ECOMYSTICISM: MATERIALISM AND MYSTICISM
IN AMERICAN NATURE WRITING

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This dissertation investigates the ways in which a theory of material mysticism can help us understand and synthesize two important trends in the American nature writing—mysticism and materialism. Material mysticism—what I term ecomysticism—has been an important current running through the American literary engagement with the natural world. Ecomysticism is a lens through which we can tease out the materialism that defines much of even the most “mystical” nature writing. This material mysticism is often a significant factor in authors’ engagements with the natural world, as it proves to be a foundational experience that motivates authors’ ethical and political perspectives.

After an introductory chapter detailing the philosophical and scientific underpinnings for my theory of ecomysticism, four chapters examine a wide array of literary figures through the lens of ecomysticism. Chapter 1 examines three authors who were writing around the turn-of-the-century: Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Austin, and Stephen Crane. This chapter examines how their regionalism and naturalism are indebted, in large part, to ecomystical experiences. I examine the ways in which the ecomystical experiences depicted in their writing challenge some scholars’ charges of anthropocentrism and dualism and offer us a new perspective on these
literary schools. Chapter 2 focuses on Robinson Jeffers, a seminal figure in American ecopoetics. Ecomysticism offers a counterweight to some interpretations that see in his work a supernatural religiosity. I demonstrate how recent philosophical advances in materialism can be marshaled to establish an entirely material basis for his religious and prophetic language. Chapter 3 uses Edward Abbey as a test case to determine the extent to which ecomysticism affects not only ontology and epistemology, but ethics as well. I investigate how Abbey’s ecomystical experiences form the foundation of an ethical orientation that came to define him as an artist and an activist. Finally, Chapter 4 centers on the most influential ecopoet of the late 20th century: Gary Snyder. Employing both his poetry and his essays, I show how ecomysticism is a significant determinant of his aesthetics as well as his politics.
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INTRODUCTION

“Ecological thinking... requires a kind of vision across boundaries.”

Paul Shepard

Ecology and mysticism: they exist at the edges of their respective fields, subversive. Yet both are also foundational, the fundamental forces running through those fields. Ecology is to the life sciences as mysticism is to religion and spirituality. They cross boundaries, violate borders. Ecology unites the life sciences and underlies the process of evolution. Mysticism is the common experiential component of the countless disparate religions of the world, the numinous heart of spiritualism. Both ecology and mysticism apprehend the subtle, hidden connections and intersections among otherwise disparate elements of the universe. Both ecology and mysticism posit an underlying unity that binds every extant thing into one whole. Ecological knowledge and mystical insights often reinforce one another, ecology’s empiricism “proving” what had long been a mystical intuition.

And yet mysticism is typically regarded as the misty, eccentric fringe of religion, the dreamy supernaturalism that the mainstream faithful—and often the religious authorities—cannot accept. Indeed, the word “mystical” is often used pejoratively to indicate something suspiciously irrational, unsupported by facts and empirically unprovable. Mysticism connotes madness. Ecology, on the other hand, is primarily identified as a “hard” science, a form of knowledge forged through observation and experimentation, with reproducible results, falsifiable claims, and concrete, material explanations. Ecology and mysticism: the material and the immaterial, hard science and fringe spiritualism. A strange pair, to be sure, but the amalgamation of ecology and mysticism marks an important convergence in American intellectual life and in American Literature more specifically.
In 2012, *ISLE* published an issue dedicated to exploring the “material turn” in ecocriticism. This turn, driven in large part by the new materialism in political and feminist theory, involves scholarship that is open and attentive to the ways in which the material, non-human world expresses agency in the lives of humans. Usually, this agency manifests in obviously physical ways, as the label “material” would suggest. For instance, Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* uses the vast North American black-out of 2003 to investigate the power grid as a heterogeneous assemblage wherein the various objects and subjects that comprise the grid (human, animal, mineral, environmental, etc.) manifest a distributed agency that frustrates our desire for clear causality and hence control. Similarly, Stacy Alaimo’s *Bodily Natures* explores a “trans-corporeality” that foregrounds the physical interpenetration of bodies whereby the notion of a “bounded, coherent” subject is challenged (23). Theresa Brennan undertook a related project in *The Transmission of Affect*, which focused on how our evolving understanding of the ways in which the biological and the social intermingle and affect one another explicitly challenges Western notions of self-contained individuality. Much recent work, especially in ecofeminist and political theory, has followed this general trend.

This material turn has almost by definition ignored the spiritual, the sacred, and the mystical. This is understandable if you accept the traditional supernatural, immaterial connotations that such concepts evoke. But if we are to take materiality seriously, shouldn’t we consider the possibility of materiality where there is seemingly none? Shouldn’t we consider the materiality of the mystical? The concept of ecomysticism invites us to contemplate the particular ways in which the material, non-human world affects human consciousness—not unlike the myriad other works of the new materialists. But ecomysticism considers the role of the material
world in inculcating mystical states in human subjects in an attempt to attribute even the most immaterial of phenomena—transcendence, spirituality—to material agency. Why, then, is this worth thinking about?

It has become a bit of a truism among ecologically-minded thinkers and artists that our ecological problems are not primarily legal, political, or scientific problems, but problems of consciousness. Fritjof Capra has written that the major problems of our time—war, poverty, environmental devastation—all stem from one single crisis, “a crisis of perception” (19). Perception is our consciousness organizing and interpreting sensory information, so Capra locates the cause of our problems at this node of interaction between the human mind and the rest of the world. Similarly, Lawrence Buell has written that the “success of all environmentalist efforts finally hinges . . . on ‘state of mind’” (Endangered World 1). Many have made analogous diagnoses: Thomas Berry (2), Paul Shepard (“Ecology and Man” 131), Kirkpatrick Sale (41-2), etc. Indeed, the problem of consciousness can be said to be the fundamental concern of the entire Deep Ecology movement. It is this concern for consciousness that leads to biologists writing books that critique the metaphors we use to describe nature, as Daniel Botkin does in Discordant Harmonies, or anthropologists writing books that attempt to account for human emotion in the economics of resource management, as E. N. Anderson does in Ecologies of the Heart. Even such staid works as an undergraduate-level ecology textbook repeatedly implore us to expand our own perspective to see things from the point of view of a plant, an animal, a fungus (Begon, Townsend, and Harper 32, 279). It is the prominence of this concern for consciousness that establishes the importance of mysticism in the relationship between humans and the rest of the world. Ethnology has revealed a common cultural characteristic that demonstrates this link between mysticism and ecology: the shamanic holy men and women of the ancient, animistic
religions of the world were mystics who achieved their altered states in order to become a conduit of communication between their people and the non-human world. If the foundation of our ecological problems is a problem of consciousness, then a close look at altered states of consciousness as they facilitate communion with the natural world would seem to be an important way to take account of the problems we face, including possible steps towards reconciling alienated human subjects to the natural world around them.

In the context of nature writing, ecomysticism is worth thinking about because mystical states—those awe-struck moments of quasi-religious reverence—have been a primary characteristic of that genre since at least the Romantic period. The ubiquity of this mode has been well-noted and analyzed—and sometimes pilloried—but mainly in the context of philosophy, aesthetics, or cultural history; it has been studied primarily as a mode of writing, as a literary style or topos, in keeping with the postmodern focus on nature as a cultural construction. Lawrence Buell, for example, has argued that we need to read Thoreau’s account of his experience of Katahdin “as having been filtered through the vocabulary of the romantic sublime” (“Religion” 221). But ecomysticism considers the material bases of these experiences, and therefore the material bases of this literary mode, in keeping with ecocriticism’s focus on culture as a natural construction: the vocabulary of the romantic sublime has arisen in response to humans’ profound experiences in the natural world. And this is important because this ecomystical experience at the heart of so much nature writing is fundamental to how we value the natural world; characterizing the romantic, mystical component as a literary fashion risks undermining that valuation. The ecomystical experience and the attendant feelings of deep well-being, interconnectedness, and reverence tend to engender respect, love, and biocentric egalitarianism. In this way, the non-human world has profound agency in how humans value that
world; so even human valuations of the non-human are not entirely anthropogenic, but rather a reciprocal process of mutual influence played out on the scale of human evolution.

Ecomysticism also contributes to a shift in attention to matters of spirituality that seems to be spreading through ecocriticism, even as the “material turn” continues unabated. Several recent monographs, such as Joan Ashford’s *Ecocritical Theology* and Robert Nadeau’s *Rebirth of the Sacred*, focus on issues of ecology and spirituality. At a recent University of Idaho conference, a round-table of ecocritics that included Scott Slovic, Jenifer Ladino, and Scott Knickerbocker discussed the likelihood of a spiritual movement in ecocriticism, and the recent formation of organizations such as International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture attest to the validity of such predictions. This dissertation hopes to make an important contribution to the current landscape of ecocriticism by synthesizing these two important trends (materialism and spirituality) by uncovering some important landmarks of material spirituality in American Literature.

Some ecologically-minded thinkers have pushed back against the cultural-construction paradigm of postmodernism by asserting that if nature is a cultural construction, it is also true that culture is a natural construction. Ecomysticism forwards this pushback. While acknowledging the ways in which culture colors our seeing, I emphasize here the ways in which culture is determined by the material world. Tom Lynch defines ecocriticism as a mode of inquiry that shows “how literature is embedded within and mutually symbiotic with the encompassing more-than-human world” (13). But certainly even ecocriticism is not immune from the influence of cultural constructivism. An example of this postmodern predilection in ecocritical texts is Catherine Albanese’s *Nature Religion in America*. This text, while impressive in its scope and insight, spends basically no time examining the role of the American landscape
itself in the evolution of American nature religion. Instead, Albanese focuses on the ways in which ideas about the sacredness of wilderness evolved from other ideas, limiting her analysis of the heritage to human cultural sources. More recently, a call for chapters for Lexington Books’ upcoming *Romantic Ecocriticism* specifically asks for papers that focus on “the influence of cultural factors on seminal writers from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.” As an example, the call cites the fact that Wordsworth had read Gilbert White (Hall). This is an example of the dematerializing network of cultural constructivist tendencies that abound in literary studies: Romantic ecological ideas are to be explored not through their connection to and genesis in the ecosystem in which they are embedded, but in their relation to other human ideas. On the other hand, there is no indication that the text intends to pay much attention to the actual physical world that is the subject of so much of the Romantics’ literary output. This dissertation attempts to address such omissions by deemphasizing cultural history and influence and emphasizing the agency of the natural world. Ecomystical readings help uncover the natural matrix within which texts always exist, even when those texts veer into the spiritual, or when they seem to be caught in a trap of romantic cliché. This adds much-needed grounding to cultural constructivist readings by asserting the natural construction of literary topos.

In keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism, I find cause to utilize an array of fields outside of literary studies in this dissertation. As a result of this interdisciplinary approach to the materiality of mysticism, a secondary outcome has been the unearthing of a significant current running through ecological thought across fields. Primitivism, bioregionalism, and even some of the new materialist philosophy undergirding the material turn in ecocriticism all seem to be implicitly informed by notions of ecomysticism. Ecomysticism helps reveal the shared history and overlooked literary precursors to these late developments in ecological
thought by showing how they often subtly presuppose the profound experience of nature that
seems to be a fundamental human experience. Ecomysticism proposes that much of primitivism,
new materialism, bioregionalism and other trends in ecological thought have as common ground
the non-rational, intuitive, ineffable experience that shatters the subjective distance of human
rationality and uncovers a more immediate, affective connection to the material, non-human
world.

DEFINING ECOMYSTICISM

The quick version (in three points):

Ecomysticism is material mysticism. It is a state of consciousness brought about via the
five senses interacting with the rest of the material world. This distinguishes it from other types
of mysticism, such as those traditions that consider the senses and the material world as
impediments to the mystical state. These mystical traditions involve turning inward and
withdrawing from the world, usually in an attempt to transcend the material in order to approach
the ideal (usually considered divine).¹ This latter type of mysticism is often practiced within the
auspices (or on the borders) of organized religion. William James, in The Varieties of Religious
Experience, notes that the foundation of Christian mystical practice is “the mind’s detachment
from outer sensations, for these interfere with its concentration upon ideal things” (352). Given
Christianity’s concepts of a transcendent, otherworldly deity, immaterial afterlife, and the soul’s
ultimate escape from materiality, the mystics in various Christian traditions tend to withdraw
from the sensual world. Their mysticism strives to transcend the bounds of the physical, “fallen”
world, the ultimate goal of which is union with the supernatural divinity that they worship.

¹ Many scholars differentiate between two types of mystical experience: the internal and external, or introvertive and
extrovertive. See pages 17-18.
Ecomysticism differs significantly from these inward-looking practices because it turns outward through the senses to corporeal nature. It is a mysticism predicated upon the material world.

_Ecomysticism involves an ecological vision._ A common attribute of mysticism across traditions is that it offers access to insights not accessible to the normal waking consciousness. In religious traditions, this is interpreted as knowledge of God or some other divine source of insight. In extreme cases, this knowledge is so profound as to be interpreted as a union of the soul with God. Ecomysticism, however, involves no such supersensual object. The object of ecomystical knowledge is the material world. This does not mean that the object of ecomystical knowledge is scientific or empirical. While it is difficult to encapsulate given the ineffable nature of the experience, we may here differentiate it from scientific or empirical knowledge by saying that it involves deep and moving realizations of the complexity and profundity of our interconnection with and dependence upon the rest of the material world. This experience might even go so far as to include something like the unitive dimension of theistic mystical experiences. But ecomystics interpret it as a realization of union with the material world rather than union with a deity. It is not union with any sort of supernatural entity, whether it be the ineffable One or the super-conscious essence of the universe. It is instead the hyper-awareness of the radical interpenetration of all things, the apprehension of which leads to union via the blurring of borders and boundaries. (“I am one with the deer and the dirt and the star we call the sun”). These material things move through me and I through them in ways which we have just begun to understand scientifically and wrestle with philosophically, but which appear instantly and intuitively in the ecomystical experience. Profound emotion, yes, but also “states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect” (James 329).
Ecomysticism is affective. Like other forms of mystical experience, ecomysticism involves a significant emotional or affective component. In his classic study of mysticism, William James posits that while there is a definite noetic quality to mystical experiences, they are also simultaneously like states of feeling (329). Similarly, Rudolf Otto asserts that the numinous can only be understood “in terms of feeling,” since the numinous invokes in the mind a “determinate affective state” (12). Awfulness, majesty, love—these are the common emotional experiences that the mystics have reported. This is really why ecomysticism is so prominent in literary depictions of nature experiences, since singular emotional experiences are the focus of a considerable percentage of literary output. And it is also why ecomysticism would seem to be an important catalyst in the human valuation of the non-human world, since we value most those things to which we have a strong emotional connection.

The long version:

The following pages will demonstrate the depth to which science has pushed our understanding of the interpenetration of humans and their environment. This is helpful context for my assertion of a material mysticism. But I do not claim to uncover the distinct material causes of the ecomystical experience. Rather, I present an overview of our understanding of the extent to which human consciousness is intimately intertwined with the larger material world in order to set the stage for my reading of the literature to follow. Those readings will often point to causes for the ecomystical experience, but they will not be supported by empirical studies or

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2 While some scholars and some disciplines take pains to distinguish among emotion, affect, feeling, and so forth, I find such distinctions unhelpful. Theresa Brennan, even after spending a couple of paragraphs disentangling affect from its near-synonyms, winds up admitting that “there is no reason to challenge the idea that emotions are basically synonymous with affects” (5-6). Therefore, I make no such distinctions here. For a helpful overview of the terms as they are often distinguished in contemporary scholarship, see: Shouse, Eric. "Feeling, Emotion, Affect." M/C Journal 8.6 (2005).
laboratory experiments, such as I briefly address here. The readings will often assume that the science I present here strongly suggests that there is a material cause as yet uncovered—or, that the “cause” is so multi-faceted and complex as to likely never be fully determined.

There is considerable empirical evidence to support our general intuitive sense that nature tends to have a calming, relaxing effect, even to the point of invoking states of consciousness we might classify as “altered” states. Roger Ulrich has conducted several controlled studies of the effects of different landscapes on human subjects, all of which come to the same conclusion: natural scenes have a pronounced restorative effect, reducing stress and increasing relaxation.3 One study measured the alpha wave activity in subjects’ brains after viewing images of either urban or natural landscapes. Alpha waves originate in the occipital lobe and correlate with states of “wakeful relaxation.” This state falls somewhere between high states of arousal (i.e. anxiety) and low states of arousal (i.e. drowsiness), both of which result in low alpha wave amplitudes (Ulrich 532). Ulrich’s experiment found that alpha wave amplitude was significantly higher in subjects after viewing natural scenes as compared to viewing urban scenes (545-6). We can say that this is a quantifiable transmission of affect from environment to subject. This is relevant to ecomysticism because alpha wave amplitude also correlates with altered states of consciousness such as those evoked during meditation. Many studies have documented the ways in which meditation produces a state of consciousness distinct from both sleeping and waking, the most remarkable difference being the “dominance of alpha waves (8-12 Hz) across much of the cortex” (Prashant et al). Meditation produces alpha waves in the brain. So does simply viewing nature. Though I don’t want to level all difference here, both activities alter consciousness. At the most basic level, feelings of peace and calm prevail—i.e., the “wakeful relaxation”

associated with alpha waves. At increasing levels of intensity, however, both experiences can take on more mystical qualities.

So the effects of natural landscapes on humans are well documented, both in quantitative studies as the ones above and in qualitative studies, such as Paul Devereux’s *The Sacred Place*. This study examines the common, pan-cultural characteristics of prehistoric natural sacred places, suggesting a shared human experience. We might even say that the long history of nature writing functions as one large qualitative study. But I want to examine briefly how and why nature seems to have this effect on humans, since being alive to this causality—even if our understanding of it remains imperfect—will help to illuminate the ecomysticism in the literature.

One prominent theory of the ways in which the natural environment affects our consciousness is the biophilia hypothesis. Simply, biophilia asserts that humans have an innate attraction to and need to affiliate with other life forms. Studies such as Ulrich’s above are cited as evidence for the existence of biophilia. First posited by Edward O. Wilson in 1984, biophilia has primarily been a scientific idea, developed and tested by biologists, psychologists, and others in the life sciences. Given this, biophilia is often explained in evolutionary terms. Peter Kahn, citing work by Ulrich and others, explains:

> If through evolution certain natural landscapes have promoted human survival and reproductive success, then it may have come to pass that such landscapes nurture the physiology and promote a sense of emotional well-being. Research also bears on this proposition. Findings from over 100 studies, for example, have shown that stress reduction is one of the key perceived benefits of spending time in a wilderness area, especially in those settings that resemble the savanna. (Kahn 13)
That is a concise summation of much of the empirical study of biophilia over the last few decades. One explanation, then, for the ability of natural landscapes to alter human consciousness is genetic: evolution has produced a genetic predisposition toward certain landscapes. Note that Kahn describes the resultant state of consciousness as a state of “well-being” caused by “stress reduction,” echoing the qualitative description of the “wakeful relaxation” associated with elevated alpha wave activity in the brain. Though this does not necessarily mean that such experiences might be defined as mystical, we are moving on the same spectrum of experience.4

Of significance, especially if we are to consider the relevance of the above in the study of literature, is the sole focus on the sense of sight. The study of biophilia and related concepts has almost exclusively relied on subjects’ vision, often having them view images of landscapes, thereby precluding full sensory engagement with that landscape. We will certainly see an emphasis on the role of sight in the readings to follow; but if anything, studies that rely on one sense only would seem to drastically deemphasize the effect of landscape on human consciousness. Though vision has, through various theories of the “gaze” (e.g., the “male gaze” or the “imperial gaze”), often been construed as an objectifying and domineering force, that is not the case here. Following the genetic/evolutionary theory of biophilia, Judith H. Heerwagen and Gordon H. Orians assert that humans evaluate the landscape (not necessarily consciously) for “survival and reproductive success”; it follows, then, that “the environment should be viewed in functional rather than morphological terms” when evaluating aesthetics or beauty (142). Their assertion, based on the many empirical studies of biophilia, means that, far from being an objectifying force, human visual assessment of a natural landscape implicates humans in that

4 William James allowed for a broad range of mystical experience, from a mere “deepened sense of . . . significance” to the religious ecstasy of union with the godhead (330). I believe that by this measure, states of “wakeful relaxation” derived from immersion in nature or from meditation fall somewhere in this range.
landscape in a meditation on the interaction if not the interdependence of subject and object, human and landscape.

Furthermore, a certain passiveness tends to mark this type of visual engagement, just as a certain passiveness marks the mystical experience (James 329-30). Carl Von Essen, in examining the role of sight in the ecomystical experience, suggests that there is an arrestation of conscious cognitive processes in this type of vision; it is a passive mental state that perceives and is acutely aware, but which does not seek to rationalize, explain, or objectify. The senses are fully engaged, but the discursive mind is quieted. As encapsulated by Von Essen, “The seeing begins when the understanding ceases.” He finds analogues to this type of vision in many of our canonical nature writers: Thoreau’s “sauntering of the eye,” Wordsworth’s “relaxed attention,” and Emerson’s “transparent Eye-ball” (59). This state of passive consciousness hearkens back to the quality of “wakeful relaxation” and is reflected in the empirical studies that track the influence of natural landscapes on human consciousness. Von Essen’s inquiry emphasizes the role of this visual mode in mystical experience, but we may safely say that the landscape itself is inducing this experience, at least partly. Certainly the human subject initiates this perceptual style by stilling the mind and opening the senses. But the landscape itself has agency here, as the sensory information received by the human subject originates “out there,” often altering consciousness below the level of the subject’s awareness. And this influence is often manifest through the active, not just passive, agency of the landscape, as flora and fauna interact with their environment purposefully and actively, thereby involving the human subject in the mingling influences of ecosystemic cause and effect.

Many have theorized that this capacity for “wakeful relaxation,” passive awareness, or whatever other label we might put on this kind of open, attentive, yet passive consciousness, has
its origins in our hunter-gatherer past. José Ortega y Gasset, in *Meditations on Hunting*, came to the conclusion that the heart of the hunt is the “detection of the game,” the initial and principal challenge. The difficulty of simply finding prey dictates that this activity demands most of the hunter’s time and effort. But, as Ortega y Gasset notes, this effort is primarily a mental one (88). Since hunting has been the primary mode of human life through our long evolution up until the advent of agriculture a (relatively) short time ago, hunting is the foundational, formative human occupation. As Paul Shepard writes in his Introduction to Ortega y Gasset’s text, “human nature is inseparable from the hunting and killing of animals” (12). If we take such primitivist notions seriously, we are led to the important deduction that the primary effort involved in the most formative behavior of our species is the close attention to and open awareness of our environment required for detecting game.

But this state of consciousness is not simply being on the lookout for tracks or sign, or contemplating the likeliest location to spot game. Ortega y Gasset places the emphasis once again on vision, as he says the hunter’s primary occupation is “looking.” But it is not just any old look. Typically, our looking is purposeful: our attention “aims our vision” to a predetermined point where we expect to see that which interests us. This type of looking—this “attention to the preconceived”—focuses on one point and ignores everything else. On the other hand, “The hunter’s look and attention are completely opposite to this.” Instead of purposefully directing his gaze to a predetermined location, the hunter dwells in uncertainty. He does not know what is going to happen or where the game will appear,

Thus he needs to prepare an attention of a different and superior style—an attention which does not consist in riveting itself on the presumed but consists precisely in not presuming anything and in avoiding inattentiveness. It is a
“universal” attention, which does not inscribe itself on any point and tries to be on all points. There is a magnificent term for this, one that still conserves all its zest of vivacity and imminence: alertness. The hunter is the alert man. (150).

This state of mind, this “universal” attention, primes one for the perception of unity, since it remains open to all things at once. The perception of unity is the apotheosis of the mystical experience. But unlike the supernatural mysticism that renounces the sensual world, this consciousness is rooted in the senses and therefore rooted in place.

This rootedness stems from the perceptual style. Ortega y Gasset goes on to explore how this type of “complete alertness” allows the hunter to live “from within his environment.” This experience is intimately tied to place. He contrasts this experience to that of farmers or tourists. The farmer, though he is a resident of the place, reserves his attention exclusively for his crops, thereby remaining “outside the completeness that is the countryside.” The tourist, somewhat inversely, sees everything but nothing clearly: “his gaze glides, it seizes nothing, it does not perceive the role of each ingredient” (150-51). The farmer lacks scope, and the tourist lacks intimacy. But the hunter unites scope and intimacy. This is a type of ecological vision, a perception that unifies the material world, with emphasis on the interconnections that bring each individual element into the completeness of the whole. This “hunter’s trance” might just be the foundation for the ecological mysticism that is the focus of this dissertation. And we will see this ecological vision play an important role in many of the ecomystical moments in the literature discussed below.

But even beyond all the empirical studies and other instances of demonstrable communion between human subjects and their environment, there is a lot that we do not know. I certainly don’t want the above review of the scholarship to suggest that the following study will

5 Perhaps a more modern and accurate phrasing would replace “countryside” with “ecosystem.”
rely on concrete empirical evidence of the communion between humans and their environment. I simply wanted to establish a baseline understanding of our ever-increasing knowledge of the many ways in which our surroundings are continually, deeply influencing us. Perhaps because of our cultural prejudices regarding the sanctity of the bounded individual subject and the special aloofness of the human consciousness, we are just beginning to appreciate the depths of our imbrication with the earth. Both ecology and materialist philosophy have been working to further this appreciation. One study in this vein, Theresa Brennan’s *The Transmission of Affect*, explores the ways in which the social and the biological blur. Brennan tracks the ways in which affects that are social in origin have demonstrable biological impact. She was concerned strictly with inter-human transmission. But as the studies above suggest, this process works across species and perhaps even across all things, living and non-living. Brennan gives special attention to the role of pheromones, which are exuded by one person and then enter another to produce a physiological change—a real, demonstrable, material effect. But this process works across species, too: kairomones, synomones, and allomones are the names given to chemicals that are used by organisms to influence the behavior of other species. The new paradigm that Brennan sought to establish refuted genetic determinism and notions of self-containment by demonstrating how “social interaction shapes biology” (74). Ecomysticism expands this paradigm by redefining Brennan’s “social” to include the interactions among the entire biosphere. The readings that follow will be attentive to the ways in which the texts show evidence of this kind of intra-ecosystemic communication, mainly by highlighting how the landscape or other organisms work to stimulate a mystical experience in the subject.

A BREIF HISTORY OF ECOMYSTICISM
Though I am using the term “ecomyistic” in a unique way, I did not coin the term. In 1996, New Scientist used the term as the title of a five-sentence book review of E. N. Anderson’s Ecologies of the Heart, and a few other reviews of cultural ecology texts published in journals around the millennium continued the casual use of the term. Mary C. Grey dedicates a chapter to the term/concept in her 2004 book Sacred Longings: the Ecological Spirit and Global Culture. Grey writes from a Christian perspective, however, and so her use of the term differs in that it is explicitly theistic in orientation. Similarly theistic, Universe as Revelation, a book that examines Quaker theology in the context of environmental problems, uses “ecomyistic” in its subtitle. Chris Jensen, a professor at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, uses the term as a label for the common misconceptions held by students in his introductory ecology courses. For Jensen, ecomysticism is “the belief that ecosystems have been designed to achieve outcomes, that they have been fine-tuned to maintain their own balance.” This definition reflects the concerns of an ecologist focused on the causal relations of functioning ecosystems. His use of the term is both theistic and pejorative: it points to students’ belief in a supernatural power or creator, and it registers Jensen’s disapproval of such belief as a way to explain ecosystems. Essentially, he is using the term somewhat informally on his blog to describe student misconceptions. My use of the term, on the other hand, is non-theistic and refers to the human reaction and interaction with non-human beings rather than causal explanations. Such specific and formal uses of the term are scarce in the literature.

As far as I can tell, the only sustained scholarly analysis of the concept is Carl Von Essen’s 2010 book Ecomysticism: The Profound Experience of Nature as Spiritual Guide (first published in 2007 under the title The Hunter’s Trance). Von Essen takes an explicitly advocacy approach, positioning his work as an attempt to address the foundation of the ecological crises of
the 21st century, and his use of the term is broader than the usage I employ here. But along the way, Von Essen touches on some important points upon which I aim to expand. One important point is his repositioning of mysticism from an indicator of human ascendancy to a concept that undermines human uniqueness and imperiousness (see, for instance, 20-22). Another important and closely related point is that ecomysticism is a material mysticism, one based primarily upon the five senses. Von Essen distinguishes the “trance” or state of consciousness of the ecomystic as distinct from the ascetic, religious mystical state by its profound connection to and dependence upon the material world (see, for instance, 34-36 and 58-59).

There exists, of course, the much more common quasi-synonym nature mysticism. This is a more general term that is typically applied to any kind of profound experience related to the natural world. The best systematic exploration of such experiences that is roughly congruent with my project here is J. Edward Mercer’s *Nature Mysticism*. Published a century ago, *Nature Mysticism* began the work of redefining mysticism from its otherworldly, theistic connotation by assuming that the nature mystic is a “modern,” or, one who has “accepted the fundamentals of the hypothesis of evolution” and “tries to be abreast of the latest critical and scientific conclusions” (Preface). Mercer’s work is a valuable documentation of the process of resolving the mystical experience with the increasingly materialist and secular civilization that the West was fast becoming at the turn of the twentieth century.

Scholars of various stripes who are concerned with mysticism have come up with different terminologies that are variously related to the idea of ecomysticism. Philosopher W. T. Stace, for instance, distinguished between “introvertive” and “extrovertive” mysticism to distinguish those experiences that are concerned mainly with a private internal state (introvertive) or with the five senses (extrovertive):
The essential difference between them is that the extrovertive experience looks outward through the senses, while the introvertive looks inward into the mind. Both culminate in the perception of an ultimate Unity – what Plotinus called the One – with which the perceiver realizes his own union or even identity. But the extrovertive mystic, using his physical senses, perceives the multiplicity of external material objects—the sea, the sky, the houses, the trees—mystically transfigured so that the One, or the Unity, shines through them. (61)

Similarly, Rudolf Otto, Evelyn Underhill, and others identify a basic duality of mystical experience, labeling them inward and outward, introspection and extrospection, and so forth. Usually, these distinctions refer to the subject experiencing the divine either within themselves or within the world at large (i.e., pantheism). The idea of ecomysticism differs in its attribution of the source of the experience. Whereas mystics of both types typically attribute their experience to God, The One, or some other immaterial being/concept, whether found within the subject or within the world, ecomysticism recognizes the plain old profane material world as the source of the experience.

Another important precursor, and one that helps build the bridge from ecomysticism to literature, is Colin Wilson’s *Poetry and Mysticism*. Though he neither uses the term ecomysticism nor refers specifically to nature mysticism, his work develops a concept of mysticism as primarily experiential and material. Additionally relevant to my purposes here, he draws parallels between mystical and aesthetic experiences, and his text is devoted to exploring the kind of mystical experience that is engaged in the world, open and receptive—qualities that make his work important to the development of a concept of ecomysticism.
Wilson’s definition of the mystical state is expressed again and again using what today we would recognize as ecological metaphors. He stresses connections, interdependence, and networks or webs. The mystical experience, according to Wilson, occurs when he loses conscious control of his critical judgment and is “suddenly hit by the objective world, by the reality of things I had been discounting” (20). It is basically a state of innocence and passivity and, most importantly, engagement with the material world. He uses the metaphor of input and output: our typical day-to-day consciousness is concerned with output, with doing work and getting things done; but mystical consciousness is concerned with input, with absorption and receptivity. It is experiential, concerned with the material world (21-3). In this regard, Wilson’s conceptualization of the mystical consciousness is explicitly ecological. He variously describes consciousness as a web or ripples, reaching out in all directions, affected by and registering the various connections and relations. Mystical states emphasize the fact that “consciousness is by nature relational; it has a web-like structure.” The consequence of this relativity is that “Things have meaning, significance, in so far as they are related to other things.” If we can’t see connections, things are less meaningful. But everything is connected, if we think hard enough or see clearly enough. Mystical states of consciousness are moments when we have a “bird’s-eye” view of things, to repeat a cliché that Wilson employs. This view allows us to see the bigger picture, to see more connections, to expand the web of our consciousness to encompass more—hence things appear more meaningful (59-60). The similarities with the ecological project are obvious, even down the use of the “web” metaphor. The more we learn, the more connections we unearth, and the more significance we attribute to the material world around us. As Muir said: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe” (157). Ecomystical states tend to engender such perspectives.
ECOMYSICISM IN ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT

As mentioned earlier, a secondary outcome of attention to ecomysticism has been the unearthing of a significant trend in ecological thought that, true to the nature of both ecology and mysticism, cuts across the boundaries of discreet fields of study. But instead of burdening the readings to follow with digressions that highlight and explore this outcome, I offer here a few notes on the ways in which ecomysticism imbues these fields of study.

Bioregionalism:

Peter Berg’s essay “What is Bioregionalism?” defines a bioregion as a geographic area “having common characteristics of soil, watershed, climate, native plants and animals” and so forth (6). This is a good general definition, one that most bioregional activists and writers would assent to. The concept is grounded in the material world but not absolutely determined by any one set of criteria. Berg suggests that since a bioregion is a human construct, it is ultimately humans who determine the shape of a bioregion. Bioregionalism, as a practice, denotes various modes of political, social, cultural, and scientific engagement with bioregions, often taken together to be the process of becoming native to a place—a “politics of ‘reinhabitation,’” in the words of Greg Garrard (118). Berg defines this process as “learning to live-in-place” via “becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships” that define that place (6). It represents a reintegration of human culture with the ecosystem in which it exists, rather than the imposition of a culture that ignores (or actively combats) the unique aspects of a particular ecosystem. In this way, bioregionalism implicates humans (including politics) within nature instead of reinforcing the human/nature dichotomy.
In all of these formulations, there is a certain materialism at bottom, a return to a culture that is rooted directly in the actual ecosystem in which it exists. Though bioregionalism might have as its goal human communities organized around the immediate material realities in which they exist (the bioregion), there is another component—one might say a more fundamental component. Ralph Metzner refers to this other component when he observes that, beyond culture and politics, “bioregionalism also includes something like a *consciousness-raising* practice” (3, emphasis mine). Peter Berg refers to this other component when he writes that a bioregion is both “a geographical terrain and a *terrain of consciousness,*” not only a place but “the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place” (6, emphasis mine). This fundamental component of bioregionalism is an alteration of consciousness, especially in the growth of an intimate, affective relationship to the non-human and non-living members of a bioregion. This component might involve a re-envisioning or an expansion of identity in order to take into account the life forms and land forms of the bioregion. The process of identifying a place, the first step in any bioregional practice, leads to identifying *with* that place as we come to acknowledge and appreciate the complex biological community in which we are enmeshed. The connections one establishes to a place—if they are to be strong enough to found and maintain culture—cannot be merely intellectual and abstract: they must be intuitive and affective. In other words, there must be an element of ecomysticism.

Logic and reason are fine ways of knowing; but real affection and intimacy come from more immediate and intuitional forms of knowing. We don’t love another person because we have determined that it is logical to do so; similarly, love of place is not a logical proposition. The cultural and spiritual relationship of humans to bioregions is based upon the human relationship to the non-human and non-living members of that bioregion. This relationship is
often expressly ecomystical in nature, inculcated and reinforced by ecomystical encounters with place. Therefore, ecomysticism is an important motivational force that can energize the integration of culture and place that bioregionalism entails. This ecomystical incentive toward the land and the life forms that inhabit it is an important thread running through American Literature, dating to well before the concept of bioregionalism crystalized in the latter half of the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, this thread can often be found in those works traditionally identified as regional literature, but it is found elsewhere as well. In many of the readings to follow, my focus will be on the role of the ecomystical experience in facilitating the affective spiritual and cultural relationship that develops between humans and their non-human neighbors as represented in literature.

Primitivism:

Another prominent strain of thought that is imbued with ecomysticism is primitivism as it is found in many disciplines: human ecology, anthropology, philosophy, etc. I am using the term primitivism not as a disapproving label for nostalgic longing after an idealized past, but as a signifier for any line of thought in any discipline that takes our hunter-gather past as the foundational human mode of being. This is a line of thought with a long history, but I am most concerned with the primitivism of the latter-half of the twentieth century that makes use of genetics, biology, and archeology to supplement and modulate the observations of anthropology and the speculations of philosophy.

This primitivism is perhaps best represented in the work of scholars such as Paul Shepard, Thomas Berry, Stephen Kellert, David Abram, and others. For instance, the human ecologist Paul Shepard’s work is greatly affected by the fact of our genetic heritage. Tracing the
rate of genetic change backwards, Shepard points out that we have not evolved significantly since the invention of agriculture (Coming Home 20). That means our species evolved to accommodate a certain pre-agricultural mode of living—namely, the itinerant, small-scale, egalitarian tribalism of hunter-gatherers. Consequently, Shepard’s work explores the ways in which sedentary, hierarchical, agricultural civilization is incommodious and sometimes downright pernicious to human beings.

This primitivism runs through not only philosophers and ecologists, but also amongst the anthropologists themselves, as they seek to rescue the hunter-gatherers from the notion that their lives were “nasty, brutish, and short.” This might also be known as the Paleolithic strain of primitivism, since it posits that we are a species essentially adapted to living the life of the Paleolithic hunter-gatherer, and therefore most of our social and environmental problems can be traced to our fundamental inaptness for “civilization.”

Such primitivism is closely related to ecomysticism. The fundamental incompatibility between humans and anthropocentric civilization—the pith of primitivism—manifests itself primarily in psychological crises. Just as animals kept in zoos display any number of pathological behaviors, so too humans living in modern civilizations exhibit likewise troubling behavior. But this incompatibility is also believed to have been caused by changes in human perception: the destructive influence of the placelessness of the Hebrew tribes and their consequent development of a mythology of transcendence from which so much of our culture’s spiritual and intellectual heritage derives has been well-noted. Therefore, the locus of the fundamental problem of primitivism is the human mind; so it is not surprising that addressing this problem also focuses on human consciousness. One major disjunction between primary

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6 See, for example: Frederic Turner’s Beyond Geography, David Abram’s The Spell of the Sensuous, Paul Shepard’s Coming Home to the Pleistocene and Nature and Madness, Roderick Nash’s Wilderness and the American Mind, Max Oelschlaeger’s The Idea of Wilderness, and Lynn White Jr.’s “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis.”
peoples and modern civilizations that is often highlighted is the latter’s lack of an intimate, intuitive, and, yes, mystical connection to the rest of the non-human world. This intuitive intimacy is cited as a nearly universal characteristic of indigenous societies and a desperate need in our own.

The mysticism of indigenous animistic religions is often held up as a model of the kind of expansion of self and identity with the material world that could help heal the rift between civilized humans and their natural surroundings. Though some might write off such notions as naïve nostalgia, the strongest work in this vein is supported by specific ethnological evidence and sometimes, as in the case of David Abram, actual ethnographic field work. The ethnological work that focuses on such “primitive” modes of communion with the earth will help elucidate the ecomysticism in the readings. Specifically, the Paleolithic primitivism that runs through a variety of disciplines will serve to show how the ecomysticism in the literature is not romantic trope merely—not cultural construction wholly—but the bubbling up of ancient sympathies found across cultures.

New Materialism:

It is possible to make the case that materialism has always functioned as a kind theoretical justification for ecomysticism: as far back as the Epicureans, materialists have propounded a common material basis for all things—for physical bodies, yes, but also for such typically “immaterial” concepts such as soul, spirit, and mind (Godwin xii). Lucretius claims to prove that “mind and spirit are both composed of matter” (70-1) and that even heat and cold are “atoms” (17), revealing his misunderstanding but also a certain prescience in light of relativity’s insight into the protean nature of matter and energy. From the theorization of this kind of
underlying, shared material nature, it is a short step to what has become known as “ecological thinking”: an emphasis on connections, interdependence, commonalities, systems, and the transgression of boundaries. But my immediate concern here is the “material turn” in ecocriticism and the “new materialism” that has driven this turn. From a certain perspective, much of this new materialism has a strong ecomystical element, both in the assertion of a material monism and in the concern with consciousness in the form of a radical expansion of the self or a transgression of subject-object dualisms. These are not incidental similarities or vague generalizations: they are vital principles that form the foundation of both ecology and mysticism and are a central concern of much of the new materialisms.

Serenella Iovino’s helpful overview of the material turn in ecocriticism reveals the material monism at its heart. She contends that the new materialisms challenge the “dualistic paradigms of transcendental humanism” by means of a “radical immanence” (450). She quotes Vicky Kirby in defining such immanence as a place where “significance and substance, thought and matter, human agency and material objectivity, must be consubstantial” (qtd. in Iovino 451). This immanence, then, denies the independent existence of immaterial things: any conceptualization exists only in accordance with a materiality; any abstraction exists only by means of a concretization. This concept is often expressed in a manner that reveals its inherent kinship with mysticism, as when Manuel De Landa asserts that all extant things are “different manifestations of this dynamic material reality, or, in other words, they all represent the different ways in which this single matter-energy expresses itself” (qtd. in Iovino 451). The italicized phase signifies one of the primary concerns of the new materialisms by assigning agency to the “single matter-energy,” and this compound noun reflects the insights of modern physics. But the underlying idea can be found in the writings of the mystics. The essential unity of all of existence
that is asserted here is a fundamental concept of mysticism. Plotinus called it “The One.” Much of this new materialism is concerned with discovering the myriad unseen ways in which hidden agencies interact and intertwine with our own, just as mysticism purports to plumb to new and startling depths of understanding of the unity of all things. The more ambitious of the new materialists contest the boundaries of subject and object, much like the archetypical mystic transcends the self and unites with some other—with God or The One or the universe itself.

The other point of convergence is the concern with consciousness, particularly with the expansion of consciousness and the ecological vision that results. As Jane Bennett writes in *Vibrant Matter*, the ultimate purpose of the idea of material agency is to engender a shift in human consciousness and attention that will allow us to identify with the other, to begin to see that no clear boundaries or fundamental differences exist (122). This ecological vision is enabled by a state of consciousness—what she calls “a certain anticipatory readiness . . . a perceptual style open to the appearance of thing-power” (4-5). It is hard not to see the overlap between Bennett’s open, anticipatory readiness and the comprehensive alertness of the hunter’s trance. Stacy Alaimo likewise positions her analysis of trans-corporeality as a way to help engender in readers an awareness of “the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment,’” again a shift toward an openness to a material monism, an ecological vision. (2). And in their collection *New Materialisms*, editors Diana Coole and Samantha Frost state their purpose is to provoke a shift of consciousness from the perception of mastery over mechanistic matter (an “ethos of subjectivist potency”) to a humble acceptance of our essential kinship with dynamic, agentic matter (7-8). Though these theorists certainly would not use such terminology as “expansion of consciousness,” it is clear that their implicit purpose
is to engender an expanded sense of identity that pushes beyond the limits of the narrow individual ego to encompass all matter both living and non-living.

This is the same goal as Deep Ecology, which advocates for an expansion of our sense of identity to include other beings and indeed the entire universe. This is a perspective toward which the science of ecology is clearly pointing, and a goal toward which mysticism had traditionally strived. Perhaps there is no more fundamental component of the mystical experience that this apprehension of unity. Ecological, materialist, and mystical perspectives converge upon the perception of an underlying unity to all things and the transgression of bounded individuality.

Despite this convergence, many of these new materialisms exhibit anxiety about being associated with mysticism. Diana Coole claims she wants to develop her ideas about a dynamic materialism without “relying upon mysticisms derived from animism, religion, or romanticism” (92). Jane Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter*, takes pains to contrast herself to “some versions of deep ecology” by making it clear her material monism is neither “a smooth harmony of parts nor a diversity unified by a common spirit” (xi). While I take them at their word, I also attribute their anxiety to the assumption that mysticism must be supernatural in orientation and thereby incongruent with materialism. This anxiety also derives from the rhetorical situation in which such theorists operate: logical argumentation and empirical evidence are required, neither of which are exactly strong suits for the mystic. But ecomysticism allows us to see that there is materialism at the center of certain mystical experiences. Ecomysticism relies not upon disembodied spirit or pantheistic life-force, but upon a consciousness open to receive the material world in ways to which the modern, skeptical, hyper-logical, discursive mind is exceedingly resistant. Given this mind’s association with the transcendent human consciousness,
ecomysticism can help with the stated goal of the new materialists by bringing even the mystical experience down to earth.

These are just a few of the strains of thought I will be drawing on in the course of this inquiry. Ecomysticism is the name I give to one important thread that binds them. Ecology and mysticism themselves are not so different. Ecology is the “subversive” science, the science that violates the boarders of the discreet branches of scientific knowledge. Mysticism is the subversive theology, the experience that democratizes the sacred and breeches the compartmentalization of all knowledge. And Literature is the way in: it is our means to explore how these threads weave together to form a backdrop for American nature writing over the past century.

NOTE ON SCOPE/TIME-PERIOD/TEXTS/ETC.

I have chosen to focus on the post-Darwin period in American literature because that is when it became incumbent to come to terms with an entirely natural world. After the Civil War, Americans began in earnest to wrestle with the implications of the subversive science that was published just before the country descended into open war. Robert Zaller has proposed that Transcendentalism had its “death-knell” with the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. Zaller sees Emersonian Transcendentalism as predicated upon human exceptionalism, an untenable proposition after Darwin (96). Transcendentalism was also idealistic and, in the end, theistic. But after Darwin’s challenge to supernatural Western monotheism and the decline of Transcendentalism, ecomysticism bubbled to the surface as a manifestation of a kind of secular spiritualism. No one could deny that spiritual or religious experiences and feelings exist. But
science now seemed to deny the supernatural bases of such experiences and feelings. If the profound experiences formerly attributed to God could no longer be sourced to the divine or supernatural, then what is the origin of these experiences? What is the cause if not the immanence of the deity?

There has been much theoretical work in the past few decades that touch on answers to these questions, but authors were making the first moves over a century ago. American Naturalism is in some ways an attempt to come to grips with the absence of the supernatural; and so we see in some naturalists an attempt to account for the entirely natural mystical experience. From these first steps toward a new understanding of the profound “religious” feeling, ecomysticism has proceeded to be explored and refined across the entire spectrum of human knowledge: in the arts, of course, but also in anthropology, philosophy, ecology, neuroscience, psychology, and so on. But theoretical knowledge risks ignoring or discounting the individual subjective experience. Literature is the place where these theories are tested in the realm of the individual subject.

I make no claims to a comprehensive survey here; indeed, this study marks only a beginning. As such, my selection of authors deserves some comment. I admit that personal familiarity and affinity played a role. When doesn’t it? My selection of authors was partly aimed at investigating how the impulse toward ecomysticism grew from a wide range of sources: men and women; regionalists, naturalists, modernists and post-modernists; long fiction, short fiction, poetry, and non-fiction; wilderness, rural, and urban settings; east and west. Of course, a “wide range of sources” doesn’t mean every source: these writers are all white, for instance, and none hail from the Midwest or the South. These choices represent notable examples rather than comprehensive coverage.
CHAPTER 1: SACRED PLACES—ECOMYSTICISM AND (BIO)REGIONALISM

This chapter looks at three different authors in an investigation into the first steps toward ecomysticism near the turn of the twentieth century. In American literature, these first steps often took place in regionalist texts: since by definition these authors are concerned with the relationship between people and place, and since ecomysticism is based upon the interaction between a human subject and their surroundings, this genesis in regionalism is not too surprising. Specifically, I attempt to demonstrate how the ecomystical experience is an important component of the relationship between humans and place at the center of these texts.

Additionally, in order to establish that this is indeed a material mysticism, I highlight the materialist orientation that undergirds the lyrical, often spiritual language the authors use to express affection for and solidarity with the land—language that is often labeled “romantic” in an attempt to situate the text in the history of culturally constructed ideas. But here, I hope to trace the ways in which the language is called forth by the non-human place by tracing the agency of that place in initiating the ecomystical experience upon which so much of this “romantic” language is predicated. This approach focuses on the agency of non-human things in contrast to the cultural-construction focus that examines the agency of one form of human culture (romanticism) in producing other forms of human culture (regionalist texts)—a legacy of the “dematerializing networks” that Alaimo explores in Bodily Natures (2). In all these ways, ecomysticism can help ground the themes of transcendence and unity often invoked in the course of depicting the integration of human and non-human place.

First, Mary Austin is recognized as a seminal figure in the American tradition of nature writing from Thoreau and Muir on down. More specifically, Benay Blend has placed her in the
tradition of female nature writers in the vein of Susan Fenimore Cooper, alongside regionalists such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman (“Building” 73). In her writing, we see a strong sense of ecocentrism and bioregionalism, both of which usually suggest a materialist orientation. This materialism is coupled with a sense of the sacred and ineffable in nature, and it leads to Austin balancing the supernatural and the material, the immaterial Christian God and the animistic pagan gods. In _The Land of Little Rain_, Austin is groping toward ecomysticism, clearly portraying the agency of place to move a human subject profoundly, and yet reluctant to relinquish the notion of a transcendent deity.

Next, Stephen Crane⁷ might be associated with squalid urban settings and the depiction of cruel and indifferent natural processes, but even here we can find the nascent material agency that is at the heart of ecomysticism. In his New York tales in particular, we can see the profound agency of the material world that translates into biophilia when the setting changes. Specifically, “Mr. Binks’ Day Off” provides an interesting case study, as the setting shifts from urban slum to rural estate. Hence, we can see that the sense of profundity experienced in the countryside is a departure from the transcendentalism of the middle of the century; it is an entirely material process that recognizes the agency and affect of the material world.

Finally, Sarah Orne Jewett is often studied as occupying the border between traditional literary regionalism and bioregionalism. Though she is sometimes situated as a regionalist who explores the extent to which a human community can be integrated into the encircling ecosystem, she is also accused of promoting an underlying dichotomy of nature and culture based on a romantic idealization of the individual’s relationship with the natural world. Highlighting the ecomysticism in her most famous short story, “A White Heron,” will help to

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⁷ Though typically classified as a naturalist, his Bowery stories can be considered works of regionalism. Certainly those works focus on the relationship between human and place and so are congruent with my focus in this chapter.
show how Jewett was effecting an integration of the human and the non-human based on ecomysticism.

**INTRODUCTION: NATURE AND RELIGION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

Since ecomysticism is a material mysticism, its emergence in American Literature is tied closely to shifting conceptions of both the material and the spiritual. The rise of Romanticism and Transcendentalism in the nineteenth century began a shift in perspective whereby it began to be possible to think of non-human nature, particularly wild nature, as sacred. Up until this point, the dominant metaphor was nature-as-machine. The machine metaphor was congruent with and reinforced by the prevailing idea of a divine order, since it reduced natural phenomena to a predictable, ordered state arranged precisely by an omniscient creator (Botkin 110). The idea of order—of deliberate, teleological creation—was central to Christian culture, and this order was seemingly reaffirmed by Newtonian mechanics and Cartesian dualism. But many have identified the Romantic Movement as the moment when a counter-tradition emerged to challenge the dualistic, mechanistic view of nature that had been ascendant at least since the Renaissance.\(^8\)

Max Oelschlaeger notes that this counter-tradition was founded on the Romantic cultivation of “the concept of nature-as-an-organism, an idea clearly opposed to nineteenth-century scientific cant” (112). Nature-as-machine is a perspective that reduces the natural world to humans’ playthings, a world that has none but strictly instrumental value. Nature-as-organism is a step toward challenging that value system. Similarly, Kate Rigby identifies the Romantic Movement as a fundamental revaluation of nature (xi), a project of “reenchantment rather than secularization,” since they were as opposed to the atomization of contemporary science as they

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were to the otherworldliness of religion (12). Romanticism, therefore, was an alternative to both supernatural religion and mechanistic science; it was a holistic reverence for the material world that manifested as a tendency to take seriously the spiritual and philosophic ramifications of contact with nature.

Bron Taylor attributes some of this shift in values to two thinkers who bridged the worlds of the Enlightenment and Romanticism: Rousseau and Burke. Both were firmly rooted in Enlightenment empiricism, and this is important since they both begin their thought with the material world—nature. But both constructed theories of exalted states of consciousness that are cultivated via encounters with nature. Taylor sees this as a fundamental epistemological shift, especially Burke’s implicit contention that “the sacred is experienced especially in wild, untamed nature” (Taylor 45). Whereas we find many early English and American writers (e.g. Crèvecoeur) explicitly linking wild nature to a fallen world, a place where humans alienate themselves from God, the Romantics—beginning perhaps with the aesthetic theories of Burke—began to see “nature itself as the source for the direct human apprehension of the sacred” (Taylor 47). This idea migrated across the Atlantic and found its most important and influential expression in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Though Emerson kept the anthropocentric orientation of the Western tradition in his focus on the human soul and its divinity, his most important philosophical legacy, according to Oelschlaeger, is his assertion that there is no “absolute separation between consciousness and nature” (134). His friend and student Henry David Thoreau shifted the focus to the non-human and to the experiential in an attempt to truly—not just intellectually—reintegrate the human and the non-human. Thoreau’s inclination to learn from wilderness—from wild plants, wild animals, and the “wild” Indians—represents somewhat of an application of the philosophy and aesthetics of Romanticism and Transcendentalism. It was
an attempt, in Oelschlaeger’s words, to “recapture the Paleolithic consciousness” (154). George Sessions agrees, writing that by the time *Walden* was published, Thoreau had “arrived at an evolutionary (and ecocentric/ ecological) perspective” (164).

And yet it is apparent that much of Romanticism and Transcendentalism maintained an idealistic orientation, despite the renewed attention to and valuation of the natural, material world. From Coleridge’s conception of the Imagination to Emerson’s conception of the soul, a strong current of belief in an immaterial, quasi-divine force maintains, based upon and reaffirming the general acceptance of human exceptionalism. Catherine Albanese, in her now-classic study of American “nature religion,” gives a good accounting of the idealistic orientation of Transcendentalism. Though Emerson’s thought took off from the material world, he had “moved past the stuff—the matter—of the universe and its earthly incarnation in nature,” since he could not “escape the logic of the idealist stance” (85). He did, after all, posit the soul and nature as two separate though interconnected entities: in *Nature*, Emerson defined nature as “NOT ME” (3-4). Even Thoreau, the revered founding father of American ecological thought, is convincingly portrayed as a quasi-idealist. Albanese writes that Thoreau’s was a “metaphysical religion of nature” that found the material world not illusory but penultimate (92, emphasis mine).

Darwinian Evolution, as the apotheosis of the many other scientific advances during that time, made this persistent idealism harder to uphold in part by undermining human exceptionalism. Though the evidence suggests that evolutionary theory was a harsh blow to the collective human ego, precipitating the brutality of Naturalism and the existential crises of Modernism, that reaction was not the sole or unavoidable one. Darwin was in some ways the beginning of modern scientific ecology, but some blamed him and other scientists for

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9 See *Nature Religion in America*, pages 80-95.
disheartening humans with their discoveries. Paul Shepard, however, points out that the reaction to these discoveries says more about the prevailing ideas of the time than the discoveries themselves:

[Evolution] might have helped rather than aggravated the growing sense of human alienation had its interpreters emphasized predation and competition less . . . Its bases of universal kinship and common bonds of function, experience, and value among organisms were obscured by preexisting ideas of animal depravity.

(“Ecology and Man” 136)

It is the persistence of the belief in human exceptionalism founded in idealism and dualism that helped precipitate the negative reaction to the scientific affirmation of our animal nature. While the early part of the nineteenth century saw a resacralization of nature in the Romantic and Transcendental movements, the middle of the century—with Darwin, Lyell and others sowing serious doubt as to the literal veracity of the Christian creation myth—saw a move toward materialism. Our essential nature, the human condition, that endlessly fascinating subject of so much human culture through the millennia, was now explicable in entirely material terms.

Donald Worster has marked 1859’s *Origin of Species* as the moment when science and religion became antagonistic, as up to this point science had believed it was uncovering the intricate workings of a magnificent creation that was gifted to humans by an omniscient Creator (39). But evolution’s challenge to the reigning ideas of human exceptionalism—ideas that survived through Romanticism and Transcendentalism—was an unsettling assertion of an essentially material, animal human nature.

The negative reaction to Darwinism was emotional as much as intellectual. The evidence Darwin and other scientists marshalled in their favor was considerable; conversely, the backlash
was often clearly motivated by offended sensibilities. John Burroughs believed that people felt they had been “turned out into the cold” by science, which had denied them their special place at the center of teleological creation (225). “Our hearts, our affections,” he wrote, “draw back from many of the deductions of science” (226). And no amount of empirical evidence or logical argumentation can heal the heart. Coming to grips with the profoundly changing conceptions of human nature required an emotional appeal. Burroughs recognized this; he believed his countrymen maintained their religious traditions in the face of overwhelming contradictory evidence because those traditions “still meet a want of their nature” (226). The ecomystical experience also fulfills this want with the added benefit of avoiding any incongruity with the latest science. The profound, affective ecomystical experience addresses the spiritual chasm many felt in the face of Darwinism, and yet it comports with the unflinching naturalism of the theory of evolution. So, ecomysticism near the end of the nineteenth century seemed to address many of the sources of post-bellum angst: it was compatible with the latest scientific discoveries, yet at the same time it was a return to the primal source of all religion—the mystical experience.

I do not want to give the impression that ecomysticism was some sort of ideological force or movement at the time; rather, looking back from our time, we can see the coalescence of historical factors that in themselves suggest that here we may find the first signs of a rebirth in American culture of the ecological mysticism that was once ascendant on the continent. Some of the literature of the time reveals that this is indeed the case; I offer three examples in this chapter.

Written at the turn of the century during a time of closing frontiers and increasing urbanization, these three texts represent changing American attitudes to non-human nature, changes that were instrumental in facilitating the appearance of ecomysticism. Roderick Nash has shown how the frontier reinforced the anthropocentric instrumentalism of the settlers’
European ancestors: “Constant exposure to wilderness gave rise to fear and hatred on the part of those who had to fight it for survival and success.” Ironically, it was increasing urbanization that allowed this antipathy to ease and evolve, as it was the frontiersmen’s “children and grandchildren, removed from a wilderness condition, who began to sense its ethical and aesthetic values” (43). Transcendentalism was borne of urbanites, as was Romanticism on the other side of the Atlantic. The appreciation of wilderness, according to Nash, could only have begun in the cities, since those living in or near the wilderness led agrarian lifestyles that actively competed with the native flora and fauna (and often the climate), thereby necessitating a life of constant conflict with the forces of nature. But those educated classes living in cities had the leisure and inclination to view the wilderness positively: as evidence of god’s power, as a retreat from urban ills, as aesthetic object, etc. (143).

In addition to the Romantic revaluation of nature, politics and nationalism played a role in the shift of values. Upon nationhood, America sought its own cultural identity in part by distinguishing itself from Europe. And the most obvious distinction was the frontier and our vast expanses of wilderness:

Seizing on this distinction and adding to it deistic and Romantic assumptions about the value of wild country, nationalists argued that far from being a liability, wilderness was actually an American asset. Of course, pride continued to stem from the conquest of wild country, but by the middle decades of the nineteenth century wilderness was recognized as a cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem. (Nash 67)

By the turn of the century, the frontier was closed, hostile Indian populations had been subdued, most large predators were in rapid decline, and the increasingly urban population could view the
wilderness as a vacation destination. Nash attributes some of this inclination to the scientific advances of the Enlightenment, since such knowledge revealed natural laws that were wondrous and awe-inspiring (44-5).

Some of this revaluation is likely nostalgia as well, since it was commonly held that the frontier experience was central to building the American character (145). This nostalgia was all the more potent when mixed with the deep pessimism that was building in America about the rapid changes taking place: industrialization, urbanization, immigration, the rise of religious skepticism, etc. As the post-bellum period began to sink to the pessimism and skepticism of Modernism, it was increasingly evident that progressivism and technological ingenuity could only address some basic material problems. The deep spiritual void left by both urbanization’s physical isolation from nature and by evolution’s intellectual isolation from god served to highlight the need for contact with the non-human world.

So near the end of the century, the psychic/spiritual wounds were dual: loss of religion and loss of contact with nature. Healing those wounds would require addressing both—and ecomysticism fit the bill. It fulfills the human need for religious/spiritual experience by encouraging and rewarding contact with the non-human world.

MARY AUSTIN AND THE LAND OF LITTLE RAIN

Though Mary Hunter Austin was a prolific and versatile author, *The Land of Little Rain* has proven to be her most enduring work. Evident from the very title, Austin eschews human political definitions of place and choses to engage the land through attention and involvement with the more-than-human inhabitants and the living systems that define it. These characteristics mark *The Land of Little Rain* as more of a bioregional text than a regional one, an early attempt
to articulate a bioregional ethic inspired in part by her embryonic ecomysticism. Though short on moments that reach the proper pitch of mystical vision, Austin nevertheless takes steps in that direction with her insistence on a close, intimate familiarity with the more-than-human landscape, a familiarity that opens to the influence of place. The non-human “objects” that make up a place exhibit the capacity to move a human subject into heightened states of consciousness and that we might identify as mystical. Though Austin tends to maintain the terminology of the singular, personal God, she does not seek him in the human mind or in the heavens, but in the material, non-human world. This marks *The Land of Little Rain* as an early example of proto-ecomysticism and its role in facilitating the emergence of bioregional thinking.

Tom Lynch identifies one important aspect of bioregionalism as the development of an “ecologically based form of place-conscious self-identity” (18), and Mary Austin dedicates significant energy to establishing such an identity in *The Land of Little Rain*. She begins with several expressions of the need for intimacy with the landscape, establishing her case for a living knowledge of the ecosystem. This knowledge cannot be gained in “a month’s vacation,” but must be attained through sustained attention to the living landscape as it changes and grows through the seasons and years: “Pine woods that take two and three seasons to the ripening of cones, roots that lie by in the sand seven years awaiting a growing rain, firs that grow fifty years before flowering,—these do not scrape acquaintance” (xi). It is knowledge predicated upon close contact with and intimate attention to the physical world. But she makes clear that beyond these material facts, which are after all strictly empirical, she is after a more intimate knowledge, a knowledge that reveals the ways in which the human can identify with the non-human. This is apparent in her declaration that she will dispense with the Euro-American names for geographical features and instead revert to the Indian name or make up her own following the
Indian custom. She justifies this because such naming expresses both the thing being named and
the namer; the Indian custom takes as the name that “phrase which best expresses him [or it] to
whoso names him [or it]” (x). Naming thus implies a reciprocal act, a relationship that assigns
agency to both parties. It is a process that belies the subject-object relationship inherent in the
Western process of naming that goes all the way back to Genesis, wherein naming is an imperial
act, and sign of dominion.

Austin’s process of naming contrasts more immediately with the anthropocentric
European tradition in America, where natural features were often named after patrons, friends,
military heroes, and other humans—e.g., Mt. Rainier, Roosevelt Lake, etc. So Austin begins her
book by establishing a basis for identifying with the natural features of the landscape through
naming and familiarity, both of which recognize the agency of the non-human world. It is this
identification with her native ecosystem that allows her to proclaim that “by this fashion of
naming I keep faith with the land and annex to my own estate a very great territory to which
none has a surer title” (xi).

We might justifiably characterize the rest of the book as an attempt to tease out the exact
mode of being at home in this desert wilderness between the Sierras and the Mojave Desert—a
mode of being that today we might recognize as bioregionalism. Much of her writing is
concerned with revealing the secrets of how the myriad animal and plant species who live in this
harsh environment adapt themselves to live in harmony with such an ecosystem so that humans
can learn from their example. This acknowledgement of animals and plants as teachers signals
her radical openness to the agency of the bioregion’s non-human inhabitants.

The very first chapter finds her calling out human maladaptation: “The desert floras
shame us with their cheerful adaptations to the seasonal limitations” (3). Her critique of
humanity’s relationship with the ecosystem is again grounded in the non-human, as she goes on to document the ways in which various desert plants change their behaviors to cope with the vicissitudes of the harsh desert climate. She can only hope that “the land may breed like qualities in her human offspring” (3). But on the next page, she examines the ways in which humans fail to adapt, even when their own lives are on the line. She details how Death Valley proves true to its name over and over again, taking the lives of various travelers year after year. But she also asserts that familiarity and attention to the ecosystem would tell travelers where to find water in the desert, as mesquite and bunch grass indicate the presence of water just a few feet below the surface. She characterizes this as a problem of human cognition: “It is this nearness of unimagined help that makes the tragedy of desert deaths. It is related that the final breakdown of that hapless party that gave Death Valley its forbidding name occurred in a locality where shallow wells would have saved them. But how were they to know that?” (7). Aid for their desperate situation is “unimagined,” highlighting the failure of human cognition that is to blame. Correspondingly, the concluding question is posed so innocently, so nonchalantly, almost as a conversational flourish. But if we consider the previous pages’ account of the value and need for adaptation based on intimate familiarity with the ecosystem in which you live, then the question loses its innocence and becomes a reproach.

This theme of bioregional affiliation runs through the diverse chapters of the text. In a letter to the editor of the Saturday Review of Literature, Austin wrote that “We are most of us only half-breeds, you know, mestizos between the old culture and the new—inheritors of no tradition and not yet like true sons of the soil, able to make our own” (qtd. in Blend 23). Through a celebration of the profound beauty of the place, Austin weaves a critique of modern non-nativeness, a critique central to the bioregional project of re-inhabitation. At every turn Austin
points to the dangers of failing to be at home in your environment. Of course, the “overlording whites” come off rather badly (85). They take not the time to become natives of this place, but instead try to force their will upon a land they see as their dominion. This will not do, as “The manner of the country makes the usage of life there, and the land will not be lived in except in its own fashion.” In contrast to the overlording whites, “The Shoshones live like their trees”: spread out in small familial clusters (46). The same adaptations to the same ecosystem suit both humans and trees. Likewise, she unifies all the life in the desert in their need to live by its dictates: “Men have their season on the mesa as much as plants and four-footed things, and one is not like to meet them out of their time” (80). Usually she is subtle and indirect, but sometimes she resorts to explicit criticism: “You of the house habit can hardly understand the sense of the hills. [. . .] Whether the wild things understand it or not they adapt themselves to its processes with the greater ease” (102-3). Even poor old Ralph Waldo Emerson becomes a target. She quotes from Emerson to subtly critique his anthropocentric dilettantizing: “The poet may have ‘named all the birds without a gun,’” she writes, quoting a poem of his, “but not the fairy-footed, ground-inhabiting, furtive, small folk of the rainless regions. They are too many and too swift” (7).

Austin shifts the focus from the human to the non-human: Emerson’s poem lavishes praise upon the human who forgoes the gun, but Austin reserves her admiration for the non-human ones thereby implicated. One can only know them, she goes on, by close and careful attention, by living with them through the nights during which they are active. Wallace Stegner has said that “[t]he initial act of emigration from Europe, an act of extreme, deliberate disaffiliation, was the beginning of a national habit” (22). Austin implicitly agrees in her affirmation of the need for a new affiliation through such close and intimate attention.
Through this close attention Austin is able to apprehend the agency of the landscape. Her emphasis on the ability of the land to affect human consciousness begins us on the path of ecomysticism. In the Preface to *The Land of Little Rain*, Austin qualifies the content of the text to follow as a deeply subjective and intimate work, a qualification that might seem a bit incongruent with the observational nature of the much of the book:

> . . . there are certain peaks, cañons, and clear meadow spaces which are above all compassing of words, and have a certain fame as of the nobly great to whom we give no familiar names. Guided by these you may reach my country and find or not find, according as it lieth in you, much that is set down here. And more. The earth is no wanton to give up all her best to every comer, but keeps a sweet, separate intimaey for each. (ix-x)

This passage begins with the assertion of ineffability so common to mystics, a sign of the elevated and profound emotional experiences she has encountered in the mountains and deserts. These landscape features rise in her estimation to the level of honored and revered individuals, rather like the honor most would reserve for human beings only. But she asks the reader to be guided and instructed by these landscape features, a request that requires a certain openness of perception and intensity of consciousness that at least hints at the experience of the ecomystic. Austin emphasizes not the scientific or technical exactitude of her work, but its subjective contingency, its affective content: each person has a different experience and relationship with this land—they will find there according to what “lieth” in them. The book, then, is not only about the material facts of the parched landscape her home; it is about the relationship between those facts and the human mind, about a dynamic between subjective human consciousness and the living world in which it exists.
This dynamic, though in itself not indicative of the ecomystical experience, brings us closer and closer with the increasing intensity of Austin’s depictions of the agency of the material world to affect humans on many levels: behaviorally, emotionally, intellectually, etc.: “If one is inclined to wonder at first how so many dwellers came to be in the loneliest land that ever came out of God's hands, what they do there and why stay, one does not wonder so much after having lived there. None other than this long brown land lays such a hold on the affections” (8). Though this passage and other parts of the text find her holding onto the supernatural creator God, we concurrently see here an emerging materiality. Whereas Emerson values, say, the stars because they signal “the remembrance of the city of God” (5), Austin values the land for its ability to ignite an affective response from the subject. Whereas Emerson’s experience of the Concord woods has its apotheosis in the “Universal Being” circulating through him as he becomes “part and parcel of God” (6), Austin attributes affection for the land to the land itself. For example, when Salty Williams returns to the desert despite vowing to quit it, she comments simply: “The land had called him” (10). In the quotation above, the land lays hold of the affections. Despite her references to a creator God, Austin is focused on the agency of the material world. The land is an active subject.

For Austin, agency is distributed across the spectrum of material forms, from humans to animals, from plants to rocks. In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett draws on Bruno Latour in order to explore how we might conceive of “agentic capacity” as not strictly the capacity of subjects, but as a condition of materiality itself. As Bennett builds her case for *thing-power*, a concept that conceives of agency as “differentially distributed across a wider range of ontological types” than just the human subject (9), she is concomitantly building a case for an ecological ontology, an ontology that recognizes the blurred and permeable boundaries that complicate our inherited
ideas of agency as well as subjectivity. This ontology of interconnection and permeability is what makes thing-power a “good starting point for thinking beyond the life-matter binary” (20). Though Bennett’s work is at the forefront of the new materialism in the twenty-first century, we see an analogous materialism in Austin a century earlier. In *The Land of Little Rain*, Austin is explicitly concerned with asserting the agency of non-human things. Part of this subversive goal is achieved by disputing Cartesian mechanism: time and again, she makes moves to counter the prevailing trend of “speaking of wild creatures as if they were bound by some such limitation as hampers clockwork” (16). Instead, she imparts to them their own consciousness and their own agency.

One prominent way she does that is by referring to animals as “people” and comparing them favorably to humans. Austin also imparts agency and emotional capacity to plants—a more radical move. In one remarkable passage, she recounts how the trees seem to climb to the altar of the mountaintop in order to pray for life-sustaining rain:

> They troop thickly up the open ways, river banks, and brook borders; up open swales of dribbling springs; swarm over old moraines; circle the peaty swamps and part and meet about clean still lakes; scale the stony gullies; tormented, bowed, persisting to the door of the storm chambers, tall priests to pray for rain. The spring winds lift clouds of pollen dust, finer than frankincense, and trail it out over high altars, staining the snow. No doubt they understand this work better than we; in fact they know no other. "Come," say the churches of the valleys, after a season of dry years, "let us pray for rain." They would do better to plant more trees. (97-98)
The construction of every clause places the trees as the subject and attributes to them activity and even intention. It is possible that we might simply attribute this to a bit of lyricism on her part, a metaphorical ornament for her compelling prose. There is no doubt something of that going on here. But context is important. When this passage is read in context with the rest of the chapter, indeed the rest of the book, it is increasingly likely that she is sincere in her attribution of some properties of mind to the flora of her home range. It would be egregious to claim she believed that the trees were literally praying. But given her unwavering battle against Cartesian mechanism, it is not a stretch to claim that such passages exhibit a poetic interpretation of the desires of the trees and their ability to act on those desires. The subsequent paragraph finds Austin asserting how the pines are “made glad” by the melt-water from the snow pack (98). We should not forget the prevalence of attitudes over a century ago (and indeed persisting today) that would find it absurd to consider a tree as anything other than an organized mass of insensate matter. But botanists continue to uncover remarkable ways in which plants respond to and manipulate their environment, exerting their will on the flora and fauna around them. In the end, Austin’s metaphor of praying trees might be relatively prescient: science is just beginning to consider the effect of trees on local climate, and the early indications seem to support Austin’s contention that planting trees will indeed call forth more rain.¹⁰

Most radical, however, is the way she imparts an agentic capacity to the landscape itself. Of a prospector with whom she was familiar, she writes “the land tolerated him as it might a gopher or a badger. Of all its inhabitants it has the least concern for man” (35). This anthropomorphizing of “the land” is not a fallacy or casual metaphor, but instead reveals Austin’s attunement to the agentic capacity of what Bennett would identify as a “heterogeneous

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assemblage”—an accrual of the minor agencies of diverse objects into a greater accumulated force (96). Neil Evernden has written in favor of rescuing the pathetic fallacy from its status as fallacy. He argues that we can classify such poetic or metaphoric moves as fallacious only by maintaining our notions of a discreet human subject that is isolated from the rest of the world:

For once we engage in the extension of the boundary of the self into the “environment,” then of course we imbue it with life and can quite properly regard it as animate—it is animate because we are a part of it. And, following from this, all the metaphorical properties so favored by poets make perfect sense: the Pathetic Fallacy is a fallacy only to the ego clencher. Metaphoric language is an indicator of “place”—an indication that the speaker has a place, feels part of a place. (19)

Evernden argues that this “fallacy” is an accurate metaphor for the human identification with place, a sign of affiliation instead of dominion.

C. G. Jung has written similarly, arguing that the withdrawal of such anthropomorphic projection has led to a distorted view of the self-contained individual (86, 155). But Jane Bennett goes a bit further and proposes that such devices are not just apt metaphors; they are not entirely metaphorical at all: “anthropomorphism . . . can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations” (99). For Bennett, anthropomorphism has an element of literalness: such metaphorical moves are actually a fair representation of the radical but literal interrelatedness that ecology and other sciences have uncovered. Likewise, David Abram believes that “projecting” human characteristics onto non-human or non-living things is more than fallacious egocentrism: “The notion of ‘projection’ fails to account for what it is
about certain objects that calls forth our imagination. It implies that the objects we perceive are purely passive phenomena, utterly neutral and inert, and so enables us to overlook the way in which such objects actively affect the space around them” (*Becoming* 32). If we reject Cartesian mechanism and acknowledge that non-human life and even non-living things exhibit at least a degree of agency, then anthropomorphism can signal the awareness of correspondence and affiliation between the human subject and the non-human or non-living object, thereby helping to undermine the bifurcation of subject and object.

Through Austin’s use of such devices, the land becomes not just the passive ground upon which human subjects exert their will; it is an assemblage, a heterogeneous confederation that behaves as an active force that shapes and permeates the lives around and within it. This agency is not centered in a solitary consciousness as in animal life; this agency has “no single locus, no mastermind, but is distributed across a swarm of various and variegated vibrant materialities” (Bennett 96). So when Austin writes that “Not the law, but the land sets the limit” (1), or “The manner of the country makes the usage of life there, and the land will not be lived in except in its own fashion” (46), we can read this syntactical construction—with the land as active subject—as a manifestation of her recognition of the agency of this assemblage “land.” As Bennett uses the vast North American power grid as an example of such an assemblage, Austin implies the myriad aggregated agencies of the Southwestern desert in the broad noun “the land.” It is not a particular animal nor a particular type of soil or weather pattern, but the accumulated amalgamation of these interrelated non-human and non-living agencies that compose the force of “the land” in human lives.

This recognition of the agentic capacity of matter is germane to my concern here in that it helps to uncover the material bases of ecstatic experiences, which in turn demonstrates that these
experiences are indeed a material mysticism rather than the supernatural type. Here we begin to see Austin’s inchoate ecomysticism, as her close and intimate attention and her apprehension of the agency of non-human and non-living materialities primes her for an ecomystical experience. Consider the following passage:

> For all the toll the desert takes of a man it gives compensations, deep breaths, deep sleep, and the communion of the stars. It comes upon one with new force in the pauses of the night that the Chaldeans were a desert-bred people. It is hard to escape the sense of mastery as the stars move in the wide clear heavens to risings and settings unobscured. They look large and near and palpitant; as if they moved on some stately service not needful to declare. Wheeling to their stations in the sky, they make the poor world-fret of no account. Of no account you who lie out there watching, nor the lean coyote that stands off in the scrub from you and howls and howls. (11-12)

There are several hallmarks of the mystical experience here. First, she introduces the “religious” theme with a reference to the Chaldeans, and hints at it also with the words “communion” and “heavens.” Using the stars as the controlling image of this scene is in itself highly suggestive—distant, beautiful, and inscrutable as they are. The stars mirror the action of the observer’s consciousness as they wheel to their “stations in the sky.” We also see a gesture toward the mystic’s grand humility, the dissolution of the ego, in the diminishment of the “poor world-fret.” But perhaps the most intriguing sign of mysticism is the wonderful word “palpitant.” All at once, that one word suggests the active profundity of the universe, the trembling of the awestruck subject who apprehends it, and the beating heart within that mirrors the vital energy without. No mention of God here, but she does allude to the Bible by referencing Abraham’s homeland.
Nevertheless, the focus is on the stars, the desert, the human subject, and the coyote in a material assemblage that erases the importance of the individual subjectivity of both human and coyote even as it repays that loss with a profound and moving experience. All of this *the land gives*.

Perhaps the most overt coincidence of non-human agency and ecomystical experience is in her sketch of the mountain storms in the chapter titled “Nurslings of the Sky.” Austin portrays storms—archetypes, by the way, of ephemeral and evanescent yet material natural processes—as agentic, even *intentional*, entities. She more or less states this outright, when she writes that “The first effect of cloud study is a sense of presence and intention in storm processes” (127). She anthropomorphizes the storms in this regard, attributing to them a purposeful employment. The storms on the Great Plains behave such that you “suspect them of a personal grudge,” while the storms in her native mountains “have other business” (126). Part of this business is to “scoop watercourses, manure the pines, twist them to a finer fibre, fit the firs to be masts and spars” (126), as well as to “shake down avalanches” and “raise up sudden floods” (130). Again, we might rightly say that this anthropomorphism is figurative rather than literal: no one would claim she believed storms were conscious beings. But it also reveals Austin’s deep sense of “presence,” as she names it, when confronted with non-human and even non-living things. She might not *literally* believe they are imbued with intention, but she does seem to use anthropomorphism in order to emphasize the agency of non-living things and natural processes.

Diana Coole has identified one primary goal of the new materialisms of the past few decades as the countering of dualism that views matter as the antithesis of consciousness (92). Austin seems to be groping toward this type of materialism in her metaphoric attribution of intentionality to storms and other non-living entities. Further, Coole and Frost write that one primary way in which this new material monism might be reached is by relocating humans
“within a natural environment whose material forces themselves manifest certain agentic capacities and in which the domain of unintended or unanticipated effects is considerably broadened” (10). Matter is *becoming* rather than being; matter is indeterminate and protean rather than distinct and static.

Similarly, Jane Bennett has defined materiality as “a protean flow of matter-energy [that] figures the thing as a relatively composed form of that flow” (349). Austin, particularly in her description of storm processes, defines things in their relation to each other. A fir is not such that it is because it was “created” or “designed” that way; nor is it simply a rote expression of its genetic code. A fir is a material entity that has come into being in response to the forces—the matter-energy—in which it is enmeshed. The storm winds, the snow melt, the short alpine summers—all of these other manifestations of matter-energy have helped to shape the form that this particular manifestation “fir” has taken. Accordingly, materiality is not simply the manifestation of a predetermined form but a never-ending process of becoming, of shaping and being shaped by the other forms and processes present. This mutual influence marks an ecological-material blurring of subjectivity that Karen Barad names “entanglement,” a term that indicates a complete lack of self-containment that belies notions of independent, individual existence since “individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating” (ix). So too with Austin’s trees. This is evident in her detailed accounts of the ways in which the storms help determine the form of the trees; the ways in which the trees, in dealing with the storms, help shape the lives of the mountain birds; the ways in which the flowers have developed their form in order to deal with the rains; and so forth. It is justifiable to say that Austin’s ecological knowledge functions as a form of materialism that is congruent with Coole, Bennett, et al. To be immersed in and observant of ecological processes is to learn that radical interpenetration,
interdependence, change, and flow are characteristics of all matter and that stasis, integrity, balance, and solidity are illusions. This holds no matter the level of scale, no matter the scope of time (Botkin 11).

Thus “Nurslings of the Sky” exhibits a radical materiality, but it also exhibits a material mysticism. One passage from this chapter shows the mystic’s characteristic privileging of intuitive, non-rational knowledge while also demonstrating the limits of her ecomysticism:

The first effect of cloud study is a sense of presence and intention in storm processes. Weather does not happen. It is the visible manifestation of the Spirit moving itself in the void. It gathers itself together under the heavens; rains, snows, yearns mightily in wind, smiles; and the Weather Bureau, situated advantageously for that very business, taps the record on his instruments and going out on the streets denies his God, not having gathered the sense of what he has seen. Hardly anybody takes account of the fact that John Muir, who knows more of mountain storms than any other, is a devout man. (127)

Austin favors affective experience over rational observation. At the very least, she is asserting the need for direct human emotional involvement in addition to aloof scientific empiricism. Again we see her tendency toward anthropomorphism, as she attributes “yearning” and “smiles” to the storm processes of the mountains. Mystical knowledge is notable for its emotional content, its irreducible commingling of cognition and feeling. Austin certainly seems to be moving in that direction here, as she reproaches the scientific observer for his detachment and indifference. She instead asserts the profundity of the experience, claiming that scientific rationality misses the essence of that experience. But it is also here that we brush up against the limits of her ecomysticism. She seems to be describing a mystical experience brought on by an encounter
with the natural, material world, but she nevertheless attributes ultimate cause to an immaterial God, a supernatural Spirit that manifests as natural process. This passage seems to imply a kind of pantheism that occupies the borderland between supernatural religion and ecomysticism. This scene is likely the record of an ecomystical experience, but Austin’s *interpretation* of that experience reflects the deep and persistent influence of American religious supernaturalism. This marks *The Land of Little Rain* as an important example of the ambivalent attitude toward nature and the tension between the material and supernatural accounts of the mystical experience of nature.

**STEPHEN CRANE AND THE NEW YORK STORIES**

If the ecomystical moments in *The Land of Little Rain* reveal Austin’s ambivalence about the rising tide of materialism, much of the work of the Naturalists betrayed no such uncertainty. But the characteristic pessimism that usually accompanied the Naturalists’ acceptance of a mundane, restrictive materialism is at odds with the ecstatic experience of ecomysticism. So at first blush, ecomysticism might seem incongruent with an arch-naturalist like Stephen Crane. Often associated with urban slums and the cruel indifference of nature, one might not expect to gain much traction by looking for evidence of ecomysticism. But the complex and progressive materialism that characterizes much of his work and is the foundation for his well-known pessimistic naturalism also facilitates ecomysticism. Comparable to Austin’s assertion of the agency of the natural world, we see in Crane a depiction of the agentic capacity of non-human and non-living things. Crane’s materialism does not reduce humans to the status of blindly mechanistic animals as does some naturalistic writing; it is a progressive materialism that explores the permeability of subjects and objects, an experiment in materiality that distributes
agency across material forms, including the non-living environment in which humans are immersed. Unlike Austin, however, Crane does not feel the need for recourse to religion to explain the mystical state of consciousness inculcated by this material agency. First, I will tease out the nature of this materialism in his New York stories, establishing his radical transgression of the subject-object dualism. Next, I will bring the focus down to one New York story in particular—“Mr. Binks’ Day Off”—in order to show how the materialism apparent in these stories translates directly into the depiction of the ecomystical experience.

If the general materialism of American culture springs primarily from Darwin, then materialism in American Literature can be traced primarily to the naturalistic determinism of Émile Zola. His focus on the influence of genetics and environment signaled an effort to seriously account for the ramifications of Darwinian evolution in literature (19). In highlighting these material causes, Zola aimed to dispense with the supernatural or immaterial “mysterious influence” that was proposed by vitalism under the guises of anima mundi, animal magnetism, élan vital, and so forth. Instead, he embraced the unconditional materialism implicit in evolution and the new science (16). But Zola’s materialism was as reactionary as it was revolutionary. His belief that life had been “reduced to the general mechanism of matter” and that “the body of man is a machine” was indicative of a revival of the mechanistic conception of life that came to prominence with Newton and Descartes (16). Only this time, human beings, stripped of their supernatural souls, were also implicated. And it is this reductively deterministic materialism that has come to be associated with the Naturalists whom Zola profoundly influenced. Such a fallen state accounts for the proliferation of animal metaphors used to describe humans as well as the pessimism that is so characteristic of much of Naturalist writing.
This mechanistic determinism and the resultant human diminishment also informs much of our perception of Stephen Crane. Analyses of his treatment of the natural world have tended to focus on the cruel indifference of nature, such as in Patrick Dooley’s *The Pluralistic Philosophy of Stephen Crane*. Dooley’s analysis highlights the parallel indifference of both urban and rural environments in Crane’s work. While Dooley does admit that, in some texts, the natural world is portrayed as merely neutral whereas the built, human environment can be downright pernicious, the result is that passive indifference is the best one can hope for. The New York stories, in particular, are noted for the bleak limitations on human potential imposed by the urban environment. But one New York tale stands out against the abject determinism of the rest: “Mr. Binks’ Day Off.” Clarence Johnson has proposed that there are elements of Emersonian transcendentalism in this story, and David Halliburton identifies it as a Whitmanesque exercise in the sentimental sublime. It is a seemingly incongruous text in the Crane catalog—certainly among the New York stories. It is, at points, downright hopeful. It utilizes many romantic tropes and seems to engage in a type of pastoral escapism. The story hinges upon a profound moment of realization, a moment of mystical consciousness, when the title character comes under the spell of what Crane calls the “natural religion.” This seems to be a far cry from the pernicious urban slums of *Maggie* or the cruel, indifferent nature of “The Open Boat.” How do we reconcile the romanticism of “Mr. Binks’” with this “notoriously anti-romantic writer,” as Keith Gandal has called him (97)? If we look closer at the precise nature of the materiality explored in his New York stories, the romantic tropes in “Mr. Binks’ Day Off” can then be read not as some incongruous transcendentalism but as a material mysticism—an ecomysticism—that derives from that materialism.
Much like in Austin, Stephen Crane’s use of anthropomorphism signals the agentic materialism that he explores in the New York tales, in contrast to the reductive material determinism of Zola. This is important because this agentic materialism blurs the boundary between subject and object, setting the stage for the agency of the material world in inducing the mystical experience that we will see later. Crane uses anthropomorphism to undermine, or in some cases invert, subject/object dualism. In Crane’s New York, material things interject themselves into the lives of the characters, becoming agentic entities in their own right. Crane portrays this through anthropomorphism, a technique whereby material objects become subjects and, often, human subjects become objects. This non-reductive, agentic, and indeterminate materialism forms the basis of the ecomysticism found in “Mr. Binks’ Day Off.”

In Crane’s Bowery tales, nearly every character has serious substance abuse problems. From a certain perspective, alcohol is but an inert, passive object upon which people are dependent or to which they are addicted. In this view, the agency lies entirely with the human subject, even if it is a compromised agency: the human depends. Halliburton’s take on Maggie forwards this kind of reading: he writes of the characters’ “submission to the bottle,” a syntax that locates agency in the human subject, even if it recognizes the power of alcohol (39). But Crane draws our attention to the agency of alcohol via the anthropomorphism and subjectification of two non-human entities that act together to affect the lives of the Bowery’s residents: the brewery and the saloons. In the story “George’s Mother,” the local brewery dominates the neighborhood, looming over the tenements in simultaneously ominous and glorious power:

In the distance an enormous brewery towered over the other buildings. Great gilt letters advertised a brand of beer. Thick smoke came from funnels and spread
near it like vast and powerful wings. The structure seemed a great bird, flying.
The letters of the sign made a chain of gold hanging from its neck. The little old
woman looked at the brewery. It vaguely interested her, for a moment, as a
stupendous affair, a machine of mighty strength. (95)
The description is a curious mix of awe and disgust, natural and industrial. The brewery is at
once a “great bird” and an immense machine belching out plumes of smoke. It is described via
both an animal metaphor and a machine metaphor, recalling both the Cartesian legacy of
objectifying non-human life and the new tendency to objectify human life through the cooption
of Darwinian evolution. But here is the vital difference: this is an animal metaphor being applied
to a machine, whereas Cartesian/Newtonian mechanism applied a machine metaphor to living
things. Crane reverses tenor and vehicle and in so doing, reverses the consequences of
materialism from a mechanistic conception of life to a vital conception of matter. This inert
assemblage of metal, brick, and glass exerts a far-reaching agency. The structure and its binary
figurative description are imposing and powerful, making it hard to miss the wider metaphor for
the role of alcohol in the lives of the residents. Both a deliverer and a destroyer, both a welcome
escape and an inescapable curse, alcohol displays agency in the lives of most people in the
Bowery. The towering, personified brewery perfectly encapsulates this agency, ambivalently
dominating the neighborhood as alcohol dominates their lives.

Stanley Wertheim has identified this brewery’s real-life analogue as the Peter Doelger
Brewery, which occupied an entire city block at 55th and First Avenue, near where Crane was
living on Avenue A when he was writing both Maggie and George’s Mother (4). Wertheim
identifies this as the “brewery against which the determined old woman does symbolic battle in
the second chapter [of George’s Mother]” (4). But her battle is more than symbolic. Wertheim’s
assumption is that alcohol and the brewery are mere passive objects: you cannot literally do battle against them. But the battle is all too real, as the rest of the story makes clear. George and his mother, like many of the residents of Crane’s Bowery, battle quite literally with alcohol and its effects. The fact that the mother’s striving ironically seems to drive George to drink only highlights the unpredictable and elusive nature of the materialism that Crane is building.

But if the brewery is the aloof and distant source of alcohol’s power, then the saloon is the site where it exerts that power. Saloons, like other structures, are frequently anthropomorphized, usually by their façade being described metaphorically as a face. But the particular character of these faces betrays more than the casual use of anthropomorphism as vivid or lyrical description; it is more a mode of investigation into the particularly pernicious agency that the saloons exhibit. In “An Experiment in Misery,” a saloon stands “with a voracious air on a corner,” much like a thug or drunk would menace a street corner. The anthropomorphism continues: “The swing doors snapping to and fro like ravenous lips, made gratified smacks as the saloon gorged itself with plump men, eating with astounding and endless appetite, smiling in some indescribable manner as the men came from all directions like sacrifices to a heathenish superstition” (184). The anthropomorphized saloon is made subject, and the people are the objects of its desire. Similarly, in Maggie, the saloon where Pete bartends “calls seductively” to the passers-by (48). The saloon seems to have more agency than the people, as they are helpless to resist its siren song. Humans are stripped of agency, and the saloons are assigned agency.

More than just alcohol-related things exhibit agency in the lives of human subjects. Perhaps the single most striking example of anthropomorphism as subject/object destabilization is the remarkable opening to the second chapter of Maggie. Chapter II begins with our first glimpse of the neighborhood where Maggie’s family lives. In this dark region, humans and
inanimate objects, subject and object, figure and ground all become blurred via anthropomorphism and objectification. As we saw with the example of the saloons, everywhere in the New York stories the façades of houses and buildings are described as faces, and so when Crane writes that “[F]rom a careening building, a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter,” it as if the building itself were a stumbling drunkard and the babies were its vomit. Agency is inverted, and it is the inanimate thing, the building, that is the subject, both syntactically and conceptually, and the human being that is the object. Similarly, Maggie’s building “quivered and creaked from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels” (7). This image again makes the building the subject and ascribes to it the characteristics of life: it moves and has internal organs. Humanity is again equated with an excretion, as if the building were the living being and the humans living there were the mere excrescence of the environment. At every turn, the despicable actions of the characters are interspersed with dramatic descriptions of the environment: doorways are “gruesome,” hallways are “gloomy”—even the family’s sink is “unholy” (8-9). The persistent intensity of Crane’s descriptions lends an air of inevitability to the outrageous behavior of the characters. His descriptive technique in this regard disrupts or at least modulates the usual attribution of agency to human subjects and instead emphasizes the agency of non-human and non-living things.

This agentic materiality is crucial to our understanding of the mystical elements in “Mr. Binks’ Day Off” because it establishes the essential materiality of that mysticism. Though a romantic pastoral like “Mr. Binks’ Day Off” might seem to be antithetical to the unsparing portrayal of the urban depravity of the Bowery, they are in fact consistent in their representation of the profound agency of material things. In this story, we see Mr. Binks break out of his everyday consciousness into a mystical state that is brought on by the non-human things he
encounters in his rare sojourn in the country. Binks’ family is not unlike Maggie’s: they are the unhappy urban poor suffering “the shackles of their poverty” (207). Their unusual and costly trip to the country is spurred by the merest sight of green: on the afternoon train, Mr. Binks catches sight of a park in the first flush of spring foliage. These “superficial glimpses” are enough to cause a restlessness in the protagonist, a restive longing for more of that which had so tempted him from the passing train (205). The green in the park beckons like the saloons in the Bowery beckon. The power this distant, fleeting encounter has over Binks is not a romantic trope merely, but a representation of the agency of nature for which we now have empirical evidence. Studies on the influence of natural spaces have revealed that the far-reaching impacts on humans’ mental and physical state do not require deep immersion in nature: those impacts are evident even when the subject simply sees “posters and slides, as well as window views” (Heerwagen and Orians 166). Binks’ fleeting glimpse takes place in the first sentence of the story; so right from the beginning the agency of the natural world is the motivational force driving the action of the narrative. This arrangement parallels the agency of the environment in most other New York tales, but to very different effect given the different setting (urban versus rural).

When the family manages to get away from the city on a weekend trip to the country, they are so conditioned by their urban environment that they experience a bit of culture shock. The peaceful tranquility of the scene is a dreadful monotony to them, and they feel bored and mildly irritated (209). But in time the air, the flowers, the trees, the grass, and the other natural objects not readily available to them in city begin to exert their influence:

With their ears still clogged by the tempest and fury of city uproars, they heard the song of the universal religion, the mighty and mystic hymn of nature, whose melody is in each landscape. It appealed to their elemental selves. It was as if the
earth had called recreant and heedless children and the mother word, of vast might and significance, brought them to sudden meekness. It was the universal thing whose power no one escapes. When a man hears it he usually remains silent. He understands then the sacrilege of speech. (210)

We see here the common reference to the ineffability of the mystical experience, along with the implication of union as evidenced by various references to universality. But this affect, which some have read as an atavistic transcendentalism, is transmitted to the Binkses by the very real material things around them: the trees, the fields, the air, etc. Indeed, it is “the earth” itself that calls to them. Reference to a “universal thing” and a “universal religion” might be interpreted as evidence of some vital, immaterial force, but we know that the tranquil and calming influence of natural landscapes is quite universal. As work on the biophilia hypothesis has shown, people across cultures prefer natural to built environments, and the effects of such environments manifest in quantifiable bodily changes: lower blood pressure, improved recovery rates after illness or surgery, lower stress levels, and so forth (Kahn 13). The effect appears to be, in other words, universal—biological rather than cultural or supernatural. In the passage above, there is no reference to anything supernatural; indeed Crane reminds us that the dynamic is entirely material by repeated reference to the source of the effect: the fields, the flowers, the air.

In keeping with the characteristics of ecomysticism, place is the central force in inducing the mystical experience. And so it is in “Mr. Binks’ Day Off,” as the scene of his mystical experience is an archetype of natural sacred space. Paul Devereux, in his historical analysis of the sacred places of ancient religions, has determined that the natural areas sacred to animistic, “earthbound” religions are inevitably related to the visionary states of consciousness to which they are conducive. With the “production of visionary states” as a “key aim of primary religious
practices,” some characteristics prove to be relatively common, one of which is *prominence* (48). The fact that the scene of Binks’ transcendence takes place atop a hill with a wide view is no accident, as it is the foundation of Crane’s claims that this scene depicts a universal human experience. In the final, climactic scene, when Mr. and Mrs. Binks have ascended a small hill to take in the view and watch the sunset, the wind picks up and we get the following passage:

> From the night, approaching in the east, came a wind. The trees of the mountain raised plaintive voices, bending toward the faded splendors of the day.

> This song of the trees arose in low, sighing melody into the still air. It was filled with an infinite sorrow—a sorrow for birth, slavery, death. It was a wail telling the griefs, the pains of all the ages. It was the symbol of agonies. It celebrated all suffering. Each man finds in this sound the expression of his own grief. It is the universal voice raised in lamentations. (213)

The prominence of the place enables the expansive views that prime the Binkses for a profound experience. Again, even though Crane attributes this experience to a material cause—the wind and the trees—there is also the claim to universality that might be taken as evidence of some spirit or divinity that permeates the material world. But the wind has a special resonance here, as there is a latent materialism underlying this seemingly stock romantic trope.

In *Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram presents both ethnological and etymological evidence of the long, cross-cultural tradition of connecting the wind and the breath with the soul and consciousness. He recounts the Navajo belief that humans can subtly influence the natural powers of the earth through song. For the Navajo, the act of singing is the externalization of thought through the transformation of air. Air thus bridges the internal and exterior worlds. And since that air is the medium in which all other natural forces exist, singing affects those forces
This belief in the medium of the air or wind as that which bridges the interior world with the exterior world has roots in the Western tradition, as well. The Greek term *psychē*, which translates loosely as *soul*, derives from the word for breath (237). Another Greek term, *pneuma*, likewise connects the ideas of breath and spirit. In Latin, the word *anima* does the same. This tradition of linking air, breath, and soul/consciousness suggests that soul/consciousness was thought of as an “elemental phenomenon,” according to Abram (238). Soul and consciousness were *part of* the sensuous world; hence soul/consciousness was not what distinguished us from the nonhuman world, but that which joined us to it. In this way, the Binkses experience the air as the means of communication between the human and the nonhuman world. The wind is both the “song of the trees” and the “universal voice” that the Binkses intuitively understand. This voice sings of “all suffering,” and Crane conspicuously omits designating *human* suffering here, thereby including the suffering of all mortal things. Each person hears themselves in this voice, linking all humans but also all life on earth to the cyclic process of birth, life, and death. The wind acts as the common medium or “spirit” of the world. Here, it both enables and provokes the special state of consciousness that is required for such communion.

The material agency that defines the New York stories set in urban slums is the same type of materialism that enables the ecomysticism of “Mr. Binks’ Day Off.” Crane even employs some of the syntactical constructions that situate place as subject and humans as object. He writes that “The peace of the hills and the fields came upon the Binkses,” indicating that the hills and fields have active influence on the consciousness of the human subjects (212). The scene on the hill pushes this influence from the impartation of peace to the impartation of mystical consciousness. “These songs of the trees awe,” Crane writes, as his description grows more lyrical and intense. The Binkses become “purified, chastened by this sermon,” Crane’s religious
vocabulary signifying their elevated interior state (213). It is in this context that Mr. Binks tries to formulate a question to the world, but gives up trying to put it into words because it deals with the ineffable insight that comes in such mystical moments. This is not the realization of god or the transcendence of the physical world, but a genuine communion with the physical world. Crane’s persistent materialism establishes the agentic capacity of these non-human and even non-living things so that we are not forced to attribute such agency to some additional vital force or spirit that must be infusing them. In this way, the environmental agency of the Bowery extends to the countryside in a perceptive style that recognizes the capacity of non-human things to alter human consciousness even into the heights of a mystical experience.

SARAH ORNE JEWETT AND “A WHITE HERON”

The ecomysticism in “Mr. Binks’ Day Off,” though offering temporary respite from the degradation of the city, was ultimately an exercise in pessimism. Crane’s naturalism focused on the agency of the environment, whether built or natural. This agency translates across the country/city divide, manifesting as oppression in the city and reinvigoration in the country. Though we see in “Mr. Binks” the avowal of affiliation with the non-human world, it is an affiliation based upon mutual empathy for the absurdity of mortal life. The ecomystical experience resulted in an apprehension of the “infinite sorrow—a sorrow for birth, slavery, death” that all living things must know. The Binkses apprehended the universal voice of nature, but it was a “voice raised in lamentations.” Though it engendered affection for the countryside, it also provoked self-pity and sorrow for one’s fate.
Austin’s ecomysticism, though still filtered somewhat through the lens of supernatural religion, functioned primarily as an instrument of reinhabitation through the emphasis of the agency of place to engender affection and instruct humans in proper lifeways. The moments of mystical consciousness were important motivating factors but not absolutely essential to Austin’s relationship to place.

In Jewett, we see a further development of the role of the ecomystical experience. Whereas Austin’s and, to a lesser extent, Crane’s ecomystical passages tended to generalize in the second or third person voice (‘‘one,’’ ‘‘you,’’ ‘‘man,’’ etc.) and avoid a specific, personal referent, Jewett’s main character in “A White Heron” very directly and intimately evinces ecomystical experiences. The protagonist’s ecomysticism is central, not secondary—joyous, not despairing. When Jewett gives us a glimpse of Sylvia’s interior mind, we see that the ecomystical experience is not only an important motivating force or a comforting empathetic understanding but the very essence of her communion with her place. Jewett completely dispenses with any pretense of a supernatural connotation for the experience, marking “A White Heron” as a further step toward a more pure ecomysticism. But this ecomysticism has not sat well with some scholars.

Recent trends in scholarship tend to read “A White Heron” as romantic nostalgia predicated upon a culture/nature dualism. Kelly L. Richardson, in the chapter she contributed to Such News of the Land, asserts that a true “ecological spirit”—one in which the human/nature dualism is erased or minimized—is to be found in Jewett’s more mature Dunnet Landing tales (i.e. The Country of the Pointed Firs), as opposed to the pronounced dualism of “A White Heron” (96). She characterizes “A White Heron” as a vehicle for the dualism that sees humans as outside of nature—at best, as caretakers and protectors of nature. Richardson detects a “clear
theme of preservation and protection” that is symptomatic of the contemporary wilderness
movement. However, Richardson detects in this theme the seed of its own undoing, as “A White
Heron” posits preservation as an either/or choice based upon “a sharp distinction . . . between
nature and society” (96). This “dualistic thinking” extends to individual characters and, as a
result, Sylvia herself remains somewhat aloof from the landscape she wishes to protect.
Richardson cites Sarah Way Sherman in support: Sherman has observed that “Sylvia’s
communion with nature does not mean that she herself is embedded in that instinctual ground but
that she protects it, oversees it, loves it from above” (161). And Richardson concurs: “Sylvia’s
role as overseer asserts a dominance over nature, even if it is a benevolent, protective one” (97).
Both authors claim that dualism inheres in the human desire to preserve and protect non-human
nature. At bottom of such an analysis of dualism is the assumption that a bifurcation of “society”
and “nature” implies a concurrent bifurcation of “human” and “nature.” This is a distorting
conflation, and ecomysticism can show us how an individual member of a society steeped in
dualism can overcome that bifurcation. The human/nature binary is not inherent in the premise of
a society/nature binary. Reading with an eye toward the ecomystical experience at the heart of
“A White Heron” reveals that, instead of indicating “dominance,” control, or aloofness, Sylvia’s
desire to protect the heron is premised on affiliation, a personal and emotional connection that
forges a union rather than upholds dualism. She is not reinforcing a nature/culture duality, but is
overcoming a physical, material alienation produced by urban, industrial society by means of the
ecomystical experience.

I first want to complicate the very idea of an oppositional, exclusive duality by proposing
a continuum or sliding scale of wilderness/rural/urban that precludes any simplistic polarity
between human and non-human, or between city and country. This continuum is evidenced by
the fact that we see in the story not only the well-known contrast between Sylvia and the young hunter, but also between Sylvia and her kindly grandmother. As matron of the farmstead, Sylvia’s grandmother functions as the mediator between the urban and the wild. Though the rural agriculturalist is enmeshed in non-human life, unlike the almost exclusively human environment of the city, the rural is enmeshed in *domesticated* non-human life—an important qualifier. The contrast between domesticated/rural and wild/wilderness is an important element of the ecomystical union of girl and nature, since Jewett contextualizes this union with her depiction of the contrast in the very first scene. As Sylvia makes her way home with her cow, it becomes clear that the creature is not a mindless submissive but a stubborn and willful animal with a clear mind of its own; the cow is a “valued companion” to Sylvia rather than a mere possession or thrall. This characterization is necessary to establish the nearly egalitarian nature of their relationship, and the egalitarian nature of their relationship is an important indicator of the ecocentric unity that is at the heart of the text.

Fundamental to the character of Mistress Moolly is her depiction as an animal existing at the border of the domestic and the wild. Though undoubtedly a domesticated animal, her behavior places her at the edge of that definition—more like a feral animal, a domestic breed that has reverted to wild behavior. Paul Shepard has written that domestication is one of the foremost qualities of agricultural civilization that has led to the human alienation from non-human nature. The characteristics bred into animals during the process of domestication—docility, submissiveness, behavioral simplification, reduced mobility and hardiness, etc.—have the cumulative effect of infantilization (38). This retarded maturation spreads to the landscape itself (and thence to human thought) as the agriculturalist suppresses biotic diversity and replaces the diverse wild forms with a relatively small number of domesticated species (39). Thus,
domestication plays a role in “isolating the individual from the nonhumanized world” by increasing “the physical and perceptual distance between the person and those forms of the nonhuman world most remote from him” (40). Shepard is building the case that domesticated animals, as an integral part of the rise of agricultural civilization, help maintain the perception of a duality between the human and the non-human.

Jewett’s characterization of the cow, therefore, is an important counterweight against this linkage between domestication and duality. Otherwise, it would be impossible to draw a distinction between their little rural family life and the hunter and the urbane culture he represents. Notice the grandmother, the character that occupies somewhat of a rural middle ground between the urban and the wild: Sylvia already seems more intimate with the woods and “wild creatures” than she is, and Mrs. Tilley, in conversation with the young man, sounds a note of regret about not escaping her rural existence to see the (human) world. She lives a life surrounded by non-human nature, but she deals primarily with domesticated beings, as evidenced by her deference to Sylvia as the one most familiar with the wild ground and the wild life forms.

The cow is characterized as intelligent and independent beyond the usual bounds of domesticity. She is rarely found feeding on the food provided for her by humans; she prefers the wild huckleberries, foraging for herself as opposed to relying on her human keepers. She is clever enough to still the ringing of her bell so that Sylvia has trouble finding her, a show of intelligence in resistance to captivity. And when, on this occasion, Sylvia finally locates the cow, she is in the swamp, the archetypal symbol of wild, resistant, liminal space. So Jewett appears to be taking pains to portray a creature existing at the boundary between wild and domestic—mirroring, perhaps, the characterization of Sylvia herself. But in itself, this portrayal of the cow works to undermine the duality between the human and the non-human by disrupting the typical
master-slave relationship between humans and their domesticated animals. Jewett opens “A White Heron” with a human-animal relationship that transgresses the boundaries between domestic and wild, between human and non-human. This opening scene leads directly to the ecomystical experience that fully transcends such dualism and forms the motivation for Sylvia’s climactic decision at the end of the story.

This ecomystical experience is foreshadowed right from the first paragraph, when Sylvia and her cow are trying to make their way home in the waning light. Their path takes them “deep into the woods,” which are already “filled with shadows” due to the late hour. But they are both so familiar with the path that it doesn’t matter “whether their eyes could see it or not.” The scene is simultaneously one of disorientation and intuitive awareness, as their familiarity with the path leads them through obscurity. This setting is already suggestive of mystical states of consciousness, as the liminality of the dark forest qualifies it as an archetypal sacred space, according to Paul Devereux. Of the several characteristics that qualify a place as potentially sacred that he distills, liminality is the one relevant here. Devereux specifically cites deep forests as one example of such liminal spaces (44). So with the scene set at the liminal dusk in the disorienting woods, the following sequence plays out:

The companions followed the shady wood-road, the cow taking slow steps and the child very fast ones. The cow stopped long at the brook to drink, as if the pasture were not half a swamp, and Sylvia stood still and waited, letting her bare feet cool themselves in the shoal water, while the great twilight moths struck softly against her. She waded on through the brook as the cow moved away, and listened to the thrushes with a heart that beat fast with pleasure. There was a stirring in the great boughs overhead. They were full of little birds and beasts that
seemed to be wide awake, and going about their world, or else saying good-night to each other in sleepy twitters. Sylvia herself felt sleepy as she walked along. However, it was not much farther to the house, and the air was soft and sweet. She was not often in the woods so late as this, and it made her feel as if she were a part of the gray shadows and the moving leaves.

Sylvia’s senses are alive to her surroundings, as vision, touch, and hearing all function within this brief scene. Her senses are especially awakened here because the cow pauses to drink and so Sylvia is still, allowing her attention to expand and drink in the sensuousness of her surroundings. She is the still point of the turning world, or at least the still point in the ceaseless flow of water that is the creak—a metaphor, perhaps, for the timelessness of her experience. The presence of moving water looms large: the flowing water adds another qualification as a sacred site, that of aesthetic or psychological effect. The sound of rushing water is one example of such effects presented by Devereux (44). Anyone who has spent any quiet time within earshot of flowing water knows the meditative and hallucinatory effects it can have. The “white noise” of the current seems to facilitate trance-like states, and it is common for voices and other aural hallucinations to begin to emerge from the drone. Therefore the imagery in this scene suggests a meditative quality as Sylvia stands in the creek and wonders at the mysterious happenings in the half-light. Significantly, non-human beings make contact with her, both bodily and aurally, as moths brush her body, creatures twitter obscurely in the trees, and a thrush—the most beautiful vocalist in the eastern hardwood forests—serenades the night. These are not spiritual mysteries, but natural, sensual ones. Sylvia experiences the prototypical ecomystical experience: she is enraptured by the beauty revealed by her senses, and she experiences a pleasurable sensation of union with the myriad other material forms with which she is connected.
This experience uncovers a bit of a paradox: Sylvia experiences union as a result of contemplating the diversity around her. The varied array of material forms counterintuitively lead to her feeling of oneness. It is helpful to examine Sylvia’s experience as an example of extrovertive mysticism, following the dichotomy that W.T. Stace develops in *Mysticism and Philosophy*. The introvertive mystics retreat into their own consciousness until all sensory impressions disappear. The extrovertive mystics, on the other hand, experience a “unifying vision” wherein all things are One (131). This description refers to fact that the extrovertive mystic “looks outward through the senses” to the material world of sense objects (61). Therefore the unifying capacity is the vision that recognizes a multiplicity of “things” in the world, even as it apprehends an essential unity underlying the diversity. Stace writes that the extrovertive experience leads to an “apprehension of the One as an inner subjectivity, or life, in all things” (131). This has clear resonance with pantheism, something that I will address in the next chapter. But here, I want to emphasize the way in which Stace’s formulation extends the quality of subjectivity to all things.

Though ecomysticism is not exactly synonymous with extrovertive mysticism, there is significant overlap. According to Stace, the extrovertive mystic experiences a “unity” that is not the erasure of all distinction but the recognition of some common ground of being, some unifying sameness that permeates the diversity of forms. But far from being an insight native to mysticism, this also carries over to both ecology and materialist philosophy. One common theme of the new materialists is the attempt to blur subject/object distinctions through the emphasis of a universal materiality. Some express this universal materiality in the language of physics, as when Jane Bennett invokes relativity with her claim of a universal “matter-energy” (122). Others express this in philosophical terms, as when David Abram invokes ontology with his claim of a
universal “mute layer of bare existence” (Becoming 29). Scientists often express this in the language of genetics, as when E.O. Wilson points out that all multi-cellular organisms “are thought to have descended from a single ancestral population that lived about 1.8 billion years ago . . . All this distant kinship is stamped by a common genetic code and elementary features of cell structure” (39). We can see the manifestation of extrovertive mysticism’s unity-in-diversity in all these examples, and this is also the primary area of overlap with ecomysticism. When Sylvia apprehends the essential unity of things via the engagement of her senses, she is recognizing this essential materiality, a material mysticism that stands in awe of this oneness without recourse to supernaturalism or any other immaterial concept. This union may be a romantic trope in literature, but it is a trope undergirded by philosophy, physics, genetics, and the experiences of the mystics.

Lest it seem that I am reading too much into the scene in the creek—perhaps it is just a pleasant evening in the forest, nothing more—the rest of the text reinforces this scene’s ecomystical overtones. After hearing of the stranger’s quest for the white heron, Sylvia thinks of course of her familiarity with the creature. But then her mind is led to the sea, whose “great voice” she can sometimes hear from the marsh where the heron lives. Sylvia often “wondered and dreamed” about the sea, indicating an abiding fascination. The sea functions as a symbol for the limitless, the mysterious, the inscrutable; it is, after all, the referent for the figurative term “oceanic feeling,” the affective source of all religion, according to some. Sylvia also thinks of the last old-growth pine in the region, a tree she has long desired to climb so that she can glimpse the sea. Her desire for the ocean is the desire for the oceanic. She dreams about it, and longs to hear its “great voice.” She believes that climbing the greatest tree will allow a glimpse of the sea. This tree functions as a dual metaphor: for elevating consciousness and also for wildness—and most
importantly, for the conjunction of the two, once again reinforcing the dynamic playing out between domesticated and wild. The tree is the lone remainder of the primeval forest that was leveled by the European settlers, an avatar of the ancient trees that have been replaced by more unassuming specimens after the spread of agricultural civilization. It is through contact with this ancient, wild being that Sylvia achieves ecomystical union.

Again we encounter the centrality of a prototypical “sacred place,” as prominence is invoked once more: this tree is notably the tallest around. Devereux explains how sacred trees often represented the axis mundi, the center of the world. Such trees often stood at the center of the world axis archetype, the center from which the four winds or four cardinal directions radiated. This archetypal symbol, which is found in many diverse cultures and was recognized by Jung as the archetype of “quaternity,” is related to “the mapping of altered states of consciousness encountered in shamanic trance” (Devereux 36). In this model of perception, our bodies “center” our awareness: we are the center of our world. But the shaman travels to other worlds—up and down the tree to the underworld of the dead or the upper world of the spirits (36). Sylvia’s ascent through the tree represents not only an intimate familiarity and engagement with the non-human, but an altered state of consciousness as a means by which such familiarity and engagement surges forward into ecomystical union. Crossing from the smaller white oak to the larger old pine is the crossing from mundane consciousness to mystical perception, from domesticity to the wilderness of consciousness.11

Such union plays out as she climbs the great pine. Gayle Smith and D.K. Meisenheimer, Jr. have both analyzed the process at length, tracing the ways in which Jewett uses bird imagery and metaphor to blur the lines between distinct life forms, thereby bridging bodies and places as

11 It is worth noting that conifers are the most ancient type of tree, while broad-leaf trees such as the oak are a more recent evolutionary development. Perhaps this is symbolic of the ecomystical experience as more of a reaching-back than a transcendent escape.
Sylvia achieves union with the non-human. As Sylvia climbs the tree, her feet and hands “pinched and held like bird’s claws”; similarly, the tree grips back as “the sharp dry twigs caught and held her and scratched her like angry talons.” At every turn, birds are calling, fluttering away, waking in the understory. Meisenheimer notes how “[b]ird, tree, and girl fuse in a climatic union as metonymic bodies (all clawed) . . . Transcendence as a process is, in fact, the vehicle through which Jewett representationally bridges body and region” (112). This is an astute analysis of the process, but I will add to this process of transcendence the recurring image of the sea. It is an important presence when Sylvia does finally reach the top of the tree. Sylvia’s long-sought sea sparkles with a “golden dazzle” in the sunrise, and two hawks circle through the “glorious east.” Sylvia’s transcendence is hinted as when the narrator tells us that she “felt as if she too could go flying away among the clouds” into that “vast and awesome world.” Sylvia’s sense of awe in the face of the overwhelming beauty of the material world and her literal and metaphorical elevation mark the experience as ecomystical. Her rise into the ethereal sky offers her a glimpse of the sea that is usually just out of sight and out of earshot, much as the mystic’s elevated consciousness offers her a glimpse of the profound, ineffable truth that is always there, just beyond our comprehension.

I do not mean for this parallelism to suggest that this scene is metaphor merely, however. The senses are employed not simply as metaphors for Sylvia’s mystical experience, but as the vehicle for it. Her physical engagement with the world—her attentiveness and familiarity, both traits that are strongly established by the narrative—engender love and awe. This affective relationship reaches its apotheosis in the scene at dusk in the creek. The serendipitous concurrence of various mysterious, beautiful, and intimate sensory impressions pushes Sylvia’s feeling of love and awe even further, into realm of ecomystical union. Then, to reinforce the
centrality of this experience, we get a recurrence in the climactic scene in the great pine tree, where Sylvia and the heron “watched the sea and the morning together.” The grammatical construction, collapsing human and animal to the plural “they,” reprises the egalitarian pairing of girl and cow at the beginning. Human and animal are no longer dual, but united in their mutuality of being in the world. Likewise, the ecomystical experience suggested by the imagery of elevation, the sea, and the beautiful yet disorienting light conditions reprises her unitive experience at the beginning.

Some criticism has focused on this transcendence as a reinscription of dualism via the rejection of culture. Meisenheimer sees this as the process of Sylvia’s transcendence of “violence, culture,” and “class and gender dominance” rather than her transcendence of human/nature dualism (112). As in Richardson’s take on “A White Heron,” Meisenheimer sees the nature/culture dualism as the central complication of the story. More specifically, he claims Jewett uses transcendence to bridge the gap between body and region, but in doing so reinforces the gap between body and mind as between nature and culture. Sylvia is rejecting “not only the ‘great world’ beyond rural New England but culture itself” (112). This rejection mirrors, for Meisenheimer, Jewett’s tendency to focus on communities that are obsolete (such as Dunnet Landing) due to their rejection of the wider world. But it seems impossible to say that Sylvia rejects “culture itself.” Would it not be more accurate to say she rejects one very specific culture, that of an urban American capitalism that commodifies everything, even living things? To believe that she rejects “culture itself” is to believe that Sylvia exists without culture. But this is not true (and probably not even possible). Sylvia is not some wild child raised by wolves; she is an integrated and well-adjusted human who found the industrial city she left to be stifling and who prefers the company of non-human things. By all accounts, she leads a healthy and happy
life under the care of a loving family member and within the intimate web of relations of a healthy, wild ecosystem. To posit this arrangement as “cultureless” reveals Meisenheimer’s bias toward urbanity rather than Sylvia’s transcendence of “culture itself.” The long history of criticism on “A White Heron” has tended to focus on transcendence and union, much like I have here; but that criticism has also tended to characterize Sylvia’s transcendence as a romantic trope that presumes an untenable dichotomy of nature and culture. And so we come back to where we started: the nature/culture dualism.

The ecomystical elements in “A White Heron”—the archetypal representation of natural sacred sites, the materiality underlying the transcendence, the sensual basis of Sylvia’s affiliation and affection for the non-human world—suggest that the readings focused on delineating the story’s advancement of dualism fail to account for the real, material bases of the “transcendence” depicted in the story. It also reveals a bias toward cultural construction: when critics call Sylvia a “romantic figure” (Meisenheimer 112), they situate her in cultural history. But what about natural history? The nature/culture split in “A White Heron” is more than an iteration of the romantic literary tradition; it reflects a manifest physical reality in America, and both sides of this dualism are specific and local, not abstract and general. Sylvia rejected a very real, very specific culture in favor of one that is of a more ecocentric orientation. Jewett herself seems to assert the mimesis of “A White Heron” in a letter to Annie Fields: "Mr. Howells thinks that this age frowns upon the romantic, that it is no use to write romance any more; but dear me, how much of it there is left in every-day life after all" (“Letter 34”). She is contrasting Howell’s use of “romance” as literary trope with her conception of romance as manifest reality. Accordingly, Sylvia’s withdrawal, transcendence, and union may have many antecedents in Western Literature, but they are also the rendering of near-universal, cross-cultural experiences of certain
natural spaces as inherently sacred. And in one regard, “A White Heron” is at the forefront of a new tradition: that of the rendering the romantic union with nature as an entirely material process.
CHAPTER 2: SEEING ROCK FOR THE FIRST TIME—ROBINSON JEFFERS AND THE RISE OF ECOMYSTICIM

In the last chapter, we saw three examples of authors depicting ecomystical experiences in different ways. Austin was somewhat ambivalent about an entirely material mysticism and so often invoked God or “spirit” during those moments. Crane very much embraced a materialistic naturalism, but his material mysticism was pessimistic, in essence mournful of the absence of the ideal in its lamentation for death. And Jewett, though she went further than the other two in enthusiastically embracing ecomysticism’s essential role in the human relationship to nature, tended to rely on stock romantic tropes that have led to charges of dualism and transcendence.

It is in Robinson Jeffers that we come to the central figure in the development of ecomysticism in American Literature. His poetry represents the establishment of an unsparing, fiercely ecocentric, scientifically-informed ecomysticism that has had far-reaching influence on American nature writing, as we will see in the final two chapters on Edward Abbey and Gary Snyder. Ecomysticism was, for more than any other American writer, the essence of his oeuvre, the primary motivating factor for all his work.

Jeffers’s writing addresses directly the impact of science and materialism on spirituality and explicitly defines the parameters of his ecomysticism, though he does not name it that. It is through this ecomysticism that Jeffers has maintained his status as an important poet. His full-throated embrace of a wholly material mysticism and its prominence in his poetry marked him as an entirely original voice in American verse. His ecomysticism inspired his philosophy of Inhumanism, which gained him infamy and fame alike. Today his ecomysticism continues to be the heart of his reputation: even though his status has diminished somewhat, Jeffers remains
canonical in proportion to his significance to narrow special interests. And it is his ecomysticism that undergirds these several esotericisms. He is recognized as a regional author, for instance: he is a Western poet, or a California poet. For others, he is a religious poet, a prophet and a mystic. For still others, he represents a proto-ecopoetics that has been influential to both the development of ecopoetry and ecological thought in general. It is the ecomystical experience—as a material, place-based, affective experience—that is the primary source of these various aspects of his work. In this chapter, I will explore how ecomysticism runs through the main channels of Jeffers’s work—bioregionalism, religion/spirituality, ecology—and so can be designated a uniting force that helps resolve these channels into a coherent whole.

TOWARD A MATERIAL JEFFERS

First we must address the question of whether Jeffers is a materialist or an idealist. It is perhaps emblematic of the persistent religiosity of American culture that Jeffers has been often labeled as a dualist and studied as a religious figure. The most influential work on Jeffers’ religiosity—William Everson’s The Excesses of God: Robinson Jeffers as a Religious Figure—imparts a supernatural element to Jeffers’s concept of god as he tries to place the poet in the tradition of Western (usually Christian) mysticism. Jeffers’s conception of god demands extended attention, as it addresses the ontological foundation of Jeffers’s ecomysticism. If Everson is right, then we can’t label Jeffers a materialist, and therefore can’t label him an ecomystic. But I think that Everson’s analysis elides the fact that we can only call Jeffers a religious poet if we use the term “religious” in a very broad and slightly metaphorical manner, since there is in fact no supernatural or immaterial element to his concept of god.
Everson’s book primarily utilizes Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* as the lens through which to understand Jeffers’s religiosity. Hence we begin with the problem of prejudiced perspectives. When Everson conceived of and began writing this book, he went by the name Brother Antoninus as a member of the Dominican Order at Kentfield Priory. Rudolf Otto was a professor of theology at Göttingen, the Chair of Theology at Marburg-on-the-Lahn, and a scholar concerned with, among other things, establishing the limits of the scientific and naturalistic perspectives (Otto ix). Both the author (Everson) and his primary interpretive lens (Otto) are steeped in the traditions of Western Christianity with its transcendent, supernatural God. Both men take for granted the existence of an immaterial divinity. Ecomysticism is almost entirely incompatible with such notions. But as I consider Jeffers the archetypal ecomystic, I will therefore need to show how Everson misinterprets Jeffers’s religiosity, finding supernaturalism where I find materialism.

Early on, Everson justifies his labeling of Jeffers as a “religious poet” because of his evocation of the numinous as God. Everson notes that Jeffers tends to cultivate the sense of the numinous in nature, a claim with which no one would argue. Apprehending the numinous in nature is not incompatible with ecomysticism, and can indeed be interpreted without any recourse to idealism or supernaturalism. However, Everson goes on to claim that Jeffers deserves the label “religious” because “he evokes [the numinous] unequivocally as God” (7). It is certainly true that Jeffers cultivated a sense of the numinous in his poetry, and it is true that he often uses the term “God”; but as I hope to show, if we take into account the totality of what he has written, it is clear that even in his most “religious” poems, his use of the term is so far from traditional Western conceptions of God that it can be described as purely metaphorical and rhetorical. Most importantly, his “god” is entirely material.
Everson is at his best when he emphasizes Jeffers’s realization that organized, abstract religion (along with the other trappings of civilization) has provided fertile ground for the growth of humanity’s monstrous collective ego. But Everson sees this not as evidence of Jeffers’s ultimate materialism, but as the motivation for Jeffers to evoke Otto’s “creature-feeling,” an overwhelming and awful humility in the face of the *mysterium tremendum*. Otto defines “creature-feeling” as the “emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures” (10). This is not, on its face, incongruent with ecomysticism, since this creature-feeling can arise from the humility felt when contemplating geologic time, for instance, or when contemplating the size and scope of the known universe. But Otto’s definition of *mysterium tremendum* reveals the supposition of a supersensual, immaterial divinity. In his most basic formulation, he defines it as a “presence,” a hint that the *mysterium tremendum* can be perceived as an entity, a singularity, an object, a thing (13). Indeed, he sometimes refers to it as the “numinous object” (23, emphasis mine). He goes on to delineate some characteristics of this presence, one of which is Energy or Urgency. Though he cautions that descriptors of this characteristic—such as energy, vitality, impetus, passion, will, etc.—are merely symbolic, it is clear that he is attempting to attribute some sort of agency to the numinous object (23). Finally, he explains that the adjective *mysterium* is meant to suggest the idea of the “wholly other,” an idea that is at odds with ecomysticism. Ecological mysticism is the apprehension of oneself in the other, of the other in oneself, of the unity-in-diversity of all things. Given these characteristics, Otto strongly suggests the thing that induces the creature-feeling is indeed a *thing out there*, a transcendent object, a thing wholly other than the material subject that apprehends it.
Since Everson is using this transcendent object as his point of reference, his analysis of Jeffers’s invocation of the creature-feeling is problematic. According to Everson, secularism and institutionalized religion have given humans a sense of superiority to material nature; hence the poet can only evoke the numinous by degrading humans to a place below that to which they have come to feel themselves superior, a move from “deceptive superiority to realistic inferiority” via a reduction of humanity and its concerns (18-9). Jeffers very clearly attempts such a reduction in much of his writing.

Everson even claims that it is Jeffers’s discernment of the incongruity between humanity’s ego and the reality of the situation that qualifies him as religious poet. The main divergence between me and Everson arises because in Everson’s formulation, Jeffers’s cultivation of the creature-feeling is primarily a rhetorical move, one not necessarily reflective of lived reality but one designed to realign human egotism so as to cultivate a sense of the numinous missing from modern institutionalized religion. It becomes clear that Everson does not interpret Jeffers’s “reduction of humanity” as reflecting a very real, material condition—i.e., that humans are actually just another creature in inferior relation to the whole—because Everson falls back on the Christian concept of human exceptionalism. It is our awareness of God, writes Everson, that distinguishes us as a species; it is man’s divine faculty “that set him off from the brutes” (23). This “intuitional distinction” places humans “outside the pale of sentient life” (24). Though Everson resists the explicit attribution of quasi-divinity to humanity, he comes close: “Knowing God, man stood apart from all creation” (24). Therefore, Jeffers’s invocation of the creature-feeling via a reduction of humanity’s exalted place is really just a means to an end, a means to evoke the numinous in the modern mind. Because in truth, according to Everson,

12 A formulation with which I would have only minor disagreement: I agree with the analysis of Jeffers’s characterization of the human ego, but would say this qualifies him as an ecological poet rather than a religious poet.
humans are special, the only beings with divine knowledge. But this is in fact the very human egocentrism that Jeffers loathed and combated. Everywhere we look in Jeffers’s work, he is preaching holism and humility. Not rhetorical humility merely, not humility as means to an end, but actual humility based upon the ecological awareness of material reality and humankind’s fairly insignificant role within that reality. It is evident in both his prose and his verse.

The most straightforward statements of Jeffers’s philosophy and theology are found in his letters, his prefaces, and the notes from his lecture tour that were published as Themes in my Poems. In the preface to his Selected Poems (1938), Jeffers positions his verse as a countercurrent to the esoteric and abstract modernism dominant at the time. He claims his poetry tries to “reclaim . . . physical and psychological reality” as it attempts to express “philosophic and scientific ideas in verse” (SP 714). No mention of religion or spirituality or God or deities. In his preface to The Double-Axe and Other Poems (1947), Jeffers engages a bit with Christianity explicitly. In discussing his philosophy of Inhumanism, he writes that the Christian maxim “love one another” should be balanced by an injunction to turn away from each other “to that great presence of which humanity is only a squirming particle.” This contrasts overtly with Otto’s concept of the mysterium tremendum as a “wholly other” presence; Jeffers asserts that humanity is part of this presence, not a thing apart. Perhaps the term “great presence” can be interpreted as denoting God, but only if we ignore the balance of the preface. He goes on in the same paragraph to clarify the thought, writing that we should turn from each other to the “vast life and inexhaustible beauty beyond humanity” (SP 721), an appeal to materialism and, perhaps, aestheticism, but certainly not to idealism or supernaturalism. The “great presence” is the material world itself. Elsewhere in the same passage, he claims his Inhumanism is based on “a recognition of the astonishing beauty of things and their living wholeness, and on a rational
acceptance of the fact that mankind is neither central nor important in the universe; our vices and our blazing crimes are as insignificant as our happiness” (SP 719). Again, this clearly displays his material orientation, as “things and their living wholeness” is a phrase that would seem to omit any sort of transcendent deity, though it does imply a kind of organic monism. It is certainly not the work of a man who devalues humanity only to invoke Otto’s creature-feeling and reawaken our special, unique human gift for knowing God. Jeffers’s Inhumanism is at least partly a “rational” reaction to the scientific insights of the time, a literal—not metaphorical—“reduction of humanity” from central to peripheral, from monumental to infinitesimal.

JEFFERS’S ECOMYSTICISM

The above argument in favor of a material orientation in Jeffers is not to deny that there is an aspect of Jeffers’s verse that can be labeled as religious or spiritual. That is undeniable, and the concurrence of the two—materialism and spiritualism— is necessary to any claims of ecomysticism. These two aspects of ecomysticism are inseparable, and so we see in Jeffers the ecomystic the expression of materialism whenever he addresses his spirituality. As Everson has noted, Jeffers didn’t record or portray his mystical experiences directly in his verse all that often. He seems more concerned with communicating some of the knowledge gleaned from those experiences—Everson calls it the prophetic mode. Nevertheless, we do have a few instances of poetic depiction of mystical experiences in the Jeffers oeuvre, and those instances stand as prototypical examples of ecomysticism.

“Oh Lovely Rock” is one such poem. The setting is a camping trip in a canyon with the speaker’s young son and a friend. After the two youngsters fall asleep, the poet is left alone in the darkness tending the smoldering fire and watching the light play on the walls of the gorge:
Light leaves overhead danced in the fire’s breath, tree-trunks were seen: it was the rock wall
That fascinated my eyes and mind. Nothing strange: light-gray diorite with two or three slanting seams in it,
Smooth polished by the endless attrition of slides and floods; no fern nor lichen,
pure naked rock . . . as if I were
Seeing rock for the first time. As if I were seeing through the flame-lit surface into the real and bodily
And living rock. Nothing strange . . . I cannot
Tell you how strange: the silent passion, the deep nobility and childlike loveliness: this fate going on
Outside our fates. It is here in the mountain like a grave smiling child. I shall die,
and my boys
Will live and die, our world will go on through its rapid agonies of change and discovery; this age will die,
And wolves have howled in the snow around a new Bethlehem: this rock will be here, grave, earnest, not passive: the energies
That are its atoms will still be bearing the whole mountain above: and I, many packed centuries ago,
Felt its intense reality with love and wonder, this lonely rock. (SP 529-30, ellipses original)

This poem embodies the fundamental characteristics of an ecomystical experience. First, it is brought about through the five senses interacting with the material world. The poem begins with
a detailed account of the setting, including a list of the specific species of trees present, the name
of the creek forming the gorge, the type of rock the walls are made of, and so forth.\textsuperscript{13} This
careful attentiveness to the non-human world around him is the means to the “visionary
experience” that follows. Though Jeffers implies that the novel visual effects of the flickering
fire had a role to play in moving his consciousness beyond the normal waking state, he also
emphasizes the role of simple attentiveness by means of listing, in great detail, the features of the
place. We get the mystic’s common claim of being able to apprehend more than the physical fact
of the thing perceived: “As if I were seeing through the flame-lit surface. . . .” But this is
specifically an \textit{ecomystical} experience in that his elevated perspective posits no supersensuous
divinity or immaterial spirit imbuing the material or prompting the experience. He is not seeing
some ideal, immaterial essence; instead, he is seeing “the real and bodily and living rock,” a very
material reality that might nevertheless be hidden from (or ignored by) a more mundane state of
consciousness. That mere rock, perhaps the most archetypal symbol of dead, inert matter (dumb
as a rock), can evoke such visionary experiences is evidence of a radical, vital materiality. The
“lovely rock” is “not passive”: it has agency not only in its capacity to excite the human mind,
but also in the energy of its atoms that support a mountain overhead. Though the depth to which
this rock is revered by Jeffers may seem strange, it is nevertheless precedented. Among many
primitive cultures, caves were often the sites of religious rites, and even cracks in rocks were
thought to be portals to other worlds that shamans could enter when in a trance (Devereux 67).
Thus the link between altered states and rock as mystical object has precedent not in the Western
poetic tradition, but in the pan-cultural primitive shamanic tradition.

Another way in which this poem is archetypically ecomystical is in its portrayal of an
ecological vision. That this insight is unavailable to the everyday experience is evident in his
\textsuperscript{13} This cataloging of natural features will be continued in Snyder’s work, as we will see in the last chapter.
proclamation that he cannot encompass its strangeness in words, a rather typical mystic’s reference to the ineffableness of the experience. The hallucinatory image of the leaves and the dancing and shifting light reinforce the mind-altering moment. This altered state of consciousness opens the speaker to the ecological revelations that seem obscure, or even nonsensical, to the rational mind: the rock is passionate and childlike and, as above, active. Typical of both the ecological and the mystical state of mind, the frame of reference dilates drastically, both spatially and temporally. He at once understands the timeliness of the rock (as well as human affairs) in the context of geologic time; he also understands that the passivity of this rock is an illusion of human perspective that his ecomystical consciousness has overcome. Significantly, this insight into ecological reality is preceded in the poem by observations of the ecology of the gorge: the community of plants present, the geologic processes that scoured clean the walls, and so forth. This attentiveness to ecological process helps form the focus of his ecomystical vision: concerned as he was with these ecological processes, his altered consciousness pushes his knowledge further into truths not so easily discerned with the senses, though clearly inspired and brought about by the senses. And this “knowledge” transforms from the dispassionate observation of the first half of the poem into the passionate effulgence that closes it.

“Oh Lovely Rock” is a clear case of an entirely material mystical experience. There is not the merest hint of idealism or dualism anywhere in the poem. But it is not always so in the rest of his work. He often invoked God and other terms and ideas from supernatural religion that can be (and often are) construed as evidence of his dualistic orientation. It is useful to look to Jeffers’s prose writings for strong, direct statements on his own beliefs. In Themes in my Poems, Jeffers explains the material nature of his religiosity:
Another theme that has much engaged my verses is the expression of a religious feeling, that perhaps must be called pantheism, though I hate to type it with a name. It is the feeling . . . I will say the certitude . . . that the world, the universe, is one being, a single organism, one great life that includes all life and all things; and is so beautiful that it must be loved and reverenced; and in moments of mystical vision we identify ourselves with it. (Themes 23-4, ellipses original)

Though he refers to a “religious feeling,” it is abundantly clear that he is referring to a state of consciousness in relation to the material world—to the “one great life”—and not to the knowledge of a transcendent deity or power. This is supported by his explicit invocation in the next sentence of “moments of mystical vision”—again a clear reference to a state of consciousness instead of an immaterial outside force: he does after all put the emphasis on the senses—vision. And the object of this vision is the universe itself, the material universe of which we are a part. But he admits to pantheism, and right there is the root “theism.”

Pantheism, though, is a nebulous concept that is applied to a broad spectrum of attitudes and perspectives. For some, pantheism means that God is immanent in the physical world; but this God takes the form of some kind of force or spirit that imbues material, a kind of immaterial add-on. This type of pantheism is indeed theistic. But there are other forms of pantheism, namely the non-theistic, “weak” form of pantheism that would be more appropriate for Jeffers. Whereas strong or theistic pantheism (sometimes called panentheism) might say that “God is in things,” weak or atheistic pantheism might say that “God is things.” In “Sign-Post,” the poet tells us that “Things are the God” (SP 504). This leveling of all difference between the concept of God and the physical universe is what philosopher J. J. C. Smart has in mind when he writes that “[some forms of] pantheism can be ontologically indistinguishable from atheism. Such pantheism would
be belief in nothing beyond the physical universe, but associated with emotions of wonder and awe similar to those that we find in religious belief.” Smart brings together atheistic materialism with the experience of the mystic, a synthesis that is very much aligned with Jeffers’s project—a synthesis that is the essence of ecomysticism. Right after Jeffers admits to “pantheism” in the above block quotation, he disavows theism by claiming the universe is “one organism,” a formulation that amalgamates the organicism of the materialist with the monism of the mystic. It is the formulation of an ecomysticism.

This material definition of pantheism is crucial, since Jeffers’s pantheism continues to be cited as evidence of his belief in supernatural divinity. One recent example is Robert Zaller’s Robinson Jeffers and the American Sublime (2012). Zaller’s study of how the religious traditions in which Jeffers was raised influenced the form of his verse is a brilliant rhetorical analysis. But Zaller, like others, extends that analysis too far and attributes to Jeffers a belief in a transcendent, singular God not too different than the Christian God of his upbringing. He blurs the line between form and content, inferring that Jeffers’s adoption of some of the formal elements of Puritan rhetoric suggests his adoption of their theology, or at least a modified form of it. Zaller places Jeffers in the tradition of the great religious poets of the West—Dante, Milton, etc.—in that his poetic project was an attempt to “depict a transcendent reality in terms of the best science and epistemology available to him” (44). Although Jeffers’s canonicity benefits from this association with the major poets of Western religion, Zaller underestimates just how far Jeffers had travelled from that tradition. Ecomysticism helps us gauge the distance as it forwards the idea that mysticism is compatible with materialism and so opens the possibility that the overt mystical qualities of Jeffers’s verse do not necessarily entail idealism, theism, or any other supernatural doctrine. Jeffers depicts an earthly reality, a reality that needs depiction not because
it is transcendent, but because most people live in cities and in cultures that exclude broad swaths of non-human life and obfuscate natural processes.

Zaller labels Jeffers a panentheist (124), which can be understood as a kind of middle-ground between theism and pantheism that sees God in all things and yet still maintains that God is greater than and distinct from the material universe—God as simultaneously immanent and transcendent. I believe this is a label to which Jeffers would never admit: it is after all a dualist theology, albeit perhaps a modulated sort of dualism. Zaller explains that Jeffers’s panentheism meant that he believed that “God inhered equally in all matter” because the universe was “a direct material manifestation of the deity” (124). This language forwards dualism and the belief in a supernatural, transcendent deity: by stating that the universe is a “material manifestation” of God, he is implying that God himself is immaterial; by stating that God inheres in the material universe, he is implying that God is in fact something other than matter, even though they are consubstantial.

The panentheist endeavor to have it both ways is an egregious example of what philosopher W.T. Stace identified as the fundamental paradox of pantheism: the simultaneous, contradictory belief that God is both identical with and different than the world (212). But Jeffers persistently states in both his poetry and his prose his belief in holism, monism, the fact that his concept of divinity is the universe itself, as one whole. One example of his proclamation of this material monism is found in his letter to Sister Mary James Power from October 1934. He is responding to her inquiry as to his “religious attitude,” and his answer establishes his rejection of dualism and his embrace of a material monism:

I believe that the universe is one being, all its parts are different expressions of the same energy, and they are all in communication with each other, influencing each
other, therefore parts of one organic whole. (This is physics, I believe, as well as religion.) The parts change and pass, or die, people and races and rocks and stars, none of them seems to me important in itself, but only the whole. This whole is in all its parts so beautiful, and is felt by me to be so intensely in earnest, that I am compelled to love it, and to think of it as divine. It seems to me that this whole alone is worthy of the deeper sort of love; and that here is peace, freedom, I might say a kind of salvation, in turning one’s affections outward toward this one God, rather than inward on one’s self, or on humanity, or on human imagination and abstractions—the world of spirits. (Selected Letters 221)

Here is evidence that, as Everson claims, Jeffers often invokes the numinous specifically as God. But Jeffers’s use of religious imagery and the term God is accompanied by a clear disavowal of supernaturalism and a straightforward equation of God with the material world. This is the very definition of ecomysticism: he is moved beyond the normal bounds of consciousness by the natural world to a state of profound love and awe. This is not pantheism, however. Stace, in light of his identification of the “pantheistic paradox,” claims that “pantheism is not rightly understood as the simple assertion of identity between God and the world” (211). But that appears to be what Jeffers is doing: asserting the material monism that seems to be the logical extension of the insights of physics, ecology, and other sciences. At best, this constitutes a redefining of the concept of “God” that is so drastic as to essentially arrive at a new concept entirely contradictory to the old.

Notwithstanding the endless variations on the concept of God that might proliferate around the fringes of religious thought, the exceedingly dominant conception of God in the West has been as a transcendent singularity, whether personal or impersonal. If Christianity and
Greece are the twin pillars of Western civilization, we have in both instances anthropocentric Gods, supernatural super-humans who are involved with our world, but are essentially of another world. Even philosophy, which has tended generally toward a more impersonal conception of god, has imagined a transcendent singularity—an unmoved mover, an impersonal watchmaker.

Jeffers’s conception of God is drastically different than even true pantheism in that he does not assert that God is in things, but rather that God is things. It is clear, I think, that his concept of God is so radically different, even oppositional, to dominant Western conceptions of God, that he likely adopts the term for rhetorical heft. In the preceding block quotation, he uses simile to qualify his use of divine imagery, writing that he thinks of the universe “as divine,” rather than asserting that it is divine (emphasis mine). Then in the next sentence, he transitions into simply naming this universe “God,” a clear move from explicitly figurative language to a straightforward substitution of the term “God” for what he has just acknowledged as metaphor.

Furthermore, as Everson shows, Jeffers often worked in the prophetic tradition, and he adopts rhetoric appropriate to that tradition (26-7). But he differs very clearly in his disavowal of supernatural license. An especially incisive example of this disavowal is “Inscription for a Gravestone,” a poem that explores a typically religious, supernatural topic: life after death. Absent is not only any mention of god, but any mention of supernatural or immaterial entities or processes. Death transforms the human into a variety of material forms: ash, gas, water. These mingle with the other material forms of the earth so that he becomes “part of the beauty” (SP 372). Even the transformation of death is expressed in exclusively material terms, an implicit denial of any existence outside of material existence. One might cite as counter-example the poem “The Bed by the Window” (SP 376), a poem where the speaker characterizes his forthcoming death as the day when “the patient daemon behind the screen of sea-rock and sky /
Thumps with his staff, and calls thrice: ‘Come, Jeffers’” (SP 376). But I don’t think anyone would claim this is expressive of a literal belief in a sea-demon; he personifies death like so many poets have before him. Likewise, his “God” is a metaphorical embodiment—a personification—of the “organic whole” he loved as if it were divine.

I don’t mean to give the impression that the matter is simple or obvious. Jeffers certainly writes with a freedom that leaves him open to divergent readings. There are examples that can be given that contradict the material, ecomystical reading on which I am insisting. For example, the poem “The Excesses of God” certainly implies a transcendent creator-God: “Is it not by his high superfluousness we know / Our God?” (SP 17). It is formulations like this—the personal possessive pronoun, the attribution of intention—that contradict the material reading I am attempting to build. Other poems—“A Little Scraping,” “Triad,” “Still the Mind Smiles,” to name a few—repeat this personal and definite formulation of God. But we err to take the poet at his work. Those three poems, for instance, all come from Give Your Heart to the Hawks, a volume whose eponymous narrative poem takes a Bible story (Cain and Abel) as its central conceit. The singular, personal God then works to convey thematic consistency to the text.

Given the definition of God and divinity in the blunt and plain-spoken prose pieces excerpted above—the organic, holistic universe—his use of the term God, even in the overtly singular and personal formulation, is likely a rhetorical move meant to convey the “religious feelings” of the ecomystical experience.

All mystical experiences entail the irony of being ineffable and yet being so remarkable that one is impelled to try to communicate it. While Jeffers did not mean to connote a singular, transcendent deity by using the word God, no other word so incisively captures the ineffable profundity and the awestruck reverence that Jeffers is trying to communicate. Though the term in
isolation may not convey his material, ecologically-based definition of divinity, it forcefully conveys the affective content of the experience of that divinity. This is a language people can understand, and despite his perceived misanthropy and his isolated life, he was indeed concerned with audience.

In “Poetry, Gongorism, and a Thousand Years,” he asserts that “poetry is not a monologue in a vacuum . . . it needs to have some sort of audience in mind” (SP 726). However, he is not referring to contemporary arbiters of taste or to a popular reading public: Jeffers explains that the author of great poetry “intends to be understood a thousand years from now” and so will choose “subjects that will remain valid” (SP 724). All the more important, then, for the poet to speak forcefully, directly, and plainly. Though we may live in an increasingly secular age, the concept of a God or Gods is a universal human cultural characteristic. It is as likely a thing to be understood in a thousand years as anything. Jeffers, therefore, seems hesitant to abandon the term/concept and chooses instead to modulate and redefine it. He does this by utilizing the “best science and epistemology available to him,” as Zaller claims; but he is not, as Zaller also claims, maintaining the association of God or divinity with a transcendent, immaterial reality. Rather, he utilizes scientific knowledge to maintain the profundity of the religious, mystical experience while reattributing the source from the supernatural to the natural. Jeffers is therefore building the foundations of an ecomysticism.

Ironically, it is precisely his ecomysticism that sometimes provokes claims of supernaturalism, dualism, or transcendentalism. Tim Hunt makes the case for an essential dualism in Jeffers in his contribution to the 1995 collection Robinson Jeffers: Dimensions of a Poet. He writes that Jeffers viewed nature as “more than matter and process,” as both “material and ideal” at the same time. He offers for support the poem “Continent’s End,” which takes the
form of a monologue addressed to the ocean and which contemplates the sources of life and matter together. Specifically, Hunt cites the phrase “the eye that watched” as evidence of the ideal component of Jeffers’s nature: “The tides are in our veins, we still mirror the stars, life is your child, but there is in me / Older and harder than life and more impartial, the eye that watched before there was an ocean” (SP 24). Hunt reads this as evidence of Jeffers’s dualism, as he sees nature as both material process and “transcendent awareness”: “[Jeffers] imagines nature as both an ultimate material process . . . and simultaneously as a unifying awareness—‘the eye that watched’—produced by this flux, bound to it, yet comprehending and transcending it” (66). Hunt’s reading, though, becomes increasingly problematic as we fully contextualize that phrase.

There are two thematic/formal aspects of the poem that should color our understanding of “the eye that watched.” First, this phrasing is anticipated by the homophonic precedent that opens the second stanza: “I [eye] gazing at the boundaries of granite and spray . . .” This establishes the theme of the embodied, gazing subject I/eye. Another iteration of this theme appears in the fifth stanza: “You were much younger when we crawled out of the womb and lay in the sun’s eye on the tideline.” In this context, with these two examples preceding the phrase “the eye that watched,” we can see that so far in the poem, Jeffers has used eye/I to refer to a very material, embodied awareness and not some disembodied, transcendent awareness. The last stanza drives home the point: “Before there was any water there were tides of fire, both our tones flow from the older fountain.” The “eye that watched” is indeed the same “sun’s eye” referenced earlier, for it is in the sun that we find the “tides of fire” that act as the furnace (or “fountain”) where the basic elements that form the universe—including both the ocean and the poem’s speaker—are forged. The “tides of fire” might also refer to the embryonic, molten Earth before it cooled and solidified, but the point remains: that which is “older” and more foundational than
life is still matter. It may be a more protean and unstable matter, or a mutable permutation of matter-energy such as characterizes the fusion furnace of a star. But either way it is natural, not transcendent. This materiality is reinforced by the speaker’s claim that the “eye that watched” is “harder than life”; this would be a curious claim to make about a transcendent awareness.

The second theme/concept that should color our reading of “the eye that watched” is the personification that is the primary mode of the poem. It is an address to the ocean, which he several times calls “mother.” Given this foray into personification, we should view his use of anthropomorphism conservatively. Yes, the “eye” is an image that can be construed as metonymy for human consciousness or, as per Hunt, consciousness more generally. But in the context of the surrounding personification, we should be hesitant to jump to such a conclusion. Of course it also seems implausible that Jeffers is being literal—so then what? We are led once again back to the sun as metaphorical eye, a material embodiment of process, energy, and creative force, the fountain from which everything from the ocean to Jeffers’s poetry flows. To be fair, Hunt himself equivocates here, as he writes that, for Jeffers, “Nature . . . is more than matter and process; it is the energy behind them and an awareness emerging from them” (66). I agree, but the consequence is materialism, not idealism; the consequence is monism, not dualism. The physics that Jeffers cites above in his description of his religious attitude was, in the first decades of the twentieth century, blurring the line between energy and matter, making it possible to maintain that the “energy” behind material processes was not fundamentally different or separate from matter—no need for an unmoved mover. Jeffers incorporated such emerging scientific understanding into his poetics and his philosophy. The more complex matter is this claim of a transcendent consciousness, an immaterial awareness that seems to transcend the material world even as it “emerges” from it. Though Hunt acknowledges that this consciousness
emerges from matter, he still imparts to Jeffers a dualist distinction between matter and mind. After all, how can something as seemingly incorporeal and intangible as mind or consciousness be material?

There have been, in fact, recent forays into accounting for a material consciousness. The previous chapter referenced David Abram’s etymological research into the Western languages’ linking of air, breath, and spirit or soul. Abram also illustrates this link through ethnography, recounting how many indigenous, oral cultures see consciousness as a phenomenon of the wider world in which humans take part. The Navajo, for instance, see the air as the medium of consciousness:

For the Navajo, then, the Air – particularly in its capacity to provide awareness, thought, and speech – has properties that European, alphabetic civilization has traditionally ascribed to an interior, individual human ‘mind’ or ‘psyche.’ Yet by attributing these powers to the Air, and by insisting that the ‘Winds within us’ are thoroughly continuous with the Wind at large – with the invisible medium in which we are immersed – the Navajo elders suggest that that which we call the ‘mind’ is not ours, is not a human possession. Rather, mind as Wind is a property of the encompassing world, in which humans – like all other beings – participate. One’s individual awareness, the sense of a relatively personal self or psyche, is simply that part of the enveloping Air that circulates within, through, and around one’s particular body; hence, one’s own intelligence is assumed, from the start, to be entirely participant with the swirling psyche of the land. (Spell 237)

This characterization of the Navajo theory of mind has clear echoes in Hunt’s description of Jeffers’s theory of an all-encompassing consciousness. But the significant difference is that
unlike Hunt’s contention of an essential immateriality, the Navajo maintain a material orientation. As Abram explains, they believe that mind is “not an immaterial power that resides inside us, but is rather the invisible yet thoroughly palpable medium in which we . . . are immersed” (Spell 237). So the claim that consciousness is a material phenomenon is not unprecedented. And yet this material consciousness is not so reductive as to be basically regarded as a just another neurological function. Additionally, you will recall Abram’s etymological evidence from the last chapter that traced a distinct trend in the languages of Western culture to equate the air with consciousness and the soul. For instance: our word “spirit,” with all of its incorporeal connotations, is derived from the Latin spiritus, meaning “breath” or “wind” (Spell 238). This is also the common root of respiration, a very material bodily process. These links between air, breath, and spirit/soul are true for the classic Mediterranean cultures as well as the Navajo, Lakota, and others. Abram’s conclusion is that “a great many terms that now refer to the air as a purely passive and insensate medium are clearly derived from words that once identified the air with life and awareness” (Spell 238). So while Hunt seems to assume that Jeffers must be a dualist given his assertion of a greater consciousness, Abram’s analysis shows how it is possible to resolve such a belief into a material monism.

Others, too, have contributed to the construction of a material concept of mind. Carl Von Essen, drawing on botany, microbiology, and evolutionary biology, speculates that what we call consciousness is just one form of an awareness that is inherent to all life (17-22). Consciousness is merely the most complex emergence of that awareness that all life shares: “[consciousness] may be the continuous evolution of a property found in all life, in different degrees, from the very beginning to the present” (22). Von Essen relates examples of such awareness in primitive
organisms such as cyanobacteria and slime mold (20). The emerging field of plant neurobiology is pushing our concept of awareness even further (19). These lines of inquiry suggest that the concept of a uniquely human mind may be misguided. Consciousness indeed may be a trait we share with many—or every—life form on the planet as an evolutionary adaptation inherent in the genetic code of life.

The inherence of consciousness in the material world is further elucidated by Theresa Brennan, whose works shows how our consciousness is profoundly affected and penetrated by the world around us—that consciousness is, in effect, a social or even environmental phenomenon. Arguing against the premise that the individual subject is cohesive and self-contained, Brennan theorizes that we are psychologically constructed by our surrounding environment. She posits that many of the things we associate with the self-contained and immaterial mind—emotions, feeling, affects, sentiments, and so forth—are instead both socially determined and “material, physiological things” (5-6). In an intriguing parallel to Abram’s analysis of consciousness’s connection to the atmosphere, Brennan emphasizes the role of the sense of smell in the transmission of affect from one person to another: it is our “unconscious olfaction” that registers the pheromones with which we transmit mood and affect, and even evoke thoughts in each another (9). Pheromones, when picked up by another member of the same species, cause a hormone to be secreted into the blood, thereby altering behavior or mood (69). This entrainment of the nervous system suggests that our concept of an immaterial, discrete human consciousness is misleading. Brