

# Introduction

## American Literature and Environmental Politics

“I think I liked the old Lou and Oscar better, and they probably feel the same about me. I even, if you can keep a secret,”—Carl leaned forward and touched her arm, smiling,—“I even think I liked the old country better. This is all very splendid in its way, but there was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years. Now, when I come back to all this milk and honey, I feel like the old German song, ‘Wo bist du, wo bist du, mein geliebtest Land?’—Do you ever feel like that, I wonder?”

“Yes, sometimes, when I think about father and mother and those who are gone; so many of our old neighbors.” Alexandra paused and looked up thoughtfully at the stars.

—Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*

He watched even the last puny marks of man—cabin, clearing, the small and irregular fields which a year ago were jungle and in which the skeleton stalks of this year’s cotton stood almost as tall and rank as the old cane had stood, as if man had had to marry his planting to the wilderness in order to conquer it—fall away and vanish. The twin banks marched with wilderness as he remembered it. . . . There was some of it left, although now it was two hundred miles from Jefferson when once it had been thirty. He had watched it, not being conquered, destroyed, so much as retreating since its purpose was served now and its time an outmoded time, retreating southward through this inverted-apex, this ∇-shaped section of earth between hills and River until what was left of it seemed now to be gathering and for the time arrested in one tremendous density of brooding and inscrutable impenetrability at the ultimate funneling tip.

—William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*

This is not said in criticism of one system or the other but I do wonder whether there will come a time when we can no longer afford our wastefulness—chemical wastes in the rivers, metal wastes everywhere, and atomic wastes buried deep in the earth or sunk in the sea. When an Indian village became too deep in its own filth, the inhabitants moved. And we have no place to move.

—John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley*

A continent ages quickly once we come. The natives live in harmony with it. But the foreigner destroys, cuts down the trees, drains the water, so that the water supply is altered and in a short time the soil, once the sod is turned over, is cropped out and, next, it starts to blow away as it has blown away in every old country and as I had seen it start to blow in Canada. The earth gets tired of being exploited. A country wears out quickly unless man puts back in it all his residue and that of all his beasts. When he quits using beasts and uses machines, the earth defeats him quickly. The machine can't reproduce, nor does it fertilize the soil, and it eats what he cannot raise. A country was made to be as we found it. We are the intruders and after we are dead we may have ruined it but it will still be there and we don't know what the next changes are. I suppose they all end up like Mongolia.

Our people went to America because that was the place to go then. It had been a good country and we had made a bloody mess of it and I would go, now, somewhere else as we had always had the right to go somewhere else and as we had always gone. . . . Now I would go somewhere else. We always went in the old days and there were still good places to go.

—Ernest Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa*

I became interested in American literature's environmental politics when I noticed what seemed like environmental sentiments in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*. I was struck by the way Cather punctured the tale of Alexandra Bergson's triumph over the prairie that killed her father with Carl Linstrum's blunt claim that he preferred the old, wild prairie. I was intrigued by her decision to undermine Jim Burden's credibility in *My Ántonia* by accusing him of being a romantic boy who made his fortune in oil and timber before having him suggest a deep affinity for the fading native prairie in the process of telling Ántonia Shimerda's story. Each novel seemed to present a faint, plaintive lamentation for the prairie that was being turned into a grid of agricultural production, but I associated environmentalist sentiment with another era, and the environmental lam-

entation was so subtle—so buried within layers of narration, expressed in such tentative voices—that I was not sure how to account for it.

Reading William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck provided some answers. Like Cather, each of them recognized environmental change as an unavoidable part of the modern world. Faulkner saw it in Mississippi and wrote about it in *Go Down, Moses*; Hemingway witnessed it in Michigan and Africa and wrote about it in pieces such as *In Our Time* and *Green Hills of Africa*. Steinbeck witnessed environmental change in California, in the Gulf of California, and throughout the American heartland, and he bears witness to it all in texts such as *Cannery Row*, *Sea of Cortez*, *Travels with Charley*, *America and Americans*, and a whole host of articles and essays that he published throughout his career.

Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck show that Cather was not alone in her awareness of environmental change, and, along with Cather, they show that authors we do not automatically remember as “nature writers” were attuned to such matters. In the different ways they approach these issues, they also suggest that environmental change was a politically charged issue that had to be approached with great care. Cather approached it obliquely and with great delicacy; Faulkner offered an absolutely gut-wrenching portrayal of environmental ruin in Mississippi’s “Big Bottom” in *Go Down, Moses* but refused to wade into politics; Hemingway offered clear testimony to environmental destruction in two continents but found ways to ignore it; Steinbeck, after much apparent wrangling with the issue, made bold statements about it in *Sea of Cortez*, *Travels with Charley*, and *American and Americans*, but he knew enough about how American culture reacted to radicalism in the mid-twentieth century to tread carefully in the footsteps of Tom Joad.

The environmental concerns these authors engage appear in their texts unexpectedly, almost as if they are unwelcome, as if they have forced their ways into the stories without the full permission of the authors themselves. Rather than serving as the guiding principles of the works in which they appear, these environmental problems are simply issues that could not be avoided. Cather, it seems, could not write a novel about the prairie without lamenting the loss of the place’s original qualities; Hemingway could not write about Africa without mentioning the destructive impact of Western incursion; Steinbeck could not write about Monterey, California, without thinking about the ecological impact of the Pacific sardine industry.

When I set out to write this book, my purpose was to interrogate the oddity of these tense, halting encounters with environmental change in early-twentieth-century American literature. I wanted to understand why these authors were writing about environmental change in such complex and often conflicted ways. I wanted to understand why they approached

the subject with such delicacy, and I wanted to understand how these engagements with environmental problems fit into the broader story of American literature.

To satisfy these curiosities, I have had to move from the twentieth century and the writings of those like Cather, Steinbeck, and their contemporaries to the early nineteenth century and the writings of those such as James Fenimore Cooper, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. I have also had to dig quite extensively into the history of American environmental politics, which I have encountered in the recent work of historians such as William Cronon and Carolyn Merchant and in the writings of those, like Jeremy Belknap, Timothy Dwight, Marquis de Chastellux, George Perkins Marsh, John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and Theodore Roosevelt, who shaped this history. In the grand scale, my conclusion is quite simple: environmental change—or environmental destruction, depending upon how one wishes to characterize it—has been recognized as a problem since the colonial period, but it has not been given a place in the story the nation prefers to tell about its relationship with the natural world.

The preferred explanation of the relationship between American culture and the North American environment is the one Perry Miller identifies in “The Romantic Dilemma in American Nationalism and the Concept of Nature,” where he explains that the United States has always been imagined as “Nature’s Nation” in relatively unproblematic terms (201). The nation’s uniqueness, magnificence, and strength have been staked on the glory of its natural world from the beginning, and the body of literature that critics have shaped into a national canon since the late nineteenth century has preserved those authors, such as Emerson and Thoreau, who investigate the wonder and complexity of the natural world while marginalizing those, such as Cooper and Longfellow, who express anxiety about the consequences of the nation’s environmental destructiveness.

Thus, the early twentieth century posed an intricate series of problems for authors who were bothered by American culture’s environmental destructiveness. The prevailing aesthetics of the age held no place for the overt criticism of environmental destruction, and, despite early-twentieth-century conservation efforts, the nation was largely committed to maintaining its faith in the illimitability and indestructibility of its unique natural environment.

### Historicizing Environmental Politics

When I began this project, I could not account for the faint environmentalist sentiments in Willa Cather’s novels because I understood envi-

ronmentalism as it is casually portrayed in popular discourse (and in the rare historical study such as Kirkpatrick Sale's *Green Revolutions*): as a unique phenomenon of the late twentieth century. Defined in that way, environmentalism is an unprecedented movement whose origins are marked by the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, the celebration of Earth Day in 1970, and the constant media coverage of environmental crises such as the Love Canal incident in the late 1970s and the Exxon Valdez oil spill in the 1989.

From the perspective of that historical frame, any discussion of environmentalist sentiment in literature written before the 1960s can seem like an unfair imposition of our own concerns upon the past. The problem, however, is not the critical method but the imperfect understanding of environmentalism's history that seems to persist quite stubbornly—in popular and academic discourse alike—even after the burgeoning of ecocriticism and its related subdiscipline, environmental history.

