force that obliterates Magda’s fantasy. This happens, for example, during her suicide attempt, which she describes as a “literary” adventure that quickly loses its lyricism: “I cast a long calm look of farewell at the sky and the stars, . . . exhale the last beloved breath (goodbye, spirit!), and dive for the abyss. Then the elegiac trance passes and all the rest is cold, wet, and farcical. . . . The first willed draught of water through my nostrils sets off a cough and the blind panic of an organism that wants to live” (13, §31). As Magda “strike[s] the bottom too soon” and finds herself in a stagnant pond instead of the “mythic vortex” of her

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11 This observation itself offers a corrective to the false assertions of other critics such as David Attwell, who states that the scene in which Hendrick rapes Magda occurs “several times,” Sue Kossew, who claims that the novel presents four “versions” of the scene, and Dominic Head, who indicates that this sequence is “described five times in consecutive sections.”
imagination, her elegiac death fantasy descends into the biological bathos of a creature desperate to survive. This is reality, which Magda discovers not in her poetic but in her animal self at the bottom of a cold, dark pool.

Such moments are rare in *Country*, however; reality doesn’t often infiltrate the novel so obviously. Instead, Coetzee’s realism is more often located *within* Magda’s fantasies. As paradoxical as this assertion may seem, it rests on an assumption that Magda’s fantasies are not solely meant to be narratologically manipulative. Indeed, what the reader might easily dismiss as deranged fantasy may be better understood as speculative thinking, which strives to recognize reality when apparently cloaked in fantasy. In the end, however, even if recuperating the novel’s realism may never fully restore the reader’s faith in the narrative, Attridge insists that attempting such a recuperation represents a deeply ethical response to Coetzee’s novel. *Country* demands that we remain with uncertainty and doubt, uncomfortable and uncanny as it may be.

**Speculative Realism: On the Shift from Complicity to Contingency**

Unbeknownst to Attridge, his perspective on Coetzee’s realism taps into an essential principle of ecological thinking, which exhorts us to stay with difficulty even when it proves deeply unsettling or inspires cognitive dissonance. Whereas Attridge articulates this responsibility in terms of an ethics of alterity focused on the estranging power of linguistic mediation (an ethics he signals with his somewhat clunky term “textualterity”), I read *In the Heart of the Country* as espousing an ecological realist ethics in which concerns with alterity extend beyond human horizons and encompass nonhuman worlds as well. In this sense, *Country* manifests an implicit critique of what Quentin Meillassoux and others have called “correlationism,” that is, a characteristic tendency of modern (i.e., post-Kantian) philosophy to understand being as a correlation between mind and
world. Correlationism classifies being as a problem of human access, and, when taken to its extreme in subjective idealism, it frames human perception as the condition of possibility for all existence.

“Speculative realism” names a group of recent philosophical projects that, though rather different from one another in emphasis, are nonetheless united in their rejection of correlationism. And yet, as Steven Shaviro observes, “The speculative realists are keenly aware that the self-reflexivity of the correlationist argument—the way it reflects back critically on its own premises—makes it difficult to escape” (6). Despite the evident difficulty of stepping outside of what Meillassoux calls “the correlationist circle,” speculative realists remain committed to developing robust ontological realism, one that “abandon[s] the belief that human access sits at the center of being, organizing and regulating it like an ontological watchmaker” (Bogost 5).

Magda is something of a speculative realist. As I’ve already suggested, she is painfully aware of the pitfalls of her own complicity and her own implicit bias toward human ways of being. And yet she is also invested in rethinking her relation to nonhuman entities. For this reason, Magda reveals herself more specifically as a budding practitioner of what Ian Bogost calls “alien phenomenology,” a philosophical project under the umbrella of speculative realism and connected to OOO that shares some important points of contact with ecological realism. Outlining what these points of contact are requires a brief digression. Stated briefly, alien phenomenology names the practice of contemplating “what it’s like to be a thing.” That is, it describes a critical process for imagining object perceptions—not how human subjects perceive objects, but how objects perceive other objects. This represents an extension of Thomas Nagel’s famous 1974 essay in psychology, “What Is It Like To Be

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12 See Meillassoux, After Finitude: “By ‘correlation’ we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (5).

13 For Bogost, as for other object-oriented ontologists, object refers to both “real” and “ideal” entities. Alien phenomenology therefore doesn’t discriminate against entities not characterized by constant physical or material presence.
a Bat?” Nagel concluded that, since bat sonar is unlike any mode of perception humans possess, the best we can do is imagine what it might be like—a far cry from actually being a bat. This observation highlights the seemingly obvious difference between the internal character of an experience and how an outside observer might characterize such an experience. Since alien phenomenology deals with the characterization of experience rather than its essential character, it remains bound by human epistemological limits. As the phrase “what it’s like to be” indicates, alien phenomenology operates through metaphor. Regarding this point, Bogost draws on Graham Harman’s observation that relations between objects take place “not just like metaphor but as metaphor” (67). For this reason, “Metaphorism offers a method for alien phenomenology that grasps at the ways objects bask metaphorically in each others’ [attributes] . . . by means of metaphor itself, rather than by describing the effects of such interactions on the objects” (Bogost 67). Understood thus, metaphor poses a problem for any anticorrelationist ethics: “When we theorize ethical codes, they are always for us; . . . moral standards sit on the inside of the unit human being” (73).

With a method based in metaphor, alien phenomenology proves inescapably anthropomorphic and anthropocentric, “and thus it challenges the [speculative realist] to embrace and to yield the limits of humanity” (74). In approaching these limits, Bogost’s alien phenomenology comes together most meaningfully with ecological realism: both insist, as I have said, on the importance of contingency. The concept of contingency emphasizes that the problem of anthropomorphism is not simply an epistemological one; it also represents an ontological limit. This explains why deep ecology, which is primarily motivated by a strict rejection of anthropocentrism, is a dead end. As Timothy Morton writes, “The danger in political and philosophical thinking [like that expressed in deep ecology] is to reckon that we have seen beyond ideology, that we can stand outside, say, ‘humanist’ reality. This idea is itself humanism” (Ecological Thought 75; my emphasis). Instead of following deep ecology, which issues accusations of anthropocentrism from some imagined
position of privilege “beyond” the human, we must recognize that there is a difference between access and being. Humans cannot know for certain what it’s like to be a bat, but we can be sure that a bat has batty experiences and batty perceptions of its own world. We therefore cannot deny bat being simply because we cannot know what being a bat is really like. Alternatively, alien phenomenology suggests that, if we imagine what, say, bat being might be like, we can circumvent correlationism even if we cannot transcend anthropocentrism.

In Coetzee’s novel, Magda thinks like an alien phenomenologist. As I discuss in the next section, Magda is deeply interested in microscopic scales of existence, and, in contemplating these scales, she sees how they complicate and fragment the category of “the human.” Furthermore, when she speculates on what it’s like to be an insect or a stone, she also reflects on the strangeness of her own being. She begins to understand, then, how alien “others” can alert her to the fact that she is also an alien to herself.

Whereas I see Magda’s thought as productively oscillating between human and nonhuman concerns, other critics prefer to situate Magda solely within human social and political realms. For these critics, Magda’s oscillating thought pattern allegorizes her stymied position in colonial society. Take, for instance, Julie Hakim Azzam, who reads Magda as being split between the guilt of her violent colonial inheritance and the mythic allure of her nostalgia: although she “admits a certain guilt over enjoying a land that she knows was stolen from the Africans by her ancestors,” she still “refuses to give up the melancholic pleasures of the land” (123). Azzam ties this split into the novel’s complex gender and racial politics, which animate an even deeper contradiction. On the one hand, Magda desires the power and status of her father, the white patriarch, while, on the other hand, she craves relief from his tyranny and consequently aligns herself with Anna, the black female servant. For Azzam, not only does this web of contradiction remain unresolved by novel’s end, but it is also—and unbeknownst to Magda—finally irresolvable. Furthermore, she reads Magda’s
impossible situation as an allegory for South African history. Azzam claims that whereas other farm novels (most notably Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist*) imagine the “ghost” of imperial history being laid to rest, paving the way for social and political restitution that would return the land to black Africans, *Country* replaces this tidy narrative with a more suitably pessimistic one in which the ghost of history can never be laid to rest. In this allegorical economy, which equates farm and nation, Azzam emphasizes a politics of complicity in which Magda remains unknowingly caught between a rock and a hard place without any viable escape route. Though Magda explicitly critiques imperialist ideology, she also upholds it implicitly due to her inability to disentangle herself from it. It is thus the task of the critic, or so Azzam suggests, to point out how the novel allegorizes Magda’s shortcomings as South Africa’s true historical inheritance.

As I have argued in the previous chapters, postcolonial readings focused on questions of complicity—whether invested in the complicity of the novel or a particular character—tend to dead end in the ambivalent hermeneutics of Manichean allegory. Once again, while I grant the significance of such readings, they have become a commonplace and predictable gesture. By contrast, if we insist on Magda as a fledgling alien phenomenologist who remains attentive to ecological principles, we find that she does not so easily fall prey to an allegorical reading of colonial complicity; we find, instead, that she actively engages the more obscure challenge of thinking contingency. Complicity stymies conversation. As an evolutionary principle, however, contingency acknowledges that, no matter how mucked up things get, life goes on: “One is complicitous to the bone. But the questions is, what does one do with it?”14 As a philosopher of contingency, Magda understands her “impossible” in-between status as a member of a colonizing race who nevertheless feels colonized by the very ideology she hates yet cannot help but reproduce. Yet she also recognizes that that it is an unsavory reality of being human. To be human at all is to be raced, gendered,

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14 These are the words of Marlene van Niekerk. See PEN America.
classed, and hence slotted into some inescapable category or another. To be human just is to be complicitous. Magda’s speculative mode is a response to this recognition; she seeks to transgress her complicity through radical acts of speculation. Through these acts, Magda muses about nonhuman worlds and the various bizarre ways in which her own world—her own being—is invisibly contingent upon them.

Magda’s Turn from Imagination to Speculation

Before clarifying how Magda’s speculation works toward a theory of contingency, it is necessary to explain how Magda actually conceives of speculation and how she arrives at the desire for it in the first place. After all, and contrary to what the above digressions may suggest, it is neither appropriate nor possible simply to cut and paste philosophy onto literature, and while Magda’s brand of alien phenomenology has some important things in common with Bogost’s project, it is inevitably subtler and stranger. In this section, then, I turn back to the literary trope of the farmworld and to Magda’s debunking of it. I am particularly interested in how Magda links this debunking with a rejection of the imagination, a faculty she critiques as being the source of all fallacious belief in unity. It is through her rejection of the imagination that Magda arrives at an alternative mode of speculation.

Unlike characters in other farm novels (both English and Afrikaans alike), Magda never celebrates the farm as a self-contained and self-consolidating whole; instead, she casts it as a prison. Importantly, however, she locates her sense of imprisonment in ideological structures rather than physical ones. While Magda does initially use a rhetoric of containment to describe the farm as “a theatre of stone and sun fenced in with miles of wire” (3, §8), just a few pages later she reframes her imprisonment as a discursive one: “Is it possible that I am a prisoner not of the lonely farmhouse

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15 In *Dark Ecology*, Timothy Morton argues that this recognition constitutes the fundamental strangeness of ecological awareness itself.
and stone desert but of my stony monologue?” (12, §27). Quickly shifting from a spatial sense of enclosure (within the concentric “theatres” of farmhouse and fenced-in desert) to a linguistic one (within systems of signification and mediation: language, narrative, “monologue”), Magda rejects any sense of the farm itself as a consolidated or consolidating realm.

In rejecting the trope of the farmworld, Magda also suggests that landscape metaphysics and its associated will-to-transcendence represents a failure of the imagination. By this I don’t mean the failure of an act of imagination, but a failure of the Imagination itself, to be understood in its Romantic sense. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge theorizes it in Biographia Literaria, “imagination” describes something more mysterious than the mechanical accumulation of knowledge, which he calls “fancy.” Indeed, imagination names what Coleridge called the poet’s “esemplastic” power to bring together disparate words, images, themes, and emotions from various arenas of human knowledge and unify them in a single work. In this formulation, Coleridge draws on Schelling’s term, Ineinsbildung, or a “shaping into one.”

Such a shaping into one requires a metaphysical principle that organizes from the outside and hence offers the mere appearance of unity; only in this way can the imagination take bare existence and form it into something meaningful. For Magda, however, such a metaphysical principle appears absurd, and she finds herself unable to muster the kind of will-to-transcendence that, for example, allowed Schreiner’s African Farm to look away from uncanny phenomena and toward the eternal beauty of Nature: “Aching to form the words that will translate me into the land of myth and hero, here I am still my dowdy self in a dull summer heat that will not transcend itself” (4, §12).

Magda’s problem here seems to be that nothing is able to self-transcend. Words fail to carry Magda “from the mundane of being into the doubleness of signification” (4, §12), and hence she cannot “translate” herself into a higher plane of being, nor can she inhabit the “land of myth and
“hero” promised by her own Afrikaner historical imaginary. Instead, the kind of transcendence Magda associates with signification must be located outside the object itself: that is, in the apparatus that perceives it and organizes it into a higher-level unity. This apparatus is the imagination. But even the imagination is not fully endowed with transcendental magic: “Deprived of human intercourse, I inevitably overvalue the imagination and expect it to make the mundane glow with an aura of self-transcendence. Yet why these glorious sunsets, I ask myself, if nature does not speak to us with tongues of fire? (I am unconvinced by talk about suspended dust particles)” (14, §32). Here Magda reveals the contradictory logic of the imagination in which she herself is caught. Admitting that she puts too much stock in the metaphysical power of the imagination, she concludes that a beautiful sunset cannot really result from dust particles forming a transcendent unity in and of themselves. Furthermore, the very fact that she can think of the dust particles at all proves to her the limits of the imagination: thinking about the individual constituents undermines the imagination’s power to organize them into a transcendent whole once and for all. At best, the imagination offers an aura of transcendence. And yet, Magda still feels mesmerized by the sunset, and so continues to insist that it can’t really just be dust particles suspended in the air and refracting light; surely Nature must “speak” in a more exotic “tongue.” But this final expression of belief in imagination’s transcendence does not fully undermine the logic that it only weakly (and parenthetically) refutes.

Still caught in its duplicitous logic, Magda makes one last-ditch effort to salvage the imagination by channeling its world-building power. After the servant Hendrik returns to the farm from a distant village with a new bride, Magda boasts that, even without having visited the village, she can reconstruct it fully in her imagination:

I have never been to Armoede, but with no effort at all . . . I can bring to life the bleak windswept hill, the iron shanties with hessian in the doorways, the chickens, doomed, scratching in the dust, the cold snot-nosed children toiling back from the dam with buckets of water, the same chickens scattering now before the donkey-cart in which Hendrick bears away his child-bride, bashful, kerchiefed, while the six dowry-goats nuzzle the thorns and watch through their yellow eyes a scene in its plenitude forever unknowable to me, the
thorn-bushes, the midden, the chickens, the children scampering behind the cart, all held in a unity under the sun, innocent, but to me only names, names, names. There is no doubt about it, what keeps me going (see the tears roll down the slopes of my nose, only metaphysics keeps them from falling on the page, I weep for that lost innocence, mine and mankind’s) is my determination, my iron determination, my iron intractable risible determination to burst through the screen of names into the goatseye view of Armoede and the stone desert, to name only these, in despite of all the philosophers have said. (17–18, §38)

In demonstrating her imaginative bravado, Magda conjures Armoede by listing a number of elements that might populate the village, all of which she envisions to be “held in a unity under the sun.” However, she immediately admits to herself that this “unity” is really just a jumble of objects held together by nothing more than her mind and organized in a list (“names, names, names”) for her own convenience and amusement. Intriguingly, in the midst of this world-building exercise, Magda’s apparently all-encompassing vision discovers a blind spot when it attempts to incorporate the perceptual world of Anna’s “dowry-goats.” In contrast to the predictable and familiar elements of Armoede’s human world (e.g., the buildings, the village, and the hilly landscape that frames them), the goats and their radically unfamiliar goat vision seem to Magda unimaginable, and she acknowledges with remorse that the goat world will remain “forever unknowable to me.”

This failure of imagination leads Magda to abandon her world-building exercise in mid-sentence. This moment also marks her turn toward speculation. Whereas imagination seeks to hold objects together in a unity, situating them in a human context of meaning, speculation seeks out the inner lives of objects, attempting to envision how they perceive their own worlds. In other words, speculation seeks to decouple objects from the mind–world correlation. This is what Magda suggests when she announces her newfound “determination to burst through the screen of names into the goatseye view of Armoede.” Renouncing the illusory metaphysical seamlessness of the imaginative faculty, Magda adopts an alternative lens that will help her attend to the strangeness of other entities (albeit obscurely) without reducing their existence to something meaningful within her own
particular perceptual world. As she puts it elsewhere in the novel, “This is what I was meant to be: a poetess of interiority, an explorer of the inwardness of stones, the emotions of ants, the consciousness of the thinking parts of the brain” (35, §73). Hence, Magda abandons the imagination for the speculation of the alien phenomenologist.

Magda’s speculative turn was primed in her youth, when she initially developed her “love of nature, particularly of insect life, of the scurrying purposeful life that goes on around each ball of dung and under every stone” (6, §15). She describes a childhood spent attending to the worlds of insects—playing with beetles, tumbling ants down the sides of conical ant heaps, and crushing scorpions with a stick. “I have no fear of insects,” she proclaims: “I would have no qualm . . . about living in a mud hut, or indeed under a lean-to or branches, out in the veld, eating chickenfeed, talking to the insects” (6, §15).

Although her sense of play sounds curiously like torture (not at all the proper comportment for an alien phenomenologist!), Magda’s reflection on the lives of insects leads her to consider more serious matters about ownership and belonging. In particular, she begins to think about insect populations as the most primordial inhabitants of the veld. Much like for young John Coetzee in Boyhood, this poses a problem for any claims to human ownership. Surprisingly, for Magda this applies as much to the African laborers on her farm as it does to the European colonials: “This is not Hendrick’s home. No one is ancestral to the stone desert, no one but the insects” (18, §40). In this vein, Magda offers what she calls a “speculative history” in which she reframes the origin of all human habitation of the veld, indigenous pastoralists included, in terms of settler colonialism:

Hendrick’s forebears in the olden days crisscrossed the desert with their flocks and their chattels, heading from A to B or from X to Y, sniffing for water, abandoning stragglers, making forced marches. Then one day fences began to go up—I speculate of course—men on horseback rode up and from shadowed faces issued invitations to stop and settle that might also have been orders and might have been threats, one does not know, and so one

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16 As Emmanuel Levinas asserts in Totality and Infinity, this is the basic principle of all ethics.
According to Magda’s history, problematic though it may be, \(^{17}\) roving indigenous pastoralists adopted the identity of the more settled “herder” once they entered the Dutch colonial economy. Before this settlement, pastoralists had “crisscrossed” the veld without laying claim to any particular place. For Magda, what this speculative history means is that, since white and black \textit{settlement} (though not inhabitation) happened concurrently, neither group has any truly “ancestral” claim to the stony desert. The settlement of the South African veld began only with the advent of the settler colony, which gathered disparate peoples into specific economic relationships, eventually engendering boredom and casual violence:

There is another great moment in colonial history: the first merino is lifted from shipboard, with block and tackle, in a canvas waistband, bleating with terror, unaware that this is the promised land where it will browse generation after generation on the nutritious scrub and provide the economic base for the presence of my father and myself in this lonely house where we kick our heels waiting for the wool to grow and gather about ourselves the remnants of the lost tribes of the Hottentots to be hewers of wood and drawers of water and shepherds and body-servants in perpetuity and where we are devoured by boredom and pull the wings off flies. (19, \S 40)

Magda boldly revises colonial history, suggesting that the large-scale human settlement of the veld inaugurated a system of universal suffering: the imported sheep are disoriented and terrified, the Africans suffer lives of servitude (if not slavery), and the Europeans simultaneously bear the weight of responsibility and the burden of boredom. Yet, given her assertion that only the insects are truly ancestral to the veld, it would seem that the flies have fallen furthest from grace. Whereas the sheep provide “the economic base” for the colony, the flies and other insects remain completely outside the economic system. Being utterly useless in the reproduction of a settled livelihood, the flies are thus reduced to the victims of the most casual and unconscious cruelty. Magda’s revisionist history

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\(^{17}\) Aside from the crude bluntness of her revision in the context of South African racial politics, Magda problematically assumes that herding only began among indigenous populations following the arrival of the Dutch, even though archaeological records show that sheep and cattle herding as well as mixed farming had been practiced in the region prior to the sixteenth century. See Leonard Thompson, \textit{A History of South Africa}. 
therefore shockingly suggests that the colonial subjugation of the indigenous peoples conceals a yet more ethically objectionable violence, one that humans perpetrated against the stony landscape's original indigenes: the insects. Furthermore, this violence is truly lost to history. Much like Michael Marder's description of plants, the “absolute silence” of the flies and other insects puts them “in the position of the subaltern,” and although an absence of voice “does not preclude their spatial, material self-expression[,] . . . it does pose additional hurdles to [their] ethical treatment” (186). It is on this account that Magda identifies herself with the insects: she, too, “fight[s] against becoming one of the forgotten ones of history” (Country 3, §10).

**Ecological Double-Consciousness**

From a postcolonial perspective, it may initially appear that Magda’s attempt to identify herself with the insects serves as an alibi for her own claim to belonging. On the contrary, this “speculative entomology” (19, §40) and its implication of insect oppression is linked to Magda’s reflection on her own vexed—and historically invisible—status as a woman who grew up squeezed between two cultural imperatives. Magda tells how, before anything else, she became proficient in the language of the subjugated. She describes how she “grew up with the servants’ children” and, in both linguistic and cultural senses, “spoke like one of them before I learned to speak like this” (6, §16). With time, however, Magda learned Afrikaans, and with it imbibed the mythic nostalgia of the Afrikaner imaginary: “At the feet of an old man I have drunk in a myth of the past when beast and man and master lived a common life as innocent as the stars in the sky” (6–7, §16). Painfully caught between allegiances to those subjected by colonial history and to those who mythologize a lost Edenic origin, Magda asks how it is possible for her to interpret the challenge of her situation without resorting to a language that aestheticizes or allegorizes it: “How am I to endure the ache of whatever it is that is lost without a dream of a pristine age, tinged perhaps with the violet of
melancholy, and myth of expulsion to interpret my ache to me?” (7, §16). The alienation paradigm that I discussed in chapter 1 becomes crucial here, generating the beautiful myth of an ideal and harmonious past that serves as recompense for the violent expulsion of others that her own people perpetrated. As a woman, however, Magda cannot fully inhabit this mythic history: “My lost world is a world of men, of cold nights, woodfire, gleaming eyes, and a long tale of dead heroes in a language I have not unlearned” (7, §16). At once implicated in colonial history and subject to the mythic nostalgia of an ancient past, Magda nevertheless proves unable to lay meaningful claim to it; it represents a white male inheritance to which she was never privy in the first place.

It is Magda’s turn to speculative history that allows her articulate the origins of her own double bind, squeezed as she is between her (masculine) identity as “colonizer” and her (feminine) identity as “colonized.” It is precisely this in-between status that renders her invisible (a “hole”) and threatens her own erasure from history. Her double bind is also what allegorical readings of the novel such as Azzam’s (discussed above) diagnose as “impossible” and neglect to unpack further. What makes Magda’s case interesting, however, and what allegorical readings fail to acknowledge, is that her speculative turn requires her to consider her own epistemological and ontological limitations. Thus, rather than stopping at the recognition of a double bind, Magda opens herself to something like an ecological “double-consciousness.”

In The Souls of Black Folk, W. E. B. Du Bois famously defines the double-consciousness of the “American Negro” as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (38). Du Bois’s double-consciousness describes a “two-ness” of being that emerges from the racist bifurcation of American society that makes African-Americans forever aware of the hyphen that
only tenuously links their two opposed (and imposed) identities. The double-consciousness that emerges from such a violent socioeconomic institution as slavery is deeply painful, but it also endows its sufferer with the spiritual strength necessary to hold opposites together, even without completely unifying them.

If Magda can be said to experience a similar condition, it emerges from different historical circumstances that keep her conscious of how her racial and gender identities entrap her in powerful social contradictions. Yet the “tape” against which Magda measures her “soul” is not only a sociohistorical one; it is also, as I have already suggested, an ecological one. In addition to the contradictory nature of her social being, Magda also ever feels the two-ness of her “social” and “animal” selves. Her social self is characterized by its need to produce meaning—she is, by her own admission, a signifying creature, hermeneutically inclined. Social being of this sort requires the subject to be legible within the system of signification in which it participates. Subjects want to know and to be knowable. In embracing her animal self, however, Magda also recognizes that the logocentric metaphysics of signification are inessential properties of being as such. In this light, she begins to think of herself less as a subject and more as an object, radically alien to herself (“withdrawn” in OOO parlance) and only ever partially knowable. In order to hold these two parts of herself together, Magda must curb her desire for knowledge and develop her nascent powers of speculation. This compromise constitutes her ecological double-consciousness.

Magda’s development as an alien phenomenologist begins from this place of compromise. Like the double-consciousness of the African-American, ecological double-consciousness is painful; it causes and is caused by suffering, and Magda’s own violent impulses originate from this pain. Examining the foundations of this negative feedback loop thus represents Magda’s first sustained attempt at speculative thinking. Early in the novel, following her first (false) account of her father’s murder, Magda wonders about the origins of her violent fantasies: “What is it in me that lures me
into forbidden bedrooms and makes me commit forbidden acts?” Her speculative answer points to her own coming of age in a country landscape:

Has a lifetime in the desert, wrapped in this funnel of black cloth, wound me into such a coil of vicious energy that the merest pedlar or visiting third cousin would find himself poisoned at his meat or hatcheted in bed? . . . Am I unfitted by my upbringing for a life of more complex feelings? Is that why I have never left the farm, foreign to townslife, preferring to immerse myself in a landscape of symbol where simple passions can spin and fume around their own centres, in limitless space, in endless time, working out their of forms of damnation? (12, §28).

Whereas city life requires too much effort to find a sense of belonging, country life allows Magda effortlessly to immerse herself in a “landscape of symbol.” And in contrast to the city, which demands “a life of more complex feelings,” rural living is based on the rusticity of “simple passions.” But as D. H. Lawrence never tired of pointing out, it is idealism that makes country life seem so easy, and idealism is violent. This is perhaps why Magda identifies the country landscape as the origin of her murderous impulses. Like her own fantasies, landscape visions perpetrate a kind of metaphysical violence by translating objects into symbols and using them to impose a self-serving unity where “simple passions can spin and fume around their own centres.” The easy familiarity of landscape vision and its casual deployment in the picturesque countryside entrench its violence. Perversely, then, Magda’s violent tendencies originate in the pleasure of landscape.

Magda does not abandon her interrogation of landscape’s metaphysical violence here. Instead of simply rejecting landscape as a form of false consciousness that obscures the real relations between herself and other entities, Magda turns her phenomenological gaze on herself in order to dismantle her desire for landscape vision and reframe it as a fundamental limit of consciousness. As with Heidegger, landscape here represents an ontological horizon: “Though I may ache to abdicate the throne of consciousness and enter the mode of being practiced by goats or stones, it is with an ache I do not find intolerable. Seated here I hold the goats and stones, the entire farm and even its environs, as far as I know them, suspended in this cool, alienating medium of mine, exchanging
them item by item for my word-counters. A hot gust lifts and drops a flap of ochre dust. The landscape recomposes itself and settles” (26, §50).

Landscape vision brings both pleasure and pain. Magda’s pleasure is steeped in a sense of power, one that derives from the implicit hierarchy set up by her being perched on the lofty “throne of consciousness.” Yet indulging in this pleasure/power also closes Magda off from other forms of being. She experiences this denial of access as pain because it showcases a lack, a gap in her knowledge of the world. Such gaps are inevitable. Take, for example, the punctum caecum in the physical eye, an obscuration of the visual field caused by the lack of photoreceptors on the retina’s optic disc. The mind simply—and automatically—fills in these gaps, smoothing over the perceptual “wrinkles” that distort the “map of visual space . . . at the microscopic level” (Koch 83–84). The mind covers up ideological blind spots in a similar way, concealing them before we even know they’re there. This process is a kind of safety mechanism that protects the mind from worrying about what it doesn’t know. Indeed, if this process causes little anxiety for the casual viewer, it is because the “alienating medium” of consciousness has always already “exchanged” the observed objects for something other than themselves: they exist first as images in the human mind, and secondly as words. Like consciousness, language represents a medium that alienates objects “item by item,” exchanging them for linguistic commodities (“my word-counters”) that only have value within the human market of signification. This is the process whereby the mind translates a mere gust of wind and dust into the comforting lyricism of a landscape that “recomposes itself and settles.” The human mind cannot short-circuit this process; such a feat would require radical

18 As recent research in cognitive science suggests, the incomplete perception of reality is paramount for survival. See Kathryn Nave, “We’re All Living in a ‘Conceptual Prison.’ ” Curiously, the narrator of H. P. Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu” is also keenly aware of the safety that ignorance affords: “The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age” (139).
cognitive reprogramming. Thus, no matter how much she wishes to “abdicate the throne of consciousness” and enter the subjectivity of objects, Magda cannot help but hold the farm in her mind as a unity, a world.

What is significant here is not simply that Magda can see this dialectic of pleasure and pain oscillating within the figure of landscape, or that through deductive reasoning she becomes dimly aware that her experience is pockered by various blind spots. These are epistemological issues. More important is her understanding that this is a fundamental aspect of her being: as a fully conscious creature existing in a semiotic world, the pleasure and pain of landscape also define an ontological limit. This realization takes the form not of a dialectic, but of a strange loop. As Douglas Hofstadter explains in Gödel, Escher, Bach, a strange loop “occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started” (10). Strange loops are strange because they mark a path that simultaneously returns to its point of origin and yet transcends it.\(^\text{19}\) Strange loops therefore offer a weird kind of knowing—what Timothy Morton calls ecognosis: “Ecognosis is like knowing, but more like letting be known. . . . It is like becoming accustomed to something strange, yet it is also becoming accustomed to strangeness that doesn’t become less strange through acclimation. Ecognosis is like a knowing that knows itself. Knowing in a loop—a weird knowing” (5).\(^\text{20}\) This weird form of knowing that is able to turn in on itself transmutes epistemology into ontology. In Magda’s case, she understands that her idealizing tendency does metaphysical violence to other entities. But this tendency is intrinsic to her own being-in-the-world, which itself is constituted by the complex fabric of consciousness, perception, and language. That is to say, the violence she perpetrates is as inevitable and unconscious as the violence involved, say, in any organism’s metabolic process. Just as organisms cannot survive

\(^\text{19}\) Hofstadter finds illustrations of strange loops in the revolutionary mathematics of Kurt Gödel, the paradoxical paintings of M. C. Escher, and the upwardly modulating canons and fugues of J. S. Bach.

\(^\text{20}\) In his volume I Am a Strange Loop, Douglas Hofstadter goes so far as to argue that consciousness itself takes the form of a strange loop.
without doing violence to other organisms (i.e., eating them), Magda is doomed to reproduce the metaphysical violence intrinsic to landscape vision. Unlike Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing*, who cannot face the strangeness of such a recognition, Magda understands this disturbing self-knowledge as an essential part of herself.

**Contingency and the Unconsolidated Self**

Magda’s ecological double-consciousness helps turn her attention back on herself. As I’ve suggested, this is not the same comforting return to self as that which traditional landscape vision inspires. For Magda, the return to herself reveals her intrinsic multiplicity, an irreducibly hermeneutic and animal being who is, furthermore, full of “holes.” Whereas Mary Turner’s encounter with her uncannily split self pushed her to the edge of psychosis, Magda proves much more resilient to the knowledge of her own unconsolidated nature.

