

Introduction

Resisting the Resistance Narrative

In the summer of 1876, the celebrated literary naturalist John Burroughs killed a loon. In his collection of essays, *Signs and Seasons* (1886), Burroughs notes that like hummingbirds, loons were exceptionally difficult to shoot given their alertness and quickness. But while fishing at Pleasant Pond in the Maine woods, Burroughs had the advantage of a breech-loading rifle, and he bagged his first loon. Burroughs was not hunting for meat—his motive was purely scientific. He exulted, “The bird I had killed was a magnificent specimen,” and when he returned home, he took pains to display the loon in a realistic manner (67). Avoiding the mistake made by most taxidermists, who mount loons standing on their legs, Burroughs placed his specimen on a table “as upon the surface of the water, his feet trailing behind him, his body low and trim, his head elevated and slightly turned as if in the act of bringing the fiery eye to bear upon you, and vigilance and power stamped upon every lineament” (67–68).¹

I suspect that many contemporary readers would find this episode surprising since Burroughs, or “John O’ Birds” as he was called, is recognized as one of the early voices of avian conservation. In 2000, Frank Bergon argued, “Burroughs’s awareness and sensitivity establish, even today, an essential standard for anyone aspiring to become a fully engaged environmentalist” (25). Indeed, in another essay in *Signs and Seasons* entitled “Bird Enemies,” Burroughs denounces in vitriolic terms bird collectors, “men who plunder nests and murder their owners” (134). Distinguishing between “genuine” ornithologists and those “sham” ornithologists who are driven by vanity, affectation, and mercenary motives rather than the pure principles of science, Burroughs insists that killing species that have already been documented is

wasteful: “Thus are our birds hunted and cut off, and all in the name of science; as if science had not long ago finished with these birds. She has weighed and measured and dissected and described them, and their nests and eggs, and placed them in her cabinet” (134–35). However, this distinction is problematic, if not disingenuous, when applied to Burroughs’s loon. Although he was elected an associate member of the American Ornithology Union in 1883, Burroughs was not a professional scientist, and he never published the results of his analysis of the loon he killed. Furthermore, by 1876, the loon had already been scientifically documented in works such as Elliott Coues’s *Key to North American Birds* (1872). As if aware of this problem, Burroughs admits that the “student of ornithology” must occasionally kill a bird to identify it (136). But he explains that “once having mastered the birds, the true ornithologist leaves his gun at home”; accordingly, the real enemy of the birds is the “closet naturalist” with “his piles of skins, his cases of eggs, his laborious feather-splitting, and his outlandish nomenclature” (136).²

The dismissive phrase “closet naturalist” and the reference to “outlandish nomenclature” place Burroughs’s polemic in an interesting moment in the history of ornithology. In *A Passion for Birds*, Mark V. Barrow demonstrates that in contrast to other sciences, ornithology maintained into the early twentieth century a close alliance between professional ornithologists and amateur bird collectors. But that alliance was not without tensions. Amateurs were likely to see professional scientists as effetes, divorced from the rugged outdoor life of collecting, and they were especially troubled by scientists’ use of trinomial nomenclature to indicate subspecies. Barrow points out that this new emphasis on subspecies variation reflected the influence of evolutionary theory and resulted in a massive increase in the specimens taken because collectors now needed examples of each variation rather than the traditional male and female pair of each species.

In the Spring of 2015, while watching a pair of nesting loons on an Adirondack lake, I recalled Burroughs’s loon hunt, and it struck me that his ability to reconcile a deeply felt love of nature with the senseless killing of such a magnificent bird complicates the story of the rise of environmentalism in America. The textbook version is that in the nineteenth century, when Americans saw nature as nothing more than a resource to be used, voices began to speak up for the nonhuman world. The vanguard of this resistance consisted of figures such as George Marsh and Henry David Thoreau, and they were followed by the great conservationists of the Progressive Era: Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and John Burroughs. In

the introduction to *American Earth* (2008), Bill McKibben explains, “After the prophetic explosion that was Thoreau, American environmental writing and thought continued, even if at a more deliberate pace and sometimes at extended intervals, to drive the movement forward” (xxiv). In his history of American environmentalism, Benjamin Kline notes, “By the beginning of the twentieth century a new view of nature appeared in America” (51). Kline argues that this reformist movement continued through Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal in the 1930s, so “much of the philosophy and most of the methods needed to construct an active environmental movement had been well formed during the first half of the twentieth century” (67). In this version, the early resistance to the culture of domination blossomed into contemporary environmentalism with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, or perhaps on the first Earth Day in 1970. This story is an example of what William Cronon has called a “progressive narrative,” a story in which “the plot line gradually ascends toward an ending that is somehow more positive—happier, richer, freer, better—than the beginning” (“Place for Stories” 1352).³

In *Reconciling Nature*, I complicate the resistance narrative through ecocritical readings of eight major American novels written in the decades surrounding the turn of the century. A close analysis of these works contributes to a cultural history of the contested ideologies of nature embedded in the development of modern environmental thought between the Civil War and World War II.



Since its development in the early 1990s, ecocriticism has steadily grown in popularity, producing academic appointments; its own journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* (*ISLE*); and the professional organization the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE), which sponsors biennial conferences. In the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Cheryl Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” a broad definition that suggests the diversity of the approach (xviii). Glotfelty links its future direction to the stages of feminist criticism outlined by Elaine Showalter in *Toward a Feminist Poetics* (1979), arguing that the feminist critique of misogyny in male-authored works parallels ecocritical critiques of anthropocentric representations of nature; and that gynocriticism, or the recovery and interpretation of writing by women,

parallels the rediscovery of nature writing that has been excluded from the traditional canon (xxii–xxiv).

Two and a half decades later, ecocritics have indeed recovered an impressive body of previously ignored nature writing, but it is not as clear that they have fully explored the first of Glotfelty's stages, the ecocritical critique. A review of anthologies published between 1996 and 2003 suggests that early ecocritics were drawn to contemporary rather than classic American literature, perhaps because the representations of nature in those texts are more closely aligned with the values of contemporary environmentalism. I analyzed five ecocritical anthologies to determine the authors and texts that were studied: *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Glotfelty 1996), *Reading the Earth* (Branch 1998), *Reading Under the Sign of Nature* (Tallmadge 2000), *Beyond Nature Writing* (Armbruster 2001), and *The ISLE Reader* (Branch 2003). My admittedly unscientific results suggest a presentist bias within early ecocriticism. Approximately 63 percent of the essays deal with post-1900 literature; 37 percent are on literature written after 1970. My analysis did not suggest an undue emphasis on what David Mazel has called the "core nature-writing canon": Carson, Muir, Thoreau, Austin, Leopold, Dillard, and Lopez ("Ecocriticism" 41). Nevertheless, the authors discussed most in these anthologies are Dillard (four chapters) and Abbey (three chapters); there was no chapter on Shakespeare, Faulkner, Dickinson, or Hurston. An examination of scholarly articles in ten recent issues of *ISLE* (2014–2016) reveals that an even higher percentage of the articles are focused on post-1900 literature (77 percent) and post-1970 literature (45 percent).

In their anthology *Beyond Nature Writing* (2001), Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace argue that if ecocriticism is to avoid marginalization, critics need to expand the ecocritical canon in order to demonstrate "the field's true range and its power to illuminate an almost endless variety of texts" (3).⁴ This call has been answered by a growing number of studies that look at previously unexamined authors, but the tendency has often been to present them as voices of dissent against the mainstream exploitation of nature. For example, in *Shifting the Ground* (1997), Rachel Stein sees the work of Emily Dickinson, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Leslie Marmon Silko as "boldly polemic subversions" of "the traditional mythos of America as a nation lodged in the wilderness" (4). Likewise, Lawrence Buell, in *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001) reads "an incipient environmental ethic" in Faulkner (171). Terrell F. Dixon (2001) concludes that Mary Wilkins Freeman's short stories "present an expansive, evolving ecofeminist vision—one that avoids essentialism and that creates green women and

green men who love and defend nature while engaged in ordinary life” (173). Likewise, Stefan Schöberlein (2016) sees Melville’s “Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” as “a politically conscious, environmentally perceptive work of art” that “has the potential to speak to socioecological concerns today in a way few texts from his time can” (747, 731).

Resistance to ideologies of domination is also embedded in attempts to define the purpose of ecocriticism. In their anthology *Reading the Earth* (1998), Michael Branch, Rochelle Johnson, and Daniel Patterson insist, “Ecocriticism is not just a means of analyzing nature in literature; it implies a move toward a more biocentric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of humans’ conception of global community to include nonhuman life forms and the physical environment” (xiii). Consistent with this agenda, James Perrin Warren (2000) explains that his analysis does not exonerate the vision of Whitman, “which is clearly not ecocritical” (175). But defining “ecocritical” as sympathetic alignment with nonhuman nature seems to reduce ecocritics to environmental police who point out anthropocentric attitudes towards nature and celebrate those who resist such attitudes. As Anne Milne (2012) warns, the activist impulse of ecocriticism could result in a “prescriptive mode” that “constricts inquiry and may even be seen to sanction a particular orientation of writers to and in nature” (141). Similarly, Robert Kern (2003) argues that ecocriticism “becomes reductive when it simply targets the environmentally incorrect, or when it aims to evaluate texts solely on the basis of their adherence to ecologically sanctioned standards of behavior” (260). In his brilliant, if acerbic, critique of ecocriticism, Dana Phillips (2003) questions its excessive praise for nature writing and poetry, “as if ecocriticism were to be organized and run as a sort of fan club” (138). He argues that undue respect for mimetic realism by ecocritics such as Lawrence Buell limits the texts that can be studied and reduces the role of the critic to an umpire, “squinting to see if a given depiction of a horizon, a wildflower, or a live oak tree is itself well-painted and lively” (164).

In contrast to this constrained scope, *Reconciling Nature* complicates the teleological implications of the resistance narrative by mapping the complex, often contradictory representations of the human relationship to the nonhuman that emerge in eight important American novels written between 1876 and 1945. Moving beyond the resistance narrative opens up ecocritical readings of texts that had not previously been read from this perspective, thereby demonstrating that ecocriticism is a remarkably flexible methodology that can produce fresh and significant readings of texts that have been thoroughly interpreted by more traditional approaches.



As the nineteenth century ended, many Americans began to realize that nature was not inexhaustible. By then the old-growth forests of New England, the Middle Atlantic, the Midwest, and the South were almost completely cutover. The massive herds of American bison had been reduced to a few hundred survivors, and in 1914 the last surviving passenger pigeon, sole remnant of a species that had numbered in the billions just decades earlier, died in a Cincinnati zoo. Exotic bird species were being decimated by the millinery business, and trapping had all but eliminated the beaver from its natural range.

Meanwhile, Americans felt that they had become increasingly distanced from the natural world. In 1870, 26 percent of the population lived in cities; by 1920, that figure had reached 51 percent (Carter et al. 103–04). Furthermore, the number and size of cities increased dramatically: in 1870 there were 663 cities with at least 2,500 people; by 1940, there were 3,485, including five cities of over a million people (Carter et al. 1–102). Turn-of-the-century cities were nightmares of pollution and overcrowding as nonhuman nature was eliminated to make room for factories, railroads, and tenement buildings. In 1883, economist Henry George noted that city dwellers “never, from year’s end to year’s end, press foot upon mother earth, or pluck a wild flower, or hear the tinkle of brooks, the rustle of grain, or the murmur of leaves as the light breeze comes through the woods. All the sweet and joyous influences of nature are shut out from them” (317). In response to these changes, Americans sought to restore the felt presence of nature to their lives. Transportation improvements made it possible for many to live in the suburbs and commute to work. Authors churned out fictional and nonfictional nature books that were eagerly consumed, and educators made nature study a part of the curriculum. Urban progressive reformers concerned about the migration of farmers to the city attempted to improve the conditions of rural life, while others left the city and returned to the farm.⁵

But if nature could be seen as threatened, it could also be viewed as threatening. Ted Steinberg proposes that in the fifty years between 1880 and 1930 more people died from natural disasters than in any other period in American history (*Acts of God* 69). Indeed, seven of the ten most deadly natural disasters in US history occurred between 1871 and 1928. In the late 1880s, blizzards killed hundreds in the Plains, and heavy rains collapsed a dam and killed over two thousand people in Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

Between 1893 and 1928, thousands died from hurricanes that hit Louisiana, Georgia, Texas, and Florida; meanwhile, forest fires killed hundreds more in Wisconsin, Michigan, Idaho, and Montana. Six magnitude 6 or higher earthquakes occurred between 1886 and 1940, including the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, which killed more than three thousand people. In this period, the boll weevil destroyed crops in the South and sustained droughts devastated farms in the Great Plains. Given these violent eruptions of the natural world, it is not surprising that naturalist writers such as Stephen Crane and Jack London wrote works depicting nature as dangerous and indifferent to human desire. Likewise, turn-of-the-century fear of nature can be seen in Coney Island's recreations of natural disasters such as the Johnstown Flood and the Galveston Hurricane, as well as in the popular attraction "The End of the World," a dramatization of the destruction of mankind as predicted in the Bible.⁶ If nature is a threat to survival, one response is to turn to human ingenuity to mitigate that threat and render nature useful. In "The Moral Equivalent of War" (1910), William James proposed conscripting young people into an "army enlisted against *Nature*" (1291). He insisted that working in mines, building roads and tunnels, and constructing skyscrapers would eliminate childishness as youths played their part "in the immemorial human warfare against nature" (1291).

Such a war could be profitable. Gifford Pinchot observed that when he returned from France in 1890, "[t]he American Colossus was fiercely intent on appropriating and exploiting the riches of the richest of all continents—grasping with both hands, reaping where he had not sown, wasting what he thought would last forever" (*Breaking* 23). Max Oelschlaeger's magisterial *The Idea of Wilderness* (1991) traces the development of this dominance paradigm from the Paleolithic era to the present. He argues that the mastery of nature implied in the mechanistic philosophy of Bacon and Descartes led to modernism, "that combination of the power of science and technology with political and economic ideologies modeled on the machine metaphor" (97). Oelschlaeger points out that by the early twentieth-century, Americans became aware of the limits of natural resources, and governmental policy began to see nature in the utilitarian terms of conservation resourcism; accordingly, "the wilderness in whatever guise is effectively reduced to an environment, a stockpile of matter-energy to be transformed through technology, itself guided by the market and theoretical economics, into the wants and needs of the consumer culture" (286–87). Samuel P. Hays sees the conservation movement as a commitment to "rational planning to promote efficient development and use of all natural resources" (*Conservation*

2). In the decades surrounding the turn of the century, national forests were created, rivers were dammed, predators were eliminated, deserts were reclaimed, and wetlands were drained. Pinchot, the architect of American conservation, insisted that “the first duty of the human race is to control the earth it lives upon” (*Fight* 45).

The progressives were also committed to controlling those humans whom they deemed more closely linked to nature than themselves. Darwinian thought blurred the distinction between human and animal and made it possible to justify a racialized hierarchy of evolution. The Civil War resulted in the sudden citizenship of 4 million African Americans, who were perceived by many as less evolved than whites. In 1906 Ota Benga, a Congolese man, was exhibited in the American Museum of Natural History and at the Monkey House of the Bronx Zoo. Women were also seen as closer to nature, and thus their increasing demands for full inclusion into society posed a threat. Likewise, the waves of immigration in the late nineteenth century, especially from southern and eastern Europe, caused many Americans to feel that the new immigrants threatened the older, “Nordic” groups with “race suicide.” To control these groups, progressives relied on a combination of education and repressive legislation, including such extreme measures as eugenics. Indeed, Charles R. McCann Jr. has argued that paternalistic coercion of the individual by the state is the “true legacy” of progressivism (224).⁷

The tension between these views of nature—vulnerable, threatening, or useful—is manifested in the cultural productions of this period. In 1876, as Mark Twain was beginning to write *Huckleberry Finn*, Americans gathered in Philadelphia for the nation’s centennial. The authorizing act of Congress specified the purpose as “an Exhibition of the natural resources of the country and their development, and of its progress in those arts which benefit mankind” (qtd. in Giberti 24).⁸ However, that same year a less optimistic note was sounded with the publication of J. A. Allen’s *The American Bisons*, the first book to raise awareness about anthropogenic extinction of species. Likewise, the detonation of the atomic bombs that ended World War II in 1945, three years after the publication of William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*, represented both the apotheosis of scientific mastery of nature and a heightened fear about the apocalyptic implications of that mastery. Burroughs’s use of science to justify his loon hunt illustrates just one of the ways that Americans in this period constructed various strategies to reconcile their desire to protect a diminishing nature with their fears of a threatening nature and their confidence in human ability to reshape the nonhuman

world. As these novels negotiated these tensions, they both resisted and reinforced the culture of dominance over nature.