As is the case with all historical narratives, the story of environmentalism's history is an exercise in periodization, and the events of the 1960s and 1970s, which seem to bear all the marks of pure originary moment, are best viewed as the markers of a periodic break in the history of environmental politics, not its absolute beginning. Historians of environmental politics have consistently shown this to be the case since the early 1980s. They agree, almost unanimously, that environmental politics should be understood as a long tradition that existed well before the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

In New England, for instance, records of resource depletion, environmental anxieties, and conservation measures date back to the colonial period. Environmental historians have made it quite clear that the general pattern of colonial settlement produced almost immediate firewood shortages and then serious deforestation, which led, in turn, to depleted populations of game animals and exhausted soils.

The statistics the William Cronon and Carolyn Merchant present in their classic studies of environmental history offer the same shock value as those in *Silent Spring* or any of the World Watch reports or Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*: colonies were experiencing firewood shortages within ten to fifteen years of settlement; Boston was experiencing wood shortages by 1683; populations of wild turkey and white-tailed deer were noticeably reduced by 1700 while beaver (and their attendant fur trade) had already generally vanished in New England; by 1800 the deer, elk, bear, and lynx had all gone the way of the beaver; by 1850, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire were all 30 to 50 percent deforested; and through all of this—the deforestation, the exhaustion of game animals—nonintensive agricultural practices were exhausting the region's

soils to such an extent that a major portion of the population would bolt to the newly opened lands of formerly Iroquois and British territory in New York during the opening decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

The colonists and the citizens of the new nation surely took these changes in stride—that is largely what we do today, after all, even when the changes are observed with scientific precision and presented in film—but to imagine that these people were oblivious or unconcerned is inaccurate. The record here is just as compelling as the evidence of environmental change: the British government was taking steps to reserve all timber in Massachusetts for the Royal Navy as early as 1691, and in 1694 Massachusetts responded to the depletion of wild game by instituting hunting seasons for white-tailed deer (Cronon, 110, 101).<sup>3</sup>

By the middle of the eighteenth century, European and American observers were wringing their hands over the wastefulness of the American approach to nature. Peter Kalm, a Swedish naturalist who traveled extensively from Pennsylvania to Canada from 1748 to 1751, was appalled by the “carelessness” with which the American colonists treated “the grain fields, the meadows, the forests, [and] the cattle” (308). He perceived a particularly “hostile” attitude among Americans toward their “woods” and cites example after example of reckless agricultural practices that “will do for a time; but . . . will afterwards have bad consequences, as everyone may clearly see” (308, 307).

By the dawning of the nineteenth century, American and European observers were certain that the North American environment was experiencing major changes—even climatic changes—due to European involvement with the continent. Even the rare individuals, like Noah Webster, who vehemently rejected the notion that human impact could effect climate change eventually found their stance more and more difficult to maintain (Webster denied climate change in a series of publications between 1799 and 1806, but his confidence in his own claims noticeably declined over time) (Jehlen 51–54).

For most, these environmental changes were welcome—the winters seemed shorter and milder; the place seemed more capable of sustaining “civilized” life—but ambivalence and anxiety often ran throughout even the most optimistic descriptions of the situation. In a fashion that is similar to the later writings of Jeremy Belknap and Timothy Dwight, Marquis de Chastellux expresses profound optimism about climate change in his *Travels in North-America in the Years 1780, 1781 and 1782*, but his optimism is tempered by cautionary tales that make it sound as if the American environment may be teetering on the edge of disaster. He does not hesitate to suggest that a particular “climate may . . . be rendered more salubrious by draining some morasses in the neighbourhood” (275),

but he still hints that the fate of imperial nations depends upon how environmental modification is managed:

Nothing is more essential than the manner in which we proceed in the clearing of a country, for the salubrity of the air, may even the order of the seasons, may depend on the access which we allow the winds, and the direction we may give them. It is a generally received opinion at Rome, that the air is less healthy since the felling of a large forest situated between that city and Ostia, which defended it from the winds known in Italy by the names of the Scirocco and the Libico. It is believed in Spain also, that the excessive droughts, of which the Castilians complain more and more, are occasioned by the cutting down of the woods, which used to attract and break the clouds in their passage. (232–33)