Often when she meditates on herself, Magda imagines that her physical body is constituted by a number of disparate entities. Unlike Walt Whitman’s “I,” which contains abstract “multitudes,” Magda’s “I” contains a multitude of concrete “its.” In one example, Magda laments the social expectation for her to develop “the jowls, the bust, the hips of a true country goodwife.” She characterizes her failure to meet this expectation as the failure of her willpower to protect her fat molecules from attack: “For alas, the power of my will . . . has not after all been great enough to keep me forever pristine against those molecules of fat: perishing by the millions in their campaigns against the animalcules in my blood, they push their way forward, a tide a blind mouths, that is how I imagine it, as I sit year after year across the table from my silent father, listening to the tiny teeth inside me” (*Country* 21, §42). Moving swiftly among vastly different scales, Magda imagines a connection between her socially inflected body image and a biological battle playing out internally between microscopic protozoa (“animalcules”) and lipocytes. This conflict manifests a connection
between her social and animal selves that generates an uncanny, defamiliarized image of the self as a strange assemblage of warring molecules. Although her specific imagery may not be accurate, it nevertheless conjures the essential strangeness of the human body and the many entities—both organic and inorganic, “native” and “foreign”—that make it function. (Indeed, if you’ve ever peered inside a human cell, you know it looks like an otherworldly circus, full of microscopic weirdos doing high-wire stunts performing crazy tricks.)

As Magda continues to contemplate these microscopic scales of life within her, she begins to see herself more and more in relation to other forms of life around her. The churning microbiomes within her body bear an uncanny resemblance to the macroscopic world that surrounds her:

I lie hour after hour concentrating on the sounds inside my head. In a trance of absorption I hear the pulse in my temples, the explosion and eclipse of cells, the grate of bone, the sifting of skin into dust. I listen to the molecular world inside me with the same attention I bring to the prehistoric world outside. I walk in the riverbed and hear the cascade of thousands of grains of sand, or smell the iron exhalation of rocks in the sun. I bring by understanding to the concerns of insects—the particles of food that must be carried over mountaintops and stored in holes, the eggs that must be arranged in hexagons, the rival tribes that must be annihilated. The habits of birds, too, are stable. It is therefore with reluctance that I confront the gropings of human desire. Clenched beneath a pillow in a dim room, focussed on the kernel of pain, I am lost in the being of my being. This is what I was meant to be: a poetess of interiority, an explorer of the inwardness of stones, the emotions of ants, the consciousness of the thinking parts of the brain. (35, §73; my emphasis)

As she draws connections between the “molecular world” within and the “prehistoric world” without, Magda is once again forced to acknowledge her own confinement in the prison house of consciousness. And once again, coming up against this limit is painful. This is the first sense intended in her complaint, “I am lost in the being of my being,” which could be read as a correlationist lament. Her pain keeps her locked inside herself, destined (doomed) to remain “a poetess of interiority” only. But this moment also represents an opening into the possibility of noncorrelationist thinking—that is, thinking that toggles between an exploration of her own

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21 See, for example, the animation produced by the BioVisions lab at Harvard University, “The Inner Life of the Cell.”
interiority and speculation on the “inwardness of stones.” The narrative patterning of this passage is important, moving as it does from self to other and back to self. Here Magda begins by listening to the sounds of her nervous system. She then attempts to translate this experience into an approximate understanding of beings that are external to her. Following this, she returns to her own experience yet again, but this time with a difference. Instead of just thinking about consciousness, she claims to contemplate “the consciousness of the thinking parts of the brain.” In this moment, Magda breaks her consciousness down into a constituency of distinct working parts, a complex physiological apparatus that turns out to be less of a mystifying whole than previously imagined and more of a disarticulated, discontinuous assemblage.

Curiously, Magda’s intuitive observation is not far off the mark from contemporary neuroscience. As the neuroscientist Christof Koch explains, “Conscious perception is synthesized from activity at many essential nodes,” and in this sense it represents a “multi-focal activity” (35). The perception of a face, for example, is synthesized from neurons firing in various parts of the brain at different times and at different intervals, ranging from 0.2 to 0.5 seconds. What this means is that perception “may be asynchronous, with different regions generating microconsciousness for color, motion, form, and so on at different times” (255)—perception exists, as Deleuze has said, “only in bits and pieces” (82). These observations tinge consciousness with a disconcerting sense of artificiality that takes away its appearance as some kind of miraculous gift bestowed upon humankind: consciousness is “not higher but lower than we have supposed,” as Morton puts it (Ecological Thought 72).

The more Magda contemplates her own inwardness, the more she sees herself as a contingent assemblage of disparate parts—surprisingly inorganic and strangely unconsolidated. Her self-contemplation is profound because it skips over the question as to whether artificial life is possible and simply posits that she herself is an example of such artificial life. Far from exalting
consciousness, Magda comes to frame it as a Cartesian *res intellectus*, or a *thing* that thinks. And instead of consolidating herself into a thing that thinks, she further fragments it into a multitude of other thinking things. In reducing and fracturing human consciousness in this way, Magda “flattens” it, making it just a thing (or assemblage of things) that can coexist with other things (or assemblages of things) on a shared ontological plane.

In this act of ontological flattening, Magda makes a move that is both Heideggerian and non-Heideggerian. She shares with Heidegger a fascination with the simple and self-evident fact of being—that beings *are*. This is the starting point for Heidegger’s ontology, encapsulated in the strangeness of the phrase *es ist*, “it is.” What is *it*? What does *is* really mean? Just like Heidegger’s obsession with answering these questions leads him deeper into the character of a particular form of being (Dasein), Magda’s relentless self-questioning leads her deeper into her own experience. Where Magda differs, however, is in her desire to inhabit the interiority of others—a project that Heidegger considers inconceivable, both because he remains suspicious of nonhumans having something like a World in the first place and because he recognizes the finitude of human being. But Heidegger is not interested in belaboring the problem of finitude and the withdrawal of objects from human access; instead, as I argued in chapter 1, his ontology focuses more on how objects appear for Dasein within the World. This is why I consider him a philosopher of access first and a thinker of finitude second. This is also why I claimed that Heidegger’s work doesn’t unfold a sustainable ecological ethics. Earth withdraws from the World, and every time you try to talk about Earth, it gets ensnared in a correlationist net of language and poetics. Magda sees this trap. But instead of allowing it to curb her curiosity, she goes deeper into her own perceptual world to develop her speculative mode. Making ontology flat is a key step in this process, and it’s a step that Heidegger never could have made given his privileging of the human.
Just as ontology becomes flat in Magda’s thought, her speculation also begins to highlight the difference between complicity and contingency. She does this by staging two contrary world-without-us visions. Her first vision is profoundly correlationist and therefore bound up with questions of complicity; both correlationism and complicity restrict the range of concern to human agents and human constructs. Her second vision is more speculative and suggests an alternative, ecological mode of contingency that keeps the human at the center of concern but involves the human within a network of other agents. These two visions are inverted reflections of one another, like a photograph and its negative: in the first vision, the world disappears around Magda; in the second, she disappears from the world.

The first vision indulges in a Berkeleyesque subjective idealist fantasy in which Magda imagines that closing her eyes causes the world to disappear. In an anxious moment, she asks: “How can I afford to sleep? If for one moment I were to lose my grip on the world, it would fall apart: Hendrick and his shy bride would dissolve to dust in each other’s arms and sift to the floor, the crickets would stop chirping, the house would deliquesce to a pale abstract of lines and angles against a pale sky. . . . All that would remain would be me, lying for that fatal instance in a posture of sleep on an immaterial bed above an immaterial earth before everything vanished” (Country 72–73, §137). Given Magda’s meditation on the metaphysical violence implicit in such thinking, this correlationist fantasy serves to reaffirm both the absurdity and the danger of subjective idealism, which posits (human) perception as the condition of possibility for all existence. She immediately admits that “I make it all up,” but this ideational act proves difficult to undo: “I cannot stop now.” It is precisely this inescapability that speaks to a sense of complicity, of being bound up in ideological systems that she cannot help but reproduce.

Magda’s second vision, however, proves more obscure, more ecological—somehow more real—despite its being pure fantasy. It is this vision that taps into the other world-without-us visions
I have explored in Schreiner and Lessing and which inches toward a notion of contingency. Magda has this vision while she waits beside her dying father, whose putrefying stomach wound has drawn a cloud of hungry flies. At first frustrated by the insect invasion—“I will not stand for any more flies” (78, §146)—Magda speculates on their motivations and reconsiders her own expectations:

The flies, which ought to be in transports of joy, sound merely cross. Nothing seems to be good enough for them. For miles around they have forsaken the meagre droppings of the herbivores and flown like arrows to this gory festival. Why are they not singing? But perhaps what I take for petulance is the sound of insect ecstasy. Perhaps their lives from cradle to grave, so to speak, are one long ecstasy, which I mistake. Perhaps the lives of animals too are one long ecstasy interrupted only at the moment when they know with full knowledge that the knife has found their secret and they will never again see the goodly sun which even at this instant goes black before them. . . . Perhaps ecstasy is not after all so rare. Perhaps if I talked less and gave myself more to sensation I would know more of ecstasy. Perhaps, on the other hand, if I stopped talking I would fall into pains, losing my hold on the world I know best. It strikes me that I am faced with a choice that flies do not have to make. (78, §147)

By attending to the flies and considering what she calls their “ecstasy,” Magda attempts to develop an alternative response to her frustration. This contemplation leads her to think of herself in relation to the fly and to reflect, first, on the gap of alterity that opens up between her and them, and second, on the possibility that this gap may not be so radical after all—that she, too, could cultivate an ability to approximate fly-like ecstasy. But again, Magda’s attempt to see herself in relation to the fly reasserts her sense of difference: ecstasy would require her to abandon her own perceptual world and privilege only one part of herself, which is not the case for the flies. Magda’s attempt to step back from her initial frustration with the flies and engage with the difference that separates them constitutes an instance of ecological ethics—a particularly important moment given Magda’s earlier “speculative history” in which she implied that, more than anyone else, it is the insects (and especially the flies) who are truly ancestral to the veld and hence the real victims of human settlement.

As the flies’ “gory festival” escalates, however, Magda begins to feel an incipient threat. The swarm of flies appears to be on the attack, preparing to conquer the farmhouse. Despite her
provisional ethics, this puts Magda on the defensive and leads her into an apocalyptic fantasy of insect takeover:

One after another the flies fall under my swatter. . . . The survivors circle the room waiting for me to tire. But I must keep a clear house and to that end I am tireless. If I abandon this room, locking the door, stuffing the cracks with rags, I will in time find myself abandoning another room, and then others, until the house is all but lost, its builders all but betrayed, the roof sagging, the shutters clapping, the woodwork cracking, the fabrics rotting, the mice having a field day, only a last room intact, a single room and a dark passage where I wander night and day tapping at the walls, trying for old times’ sake to remember the various rooms, the guest-room, the dining-room, the pantry in which the various jams wait patiently, sealed under candle wax, for a day of resurrection that will never come; and then retire, dizzy with sleepiness, for even mad old women, insensible to heat and cold, taking their nourishment from the passing air, from motes of dust and drifting strands of spiderweb and fleas’ eggs, must sleep, to the last room, my own room, with the bed against the wall and the mirror and the table in the corner where, chin in hand, I think my mad old woman’s thoughts and where I shall die, seated, and rot, and where the flies will suck at me, day after day, to say nothing of the mice and the ants, until I am a clean white skeleton with nothing more to give the world and can be left in peace, with the spiders in my eyesockets spinning traps for the stragglers to the feast. (78–79, §148)

The feverish intensity of this sprawling sentence narrates a drama in which the hoard of flies progressively conquers the farmhouse and lead the way for history’s other forgotten creatures—mice, spiders, fleas, etc.—to take back their ancestral territory. Losing ground as the flies advance, Magda imagines herself retreating through the melancholy rooms, feeling as though she’s betrayed the human ingenuity that went into designing, building, and furnishing the farmhouse. As she retreats, she makes an inventory of the house’s dilapidated architectural and design features, as well as other objects whose meaning will be lost without a human presence (e.g., the jam sealed in waxed jars). Strangely, though, by emphasizing how these architectural aspects are reflections of her own misery—as well as her sense of never having felt at home in this house—Magda’s nightmare of retreat doubles as a fantasy of escape.

Magda is thus at once a fugitive running from a human mode of habitation (and, even more so, from farmwife domesticity) and a refugee running toward an alternative way of being with others (one that resembles Lawrence's unhomely sense of home). This is why, despite the fear and the
terror that is evident in this uncanny fantasy of insect revolt, Magda’s apocalyptic nightmare ultimately moves toward a vision of peace and rest—the only such vision the novel affords. Instead of simply disappearing from the world, her speculative death allows her to enter a much more intimate relationship of coexistence with her entomological kin. As she envisions it, her body becomes reappropriated in order to serve the basic needs of the new inhabitants: first as fly food, and second as a spider’s shelter. Reversing an earlier image of herself as a hermit crab inhabiting the shells of dead creatures (43, §90), here her body becomes another’s shelter: a spider takes up residence in her skull, stringing up webs in order to make itself more comfortable and secure additional nourishment. Magda’s startling fantasy also recalls her initial description of herself as a “hollow woman”—a scarecrow with a womblike hole in her center that offered potential space for a mouse to nest. Like this earlier image, which depicted the possibility of forming a human–mouse relation, Magda’s fantasy of her skeleton as a spider house also presents an example of contingency. Rather than using her last moments to reflect on her life and legacy, Magda fantasizes about her physical self entering radically different economies of use. Her flesh will be metabolized by the flies, mice, and ants, leaving behind the bone-house of her skeleton. Her speculative death finally gives her what she has always wanted—to transcend her own consciousness and become an integral part of nonhuman worlds. While she won’t ever know the “inwardness” of these entities, she will go on living inside of them, and they will go on living inside of her.

I wrote earlier that contingency enjoins us seriously to meditate on principles otherwise shirked by contemporary environmental rhetoric such as negativity, femininity, and incompleteness, and that these principles force us to rethink the idealism involved in visions of seamless and organic unity. Magda’s ecological double-consciousness and the speculative thinking that emerges from it embody all of these principles, and in doing so Magda demonstrates just how surprising, even frightening, an alternative ecological ethics can be. Furthermore, the kind of uncanny ecological
realism that is so bizarrely staged in Coetzee’s novel emphasizes the necessity of engaging with what is obscure, unknown, and therefore scary. This is much harder than celebrating an idealized Nature that will redeem humanity from its profound sense of alienation. Magda, however, is up to the challenge: “[There is] something in me that loves the gloomy, the hideous, the doom-ridden, that sniffs out its nest and snuggles down in a dark corner among rats’ droppings and chicken-bones rather than resign itself to decency” (23, §44). This strange desire marks the uncanny ecological potential of contingency.
Coda

En Route to a Posthuman Ethics

In *Dark Ecology*, Timothy Morton argues that ecological awareness takes the form of a loop. This is because biological systems are full of looping processes, and human interference with ecosystems often institutes negative feedback loops. Indeed, Morton insists, even individual entities are characterized by loops: “The looping form of beings means we live in a universe of finitude and fragility, a world in which objects are suffused with and surrounded by mysterious hermeneutical clouds of unknowing” (6).

This dissertation has itself followed a looping path, initially eschewing ethics only to return to it some 300 pages later. As I explained at the outset, I needed to bracket the question of ethics long enough to dismantle another logical loop, one that has taken shape in what I called the ecological homecoming narrative. This narrative, which itself is formed on the model of the alienation paradigm, celebrates the possibility of a joyous “return” to Nature. Ethics plays a crucial role in the ecological homecoming narrative; it’s something like a metaphysical ticket that guarantees its possessor reentry into the primordial realm of being itself. As long as we admit that, as a species, we humans have treated Nature poorly, we can finally end our period of exile and return to the ecological bosom. Or so the story goes. But this narrative makes ethics seem all too easy, little more than a pledge to uphold some notion of utopian harmony that is, I hasten to add, itself profoundly unnatural.
What gets lost in the rush to establish an environmental ethics and return to Nature is the recognition that the ecological realm is radically strange, even estranging. Recognizing this radical strangeness is no piece of cake, and living with the kind of estrangement it causes is even harder. As Morton insists, “the politics of coexistence are always contingent, brittle, and flawed” (6). It is for this reason that I have sought in this dissertation to engage with ecology’s more obscure, uncanny side. And, as I explored in the final chapter, the kind of ethics that develop in the shadow of the ecological uncanny are decidedly strange and difficult.

But where does has this engagement with the ecological uncanny brought us, if not to our “home” in Nature?

As I have argued throughout, the ecological uncanny brings us back to ourselves, but not to our familiar selves. As with D. H. Lawrence’s understanding of the spirit of place, recognizing that the natural world is characterized by a vast universe of individual entities—each comprising its own stunning complexity—is not just humbling; it reminds us that we, ourselves, are similarly multitudinous.

In chapter 3, I claimed that Lawrence’s notion of a multitudinous (or “allotropic”) self opens his work to the concept of posthumanism. In recent theoretical work, the term “posthumanism” has accumulated many definitions, but in this dissertation, it has served as a form of shorthand indicating that human beings already (and fundamentally) exist in a state beyond humanness. Posthumanism is thus a kind of tool for defamiliarizing ourselves from ourselves. Discourses such as postcolonialism and critical race theory long ago taught us that “the human” is a social, historical, political, and juridical status to which not all humans have equal access. Posthumanism goes further, recognizing that “the human” is an assemblage of cells, bacteria, and inorganic materials as much as it is an assemblage of perceptions, feelings, and identities. Just as Lawrence posited through his fiction and his essays, being expresses itself as a manifold, albeit an intrinsically fragmented and
When we come to see our humanity in this more fragmented way, it can be deeply unsettling. But the point is not simply to be unsettled. It is only once we are unsettled that the real work can begin—and the real work, I think, is not the work of critique but of creativity. Critique is of course vital to all sorts of work, and not just to philosophy or literary criticism. However, as Rita Felski has powerfully reminded us, critique also has its limits in pointing the way toward new modes of thinking.

It is my belief that posthumanism offers something of a creative path forward. Indeed, it is perhaps only when we come up against an understanding of our own limits, our own finitude, that we can begin the more speculative work of imagining what it’s like to be other than what we are. This means us taking seriously, for example, Thomas Nagel’s question, “What is it like to be a bat?,” or Ian Bogost’s question, “What is it like to be a thing?” These are precisely the kinds of questions Magda pursued in Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*. And, as my reading of Magda illustrated, imagining what it’s like to be other than what we are is really difficult work. *It’s also the very essence of ethics.*

Ethics isn’t easy; it’s not simply about illumination—it’s about grappling blindly with what lies beyond one’s sphere of knowledge. Ethics, then, is above all a posthuman project; it’s creative rather than critical; it’s about contingency rather than complicity. Thus, if the ecological uncanny accomplishes anything, it will be to help open our imaginations and to explore the bizarre terrain of our own selves and of the wider universe of things in which we participate. It will open us to the strange horizons of a posthuman ethics.
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1 The information in brackets indicates the original German-language version of each text. *GA* stands for *Gesamtausgabe*, and the accompanying numbers indicate the volume of the *Gesamtausgabe* where the original version of the text may be found. See the Appendix at the end of the Works Cited for full bibliographic information.
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Appendix: German Editions of Works by Heidegger

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