To untangle the representations of nature in turn-of-the-century American literature, I examine a diverse group of novels. In “From Wide Open Spaces to Metropolitan Places” (2003), Michael Bennett notes the relative neglect by ecocritics of eastern, urban literature, a trend he links to the disproportionate number of ecocritics who were associated with universities in the American West (302). Likewise, the environmental justice movement has challenged ecocritics to address literature that depicts urban life. The novels I discuss are set in the Mississippi River Valley, the Adirondacks, New York City, the Everglades, New Orleans, Mississippi, Chicago, and southwest California, thus representing more fully the environments of modern America. The novels are likewise written by authors of diverse backgrounds and perspectives: several saw themselves as part of the social reform movements of the era; others were more indifferent or even reactionary in their politics. But despite their differences, these eight novels are unified by efforts to reconcile concerns about a threatened nature with an ideology of domination that rendered nature safe or useful. Collectively, these reconciliations offer a more complete map of environmentalism in the period between the Progressive Era and the New Deal.

The Progressive Era has been the subject of much debate. Recent historians have challenged the idea of a coherent progressivism, given the diversity of those associated with the reform movements. Daniel T. Rodgers proposes that instead of an overall unifying principle, the progressives loosely organized around three clusters of ideas: “the first was the rhetoric of antimonopolism, the second was an emphasis on social bonds and the social nature of human beings, and the third was the language of social efficiency” (“In Search” 123). Historians also differ significantly on the question of when the movement began and ended. Charles R. McCann Jr. defines the Progressive Era as extending from 1885 to 1925, but he admits that “no clear-cut designation is possible, given the protean nature of Progressive thought” (10). Indeed, a recent anthology edited by Stephen Skowronek, Stephen M. Engel, and Bruce Ackerman addresses the “Progressives’ Century,” beginning with the 1912 election and ending with Barack Obama’s election in 2012. Similarly, recent historians of the New Deal have recognized its continuity with progressivism: in *Atlantic Crossings*, Daniel T.

Rodgers sees the New Deal as a “culmination” of progressivism and argues that “to a striking degree the New Deal enlisted its ideas and agenda out of the Progressive past” (415).⁹

Certainly, the period between the Civil War and World War II was important in American environmentalism. Discounting outliers such as Thoreau and Marsh, before the 1870s, few Americans expressed any reservations about the ideology of domination. The environmental crises of the late nineteenth century did indeed inspire challenges to this attitude and led to progressive conservation. Benjamin Heber Johnson defines conservation as “a robust political program with different but overlapping principles,” including respect for the transcendent beauty of wild nature and the need for efficient use of natural resources; he notes that to achieve their ends, conservationists relied on state power, scientific knowledge, and grassroots support (55). In his study of continuities and discontinuities between the progressives and the New Dealers, Otis L. Graham notes that progressives were more likely to support New Deal conservation than other issues (*Encore* 207–08). The end of World War II ushered in a new phase of American environmentalism, a response to what J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke have called “the Great Acceleration,” the rapid postwar increase in energy usage and population growth (208). Encompassing the origins and the eclipse of the conservation movement, these novels suggest continuities in the environmental attitudes of this period. Despite the half century that divides their careers, John Burroughs and Aldo Leopold have more in common than either has with contemporary, biocentric environmentalists. The strategies that turn-of-the-century Americans developed to reconcile their anxieties about a threatened nature with the older domination paradigm persisted until the late twentieth century, when new anxieties over human domination of the natural world led to the emergence of contemporary environmentalism.

Reflecting the diversity of liberal reform in this period, several patterns will be traced in this study. First, as middle- and upper-class Americans encountered the psychological pressures caused by the harsh realities of life in the industrial city, a strong anti-urban impulse drove them to seek temporary escape in both real and literary nature. Second, as the implications of Darwinian theory percolated through the culture, Americans attempted to control a threatening external world and direct evolutionary progress through technology and scientific management. Third, a growing awareness of the need to protect a nature threatened by industrialization dovetailed with the progressive expansion of the regulatory state; however, by the 1930s, reaction against what was seen as the excesses of this new

federalism resulted in a revival of individualism. Finally, the newly emerging disciplines of ecology, psychology, sociology, and anthropology seemed to present effective strategies to manage and protect nature; these disciplines also offered useful ways to control the problematic nature represented by women, immigrants, and nonwhites.

Chapter 1 argues that Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) displays antimodern anxiety about the environmental crisis caused by the rise of industrial capitalism. Huck's excursion into nature on the frontier is encumbered by the manufactured objects that he acquires, suggesting that any effort to escape civilization is always entangled with consumer culture. Furthermore, Huck's efforts to assimilate Jim into human society reveal the threat of an untamed nature. Ultimately, Twain's response to the nineteenth-century environmental crisis is a nostalgic realism that attempts to preserve a disappearing nature.

Chapter 2 situates Stephen Crane's *Maggie* (1893) into late nineteenth-century debates over the growing problem of the city. The new disciplines of sociology and ecology intersected with progressive urban reform to emphasize the importance of the environment and the interdependence of the various elements of the city. Focusing on the ways in which the material conditions of the city warp the mental states of the characters in *Maggie* reveals the threats that the urban poor represent to the upper classes and the need for the police powers of the government.

Chapter 3 complicates the late nineteenth-century view of the socializing value of nature, especially its role in the education of young women. In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), Edna Pontellier's outdoor experiences develop an individualistic desire to transcend external nature and social convention; however, she is destroyed by an intractable nature that opposes her desires and reinforces her status as a nineteenth-century wife and mother. Her failure suggests the need for experts in psychology who can reconcile the conflict between the inner desires of women and the harsh realities of nature and society.

Chapter 4 examines competing views of Darwin in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). Situated in the middle of the Progressive Era, Sinclair's novel represents socialist cooperation as a more efficient strategy for evolutionary progress than capitalist competition. Rather than repressing the nature of the immigrant workers, socialism carefully manages it through Progressive Era education and eugenics. That utilitarian view of nature is likewise represented in the novel's evasive engagement with questions of animal rights.

Chapter 5 looks at Mary Austin, a central figure in the ecocritical resistance narrative, arguing that she is more closely aligned with domination ideology than has been assumed. In her novel *The Ford* (1917), Austin represents the California “Water Wars” as a struggle between urban acquisitiveness and the need for an efficient agriculture that uses nature productively. The novel privileges a progressive “wise use” of nature through cooperation, scientific efficiency, and an understanding of human psychology.

Chapter 6 connects Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925) to conservationist efforts to protect threatened wilderness areas, such as the Adirondack setting of the novel. The preservation of the Adirondacks required the legal erasure of people who had been living in the area and led to a network of surveillance and coercive mechanisms of control. Clyde Griffiths attempts to transform the external reality of the Adirondacks into an empty space where he can enact his desires without detection. However, his arrest and conviction demonstrate that the wilderness is not outside of the disciplinary surveillance of the state.

A central concern of the New Deal was the assimilation of African Americans into mainstream American society, a project left unfulfilled by the progressives. Chapter 7 explores Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) from the perspective of twentieth-century anthropological theories that attempted to manage the problematic nature represented by African Americans. As she struggles to define herself against the natural, Janie Crawford develops a scientific objectivity that demonstrates her potential for assimilation into white culture.

Chapter 8 places William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* (1942) in the Depression-era debates over the role of the government in forestry and sport hunting. Reacting against the progressive–New Deal expansion of the regulatory state, Faulkner’s novel presents the individual who acts ethically without external control as a constructive alternative to both rapacious individualism and governmental regulation. Ike McCaslin’s failure to become that responsible individual can be attributed to his escapist immersion in atavistic wilderness nostalgia, an escapism that is in contrast to those who struggle to maintain the land and the people living on it on a sustainable basis.

The effort to control the forces of nature reached its apotheosis in the Manhattan Project; accordingly, the epilogue to this book synthesizes the themes of *Reconciling Nature* by focusing on the rhetoric of the creation and use of the first atomic bomb and the nuclear age’s influence on the development of contemporary environmentalism. Turn-of-the-century

ideologies of nature surface in the rhetoric surrounding the construction of the bomb, justifications of its use, and efforts to relieve the fear of nuclear war. In turn, anxiety over the threat of nuclear holocaust helped to shape the contemporary environmental movement.



In their 2001 anthology, Armbruster and Wallace urged ecocritics to draw from disciplines such as environmental history for “insights into the relationship between natural and cultural environments” (5). More recently, in 2015 Hannes Bergthaller argued that the promise of an environmental humanities has remained unfulfilled, and he called for a “closer engagement” between ecocriticism and environmental history (6). *Reconciling Nature* employs the work of environmental historians to trace ideologies of nature in works of literature through a key moment in American environmental history, a period that encompasses both the Progressive Era and the New Deal. By situating these novels in the context of the cultural conflicts that shaped modern views of nature, I present revisionist readings of these literary works and rereadings of some of the major issues of environmental history. Although I incorporate history, my approach focuses on the literariness of these texts and thus differs from an environmental history that uses literature as illustrations of how people thought at a given historical moment. If Greg Garrard is correct in seeing culture as “the production, reproduction and transformation of large-scale metaphors,” then careful attention to how cultural ideologies are refracted through those metaphors as well as through the characters and the plots of literature seems to represent a unique opportunity for a historically grounded ecocriticism (7).¹⁰

My approach is an eclectic mix of historicism, feminism, and psychology, as well as the close reading strategies of formalism, but I am most directly influenced by cultural studies or the “New Historicism” (the title of which is now nearly as anachronistic as that of the “New Criticism”). I am especially drawn to the assumption that literary and nonliterary texts “circulate”: in other words, they reveal similar ideological constructions of the world. Likewise, the work of Michel Foucault has shaped my thinking about environmental history, especially his analysis of the rise of biopolitics and the disciplinary state.

While cultural studies has been a dominant trend in American literary studies, it has been less influential in ecocriticism. However, I do expand upon the work of several recent Americanist ecocritics who have taken

a historicist approach. Lawrence Buell's *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001) looks at the development of "the environmental unconscious" in American literature from the late 1700s to the present (18). David Mazel's *American Literary Environmentalism* (2000) explores the "genealogy of the environment" in such pretwentieth century authors as Mary Rowlandson, James Fenimore Cooper, and Theresa Yelverton (xxiii). Lloyd Willis, in his *Environmental Evasion* (2011), cogently discusses the failure of American literature "to spur along a vigorous and sustained environmental movement" (17). Indeed, my work could be seen as a continuation, albeit with a different focus, of his "attempt to explain the forces that have regulated environmental discourse in American literature since the early nineteenth century" (14). Other critics have historicized the relationship of views of nature to ideologies of gender and race in American literature. In *Undomesticated Ground* (2000), Stacy Alaimo discusses what feminism and nature "have meant within specific historical moments" in literature written by women (21). Paul Outka's *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (2008) explores "the intersection between the construction of racial identity and natural experience" (4).



Of course, my sense of the loon as a "magnificent bird" is itself historically and culturally produced just as much as Burroughs's representation of it as a "magnificent specimen" (or as a "magnificent dinner"). An issue that has bedeviled ecocriticism from the beginning has been its relationship to poststructuralist thought, which problematizes such oppositional concepts as "nature" and "civilization." Especially since the publication of William Cronon's anthology *Uncommon Ground* (1996), ecocritics have debated the question of to what extent our concepts of nature are socially constructed. Much like Samuel Johnson kicking a rock to refute George Berkeley's idealism, essentialist ecocritics often confront poststructuralists with various illustrations of the "reality" of nature; indeed, they do this with a frequency only surpassed by those critics of Thoreau who charge that he went home to his mother's house for cookies, doughnuts, or pie.¹¹ Thus, Edward Abbey proposes a variation of Johnson's proof: if you throw a rock at the head of "the solipsist or the metaphysical idealist" and he ducks, "he's a liar" (97). Richard Dawkins quipped, "Show me a cultural relativist at thirty thousand feet and I'll show you a hypocrite" (31–32). And Terry Gifford confronts the poststructuralist students in his classes by pointing to his "balding head" and explaining that "daily, post-modernists have to use an active, if tentative,

concept of ageing, or of justice, or of environmentalism, however these concepts have been socially constructed" (15).

But these representations of poststructuralist ecocriticism seem oversimplified, if not actual straw man/woman arguments. Most recent ecocriticism adopts a middle ground, acknowledging the reality of the natural world but recognizing the difficulty of apprehending that world except through culture. Thus, Stacy Alaimo in *Undomesticated Ground* concludes, "While nature cannot be understood apart from its discursive construction, it may *act* in ways that jostle or jolt that very construction" (12). Likewise, David Mazel, in *American Literary Environmentalism*, draws upon Judith Butler's feminist theory to insist that "the key is not in arguing over whether everything is a construct"; instead, the focus should be the "processes of exclusion, erasure, foreclosure, and abjection" that have constituted both the environment and the subject that perceives that environment (xvi). Indeed, in a discussion of the consensus that was reached during the writing of *Uncommon Ground* (which has become to the essentialists what E. M. W. Tillard's *Elizabethan World Picture* was to the New Historicists), Richard White noted, "There was considerable agreement that the natural world was more than a representation and that we could learn meaningful things about it—not just about our representations of it. There was also considerable agreement that, whatever else nature was, it was a representation" (qtd. in Cronon, *Uncommon Ground* 457).

A recurring question among ecocritics is the value of such criticism from an environmentalist perspective: in other words, is it worth the trees that were cut down to publish this book? Indeed, ecocriticism has often struggled with the question of praxis. Glotfelty notes that for environmentally conscious literature professors, "as environmental problems compound, work as usual seems unconscionably frivolous. If we're not part of the solution, we're part of the problem" (xxi). In an intriguing analysis of the environmental implications of ecocriticism, David Mazel concluded that there was no empirical evidence that "students who read and write about green texts turn into more thoughtful and effective environmentalists than they might have been otherwise" ("Ecocriticism" 42). Nevertheless, I would argue that focusing on the ways in which American writers creatively imagined strategies to reconcile nature is instructive for the present since many of these strategies have proven long-lived. For example, recently, sustainability, which is frequently linked to Progressive Era conservation, has emerged as an alternative to traditional environmentalism. Sustainability's focus on the relationship between ecological health, economic welfare, and social empowerment has added important questions of justice to the environmentalist

agenda. But, as Leslie Paul Thiele points out, sustainability also can be used by businesses and governments as greenwashing to mask practices that destroy the environment (5–8).

Furthermore, some argue that the legislation and regulatory agencies that were the high achievement of postwar environmentalism have had limited effectiveness and thus raise questions about the future direction of the movement to protect the nonhuman. In a defense of Burroughs's lack of engagement with legislative environmentalism, Justin Askins notes, "Thoreau and Muir's legacy of battling within the Western legal and political system has done little to change the terrible shape the planet is in, even though the spirit of confrontation within that system remains stronger than ever" (263). If politics has proven inadequate, perhaps a cultural change is the only hope for amelioration of worsening environmental conditions. Garrett Hardin's "The Tragedy of the Commons" (1968) begins with a discussion of problems that have no technical solution; accordingly, they require "change in human values or ideas of morality" (1243). The value of environmental humanities (environmental history and ecocriticism) seems to lie in its potential to explore the implications of alternatives to the dominant culture. As Michael Branch notes, we "need to study earlier American conceptions of nature in order to better understand how certain misguided and destructive ideas gained prominence in our culture" ("Before Nature" 93). Or, as Sylvia Mayer observes, "ecocritical studies try to create knowledge that contributes to our understanding of the causes of environmental degradation as well to the search for effective strategies of amelioration" (4).

If our only way to approach nature is through representation, it nevertheless seems clear that some representations are more sustainable than others. In "The Trouble with Wilderness" Cronon observes, "If living in history means that we cannot help leaving marks on a fallen world, then the dilemma we face is to decide what kinds of marks we wish to leave" (88). In Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000), the wildlife biologist Deanna Wolf explains to a coyote hunter that while living always involves taking life, "it can be thoughtful. A little bit humble about the necessity, maybe. You can consider the costs of your various choices. Or you can blow big holes in the world for no better reason than simple fear" (323). But thoughtful choice requires a full understanding of the tensions embedded in any alternatives to the culture of dominance. As American authors reconciled the desire to dominate nature with concerns about the threats to a diminished natural world, they suggested potential solutions to the human/nature relationship, solutions that might represent hope for our future.