Having situated the history of environmental modification in this way, Chastellux explains that he feels compelled to “fix the attention of the learned in this country” upon the situation in Virginia, where environmental changes will have to be guided by the most judicious of hands. “The greatest part of Virginia,” Chastellux writes,

is very low and flat, and so divided by creeks and great rivers, that it appears absolutely redeemed from the sea, and an entire new creation; it is consequently very swampy, and can be dried only by the cutting down a great quantity of wood; but as on the other hand it can never be so drained as not still to abound with mephitical exhalations; and of what ever nature these exhalations may be, whether partaking of fixed or inflammable air, it is certain that vegetation absorbs them equally, and that trees are the most proper to accomplish this object. *It appears equally dangerous either to cut down or to preserve a great quantity of wood; so that the best manner of proceeding to clear the country, would be to disperse the settlements as much as possible, and to leave some groves of trees standing between them.* (233; emphasis added)

While Belknap and Dwight do not completely match the level of anxiety that is reflected in Chastellux’s equation of Rome and Spain with the American colonies, they both offer the type of instruction that Chastellux calls for here. Belknap devotes two volumes of *The History of New Hampshire* (the volumes published in 1784 and 1791) to celebrating

the blossoming of New Hampshire civilization and then makes the third volume (published in 1792) into a veritable guidebook for potential settlers, complete with advice on the most effective ways to clear forests and develop farms. Dwight offers similar advice throughout his *Travels in New England and New York* (1821–22) but not without counterbalancing glowing panoramic descriptions of the almost totally cultivated Connecticut River Valley with descriptions of the injudicious use of forest resources, as in the case of Newbury, Connecticut, where, he writes, settlers have “cut down their forest” with such an “improvident hand” that the resulting lack of resources may “hereafter put a final stop to the progress of population.” (2:238)

### The Unique Problem of Environmental Politics

Kalm, Chastellux, Belknap, and Dwight were actively participating in the environmental politics of their eras. They identified resource depletion as a problem that could limit the growth of the population and the nation, they diagnosed it as a product of wastefulness and laziness, and when they felt that ignorance was the culprit (as is the case with Belknap and Dwight) they provided the information they felt their audiences needed. Despite the pervasive evidence that people of the colonial and early republican periods noticed and worried about environmental change, it is still difficult to grant legitimacy to those thoughts and opinions.

It was difficult for Perry Miller when he wrote “The Romantic Dilemma in American Nationalism and the Concept of Nature.” Miller’s essay recognizes that the North American environment was monumentally important to nineteenth-century American culture (he argues that it was revered as a place where God spoke, as a place where the nation, not just individuals, could find spiritual guidance and psychic restoration), it recognizes that the march of American civilization threatened the very natural world that it revered, and it recognizes that this tendency to destroy the beloved produced a kind of psychic crisis for the young nation that only artists and writers had any hope of remedying. Nineteenth-century American culture, he explains, felt that it was the special “calling” of American artists—“our Coles, Durands, and Cropseys, our poets and novelists”—to urgently undertake “an accurate recording of scenery” to “fix the fleeting moment of primitive grandeur” because “in America Nature is going down in swift and inexorable defeat. She is being defaced, conquered—actually ravished” (198).

Miller clearly believes that serious environmental changes were taking place in the nineteenth century, and I think that to a lesser or greater



extent he believes that artists and authors really did play a role in the shaping the culture's reaction to those changes. His misgivings, though, are apparent in the language he uses. He feels that the impassioned spirit of the nineteenth century, which reacted to environmental change in terms of "inexorable defeat" and ravishment, was overwrought. He casts the situation as a conflict between the civilized and the primitive, and when he applies those terms he feels that any argument against civilization must be specious. He even seems to feel that the whole crisis of American civilization overwriting American nature is made up, an unpleasant product of a Romanticism that allowed the locus of truth, beauty, and virtue to shift from God or the Bible to Nature, and that this elevation of Nature is what made nature's effacement a problem in the first place. Miller was all the more confident in his interpretation of this crisis as artificial because he knew, beyond the shadow a doubt, that "on the whole . . . the founders had no qualms about doing harm to nature by thrusting civilization upon it" (198).

The problem with environmentalism is not just the persistent sense that it is historically limited—it is easy enough to unearth the longer tradition that extends well beyond the nineteenth century. The problem for us, as it was for Miller, is that environmentalism is an anomalous form of politics because it moves against the grain of virtually every element of the modern Western episteme: it refuses to accept economic gain and national expansionism as unquestionable pursuits, it asks people to stop acting as atomized individuals and make sacrifices in the pursuit of goals as impersonal and abstract as saving the planet, and from time to time it asks that people subvert human interests for the good of the nonhuman.

These environmentalist demands can seem like trite, innocuous platitudes, but when they are taken seriously and inserted into literary, cultural, and political fields that are dedicated to nationalism, rationalism, democratic idealism, and material progress, they are more likely to seem incongruous and threatening, in some ways as Bartleby's "I prefer not to" is incongruous within and threatening to the office culture of nineteenth-century Wall Street. Bartleby's protest is entirely subversive, but it is deeply personal—it is an expression of Bartleby's own grievances, and, since he won't explain his actions, it attracts no followers. In the end, for all its revolutionary potential, it goes down as a severe case of individual petulance or belligerence that engendered nothing—no followers, no movement, no change.

When environmentalist demands emerge forcefully, in ways that suggest they are meant to be taken seriously, they carry Bartleby's incongruity, but they are all the more threatening because they articulate the grievance. They refuse to remain silent; they demand that the surrounding

world shift and re-center its thinking around a new way of understanding the relationship between human existence and the world that supports it, and they call for communal action against the status quo.

Because it recognizes a flaw in the established system, because it demands an epistemological shift, and because it contains a call to action, environmentalism is less the fringe, hysterical, phenomenon that its detractors find it to be than it is an example of what the French philosopher Alain Badiou defines, in works such as *Being and Event*, *Saint Paul*, and *Ethics*, as a truth event. In these treatises, Badiou argues that truth is not an a priori construct but a thing produced by an event or rupture that arises unexpectedly from within an established situation. In this theory, every established situation contains a void—an unknowable, unspeakable aspect of its own being—and truth happens in the rare, unexpected moments when the void is recognized, given a name, and acted upon in a way that inspires a chain of future actions performed in the spirit of the original event.

The important thing about Badiou's idea of truth for our work here is that it points out the inherent radicalism that environmentalism possesses *as a truth event*, and it provides us with a way to explain the irregularity of environmentalism's extended historical narrative. By virtue of what it points out and what it asks people to do, environmentalism cannot help but be radical; it cannot help but challenge the current situation, and, like all truth events, all odds are stacked against its success. To be viable, to make any difference, truth events must exist beyond the fleeting moments when they articulate the previously unrecognized problem of a given situation. They must break through the inertia of the status quo, which Badiou refers to as the "instituted knowledges" or dominant ideologies of any given situation, and survive the forces that are invested in *not changing*. In the United States, the radicalism of environmental politics is particularly pronounced because the "instituted knowledges" it must displace are myths (that the continent is an empty, virgin space created by God to be redeemed or developed by the white race), misperceptions (that the continent is illimitable and its nature indestructible), and beliefs (commitments to technological progress, national expansion, and the development of wealth) that have been so woven into the national identity that opposing them can seem like opposing "Americanness" itself.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, it has been profoundly difficult for environmental politics to gain ground in American culture. We can create lists of writers and thinkers who have presented environmentalist ideas from the colonial era to the middle of the twentieth century (it is not exhaustive or authoritative, but my list includes Peter Kalm, Marquis de Chastellux, Jeremy Belknap, Timothy Dwight, James Fenimore Cooper, Susan Fenimore Cooper, George Perkins

Marsh, John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Aldo Leopold, and John Steinbeck), but in many ways the story that such lists tell is one of starts, stops, and restarts rather than a steady historical progression toward a consistent, well-defined program of environmental politics. It is a history of ruptures that named the void in the American situation but that did not spark subsequent truth events so that what appears to be chronological progress toward the environmental politics we know today is often not progress or historical continuity but an arrangement of figures on a timeline independently arriving at the same realizations again and again.

From this perspective, Kalm and Chastellux named the void—the limitedness and fragility of the nation’s nature—at the heart of the eighteenth century’s understanding of the natural world, but it went nowhere. No secondary figures immediately appeared to carry their message forward. So, when James Fenimore Cooper expressed his concerns about the state of the environment in the early decades of the nineteenth century, he was largely restarting the debate, not continuing the one that had begun earlier. In almost every instance—in the case of Marsh and Muir and Leopold—this pattern repeated itself until, it seems, writers such as Cather and Steinbeck began to feel that pointing out the unsustainability of American culture’s relationship with nature was either futile or not worth the risk they would incur as the bearers of a radical message.<sup>5</sup>

*Environmental Evasion* is certainly not a book about Alain Badiou or his philosophy of truth, but Badiou’s work has shaped how I think about environmental politics. It has brought me to feel that the story of American environmental politics, from the beginning, has been a negotiation of *what could be said* about the relationship between the nation and the natural world upon which it has been built and what writers and activists *have been allowed to say* by a national culture dominated by ideologies that place it in direct opposition to environmental activism, and Badiou’s work has helped me recognize that these same tensions exist in American literature and the critical conversations that have grown up around it.

In American literary studies, just as in American culture writ large, “instituted knowledges” have pushed back against environmental politics for decades. From the late nineteenth century to the last decades of the twentieth century, literary studies eschewed politics altogether and promoted aesthetics that often withheld from view the authors and texts that engaged literary politics. The first wave of American Studies contributed to the nation’s mythologizing of the natural world as a virgin land (with Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* in 1950) while also making any discussion of nature a discussion of literary genres (the pastoral) or literary devices (myths, symbols, and archetypes).

When environmental politics have entered literary criticism, they have been met with charges of “presentism,” a term that seems designed to carry a burden of shame parallel to plagiarism. The two most prominent examples of this are Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden* (1964) and Annette Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land* (1975). Many would include *Machine in the Garden* with the other “master texts” of “cold war” American Studies because it tacitly accepts the thesis of *Virgin Land*, it uses the same white and male canon, it omits the same women and people of color of the master texts, and it recasts American literature into molds of archetypal pastoralism, but Marx does depart from the established order in one way: he suggests that white Americans of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were *bothered* by technology’s intrusion into their virginal, pastoral gardens.<sup>6</sup> In the opinion of his critics, however, Marx’s text is flawed because of problems inherent to the “Myth/Symbol” school of Americanist criticism and because (and here is the more damaging problem) they feel the technological anxieties Marx focuses upon in the book are really the concerns of his own era, not those of the nineteenth-century authors he studies in the book. For Bruck Kucklick, who famously deconstructed *Machine in the Garden* in “Myth and Symbol in American Studies” (1972), the damning flaw is presentism, the “notorious” error of historians that causes them to “read their interest back into the past, and misconstrue an individual’s thought so that it is relevant for the present” and eventually “extract from an author what is significant for us,” rather than what really was significant to the author (77).

When Annette Kolodny published *The Lay of the Land*, she was met with a similar reception. Kolodny’s book, of course, argues that North American environmental destruction is the unfortunate result of the way nature has been gendered since the beginning of European colonization. She argues that by turning the “new” land into a female virgin land Europeans placed North American nature into the category of the exploited and exploitable. Surely, the groundbreaking nature of her study can bear part of the blame for the stiff resistance it met—it was, after all, the first book to seriously challenge the commitment of American Studies to “virgin land” mythology—but one fleeting line in the book’s preface, the line that says the project’s “*original impetus*” is a “growing distress at what we have done to our continent,” seems to have also played a role in the book’s reception (ix). In her *New World, New Earth* (1979), Cecelia Tichi applied to Kolodny’s book the same logic that Kucklick had used against Marx years earlier: in her opinion, *The Lay of the Land* is irredeemably damaged by its confession of environmentalist motivations, and Kolodny’s tendency to recognize environmentalist sentiments in pre-contemporary

authors is nothing more than another case of “mistaking palpable present effects for past intentions” (xvii).

In the 1980s and 1990s, American Studies concluded a major phrase of challenging the guiding assumptions of “cold war” criticism; revised its relationship to history; entered a deeply introspective moment; and finally grew silent on issues relating to either the environment or environmental politics. When environmental topics reappeared in literary criticism in the mid-1990s, they appeared as the special purview of the emerging field of ecocriticism, but, during those early years, even this critical field that operated under explicitly environmentalist motivations bore the signs of institutional resistances to environmental politics. When Cheryl Glotfelty first envisioned this new type of literary criticism, she was motivated by “the most pressing contemporary issue of all, namely, the global environmental crisis,” but the criticism that ensued tended to focus on interdisciplinarity rather than politics (xv). It investigated the science and philosophical implications (holistic worldviews, metaphors of connectivity) of ecology and often converted these concepts into a new interpretive matrix that critics could use to dive beneath the surface of texts in search of ecological truths while almost unconsciously maintaining the idea that environmentalism is no more than a contemporary concern that can motivate criticism but not be the subject of it.

My purpose is not to undermine ecocriticism; as an undergraduate mentored in the 1990s by one of the people who was involved in its development, I was virtually reared on it, and I have been engaged with ecocriticism ever since. My purpose is merely to identify the degree to which environmental politics is, and has been, an anomaly in American Studies and its related critical fields. In these critical fields—even those most sympathetic to environmentalism—what has been said about environmental politics has been limited by the power of instituted knowledges that, in this case, include longstanding commitments to modernist aesthetics that devalue some of the texts that are most involved in environmental politics, related critical methods that focus on aesthetics and the creation of national mythologies, and a general resistance to political criticism that is further exacerbated by commonly held assumptions about the presentism of environmental politics. For all of these reasons, it was more natural for environmentally motivated scholars to turn toward interdisciplinarity—toward ecology and its related concerns—than it was for them to turn their lines of inquiry toward the very forms of politics that were explicitly motivating their work.

While it originated in my curiosities about the environmental commitments of early-twentieth-century authors, the story I have to tell in this

book is much broader. *Environmental Evasion* is an attempt to explain the forces that have regulated environmental discourse in American literature since the early nineteenth century, to identify what has been omitted or silenced in the process of regulating this discourse, and to then resituate the work of early-twentieth-century writers such as Willa Cather and John Steinbeck in the matrix of literary, cultural, and environmental politics that was under construction well before they began their literary careers.

As one might expect in such an examination of the center and periphery of American literature's environmental politics, *Environmental Evasion* begins with a reassessment of American literature's most privileged environmental thinkers, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Chapter 1 argues that while Emerson and Thoreau both offer rich and varied interpretations of nature they unwittingly empower American imperialism and develop ways of evading the environmental destruction that this imperialism always leaves in its wake. Moreover, while their canonization—brought about in the broad shift in values that was guided by critics from Cornelius Mathews and Margaret Fuller to Mark Twain, George Santayana, Van Wyck Brooks, D. H. Lawrence, and Leslie Fiedler—has affected American literature's relationship with the natural world in two ways: it has limited the terms of subsequent environmental discourse in American literature, and it has marginalized the much different environmental visions of other authors such as James Fenimore Cooper and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Chapter 2 and chapter 3 are attempts to recover the environmental politics of James Fenimore Cooper, the first commercially successful American novelist, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the nineteenth century's most popular, most widely read American poet. Thus, chapter 2 argues that despite his devaluation in a critical tradition that stretches from Mark Twain to Leslie Fiedler Cooper's *Leatherstocking* series constitutes a significant intervention into American culture's vision of the natural world by breaking from a federalist rhetoric of environmental inexhaustibility that was pervasive in the early republic. Rather than continuing a tradition of federalist optimism practiced by those such as William Cooper (his father) and Timothy Dwight, Cooper argues that the United States is expanding into a limited environment, that the dominant capitalist culture of the United States is environmentally ruinous and unsustainable, that the continent has always already been a contested space rather than a virgin void, and that language and science are mechanisms of a Euro-American imperialism that was much more complex than the squatters, squires, and outcasts that populate Cooper's romances.

Chapter 3 argues that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow defined nature as a terrestrial rather than abstract phenomenon that could provide a basis

for American exceptionalism in a new transnationalist American literature. Longfellow's poetic project, as he defines it in three manifestoes published between 1823 and 1839, was to create a transnational American literature that based its exceptionalism upon the uniqueness of the North American continent. Longfellow promoted his plan for an environmentally determined national literature through the 1850s, with the help of other powerful critics like James Russell Lowell, against Young Americans such as Cornelius Mathews who were vehemently promoting a drastically different American literature rooted in nativist patriotism. Longfellow attempted to fulfill his vision of an environmentally determined national literature in *Evangeline* and *The Song of Hiawatha*. Longfellow's plan for the development of a legitimate American literature depended upon the continued existence of a pristine and culturally significant North American environment, but his plan waned along with his critical reputation. By the time Santayana and Brooks formulated their vision of "American Literature" in the early twentieth century, any lingering notion of an environmentally determined or transnationalist American literature had vanished, and American Literature had become the product of an inclusive Whitmanian personality that was clothed in naturalistic rhetoric but freed from any dependence upon material nature itself.

*Environmental Evasion's* final two chapters and its afterword return to the twentieth century. While I could have extended my argument into other authors—particularly William Faulkner—I have limited the primary focus of these chapters to Willa Cather and John Steinbeck, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ernest Hemingway. Cather and Steinbeck are unique because they were in tune with the period's emerging ecological sciences, Hurston is unique because she was able to depart wholly from established methods of writing about the natural world, and Hemingway is remarkable because his extreme denial of environmental catastrophe seems to represent the culmination of American literature's evasive environmental politics.

Chapter 4, then, argues that Willa Cather and John Steinbeck, who recognized American culture as an environmentally destructive force, reacted to environmental crisis with an Emersonian environmental vision that suited the expectations of critical and national audiences that they believed would not tolerate any declaration of an unequivocally environmentalist position. As Emerson does in the nineteenth century, Cather and Steinbeck's fictional characters—and in some instances the authors themselves—fix their environmental gazes upon metonyms of environmental health and viability. Cather's characters maintain their faith in the permanence and permanent virginity of nature by fixing their environmental gazes upon horizons and vast environmental cycles that metonymically represent the health and availability of whole environmental systems, while Steinbeck

and his characters perform the same action as they contemplate whether scientifically preserving small bits of the natural world from beneath the eaves of industry can provide a satisfactory hedge against widespread environmental destruction. Although Cather's refusal of environmental activism may be excused as a function of her general belief that literature should abstain from politics, there were plenty of reasons to stay within the Emersonian paradigm of abstract nature during the early twentieth century. Steinbeck seems to speak for both of them, and for the historical moment in general, in fact, when he suggests that launching a pointed environmentalist attack on American culture would subject anyone—authors included—to the social ostracism and group violence that befalls outcasts and monstrous figures throughout his body of work.

Chapter 5 pursues two goals: it offers a revisionist account of Zora Neale Hurston's relationship with the Harlem Renaissance, and it suggests that her work, read in the context of her letters and biographies, offers one way out of the Emersonian tradition of environmental abstraction. Although she is often portrayed as a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance—as the fun-loving, brash, life-of-the-party Zora—I argue that Hurston resented the system of patronage that she experienced in Harlem and that she viewed the South, and Florida in particular, as a place where the abjection of patronage could be avoided, where an alternative black art community could be formed and sustained, and where a vibrant black life could be practiced without impediment. From Richard Wright to Hazel Carby, Hurston's critics have claimed that she refused to engage the Great Migration and the desperate situation that the South offered to African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. Against this line of critique, though, I suggest that Hurston's work is a bold act of spatial reterritorialization that uses fiction to reclaim a highly organic and immanently physical natural space within which a rich and vibrant African American life can be practiced without fear, humiliation, or apology.

*Environmental Evasion's* afterword argues that Ernest Hemingway brings American literature's politics of environmental evasion to its logical fulfillment. Particularly in texts such as *In Our Time* and *Green Hills of Africa*, Hemingway admits the reality of widespread environmental destruction but simultaneously proclaims that there will always be a "last good country" somewhere for those who have the knowledge, desire, and means to pursue it. In all cases and against all logic, he maintains faith in a vision of nature as ahistorical, illimitable, and indestructible along with a type of environmental imperialism that is like Thoreau's environmental imperialism but without Thoreau's claim that the self is the wilderness most worthy of pursuit.



In the end, it can be argued that literature is just not political in the ways that I am politicizing it, or that it should not be, and that American literature's failure to spur along a vigorous and sustained environmental movement from an early date should surprise no one. Cather, after all, argues in "The Novel Demeuble" that politics should be left to activists and their pamphlets rather than authors and their serious works of literature. Such arguments, though, disregard the basic fact that literature cannot help but politicize space—all space, including natural space. Whether or not they want to claim their agency, the stories we tell shape our spatial realities. They have always performed this function, and in American literature various spatial narratives have existed in competition from the moment that European explorers had to choose between casting North America as a wasteland or as a Garden of Eden. To recognize the power of the spatial politics that resides in storytelling or in the narrative, however, it is not necessary to return to the contact period. We need only return to 1962 and contemplate the ways that the story Rachel Carson told in 1962 revealed a new environmental reality that could not be ignored, a new environmental reality that fundamentally changed the way people thought about and experienced the natural world in the last decades of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>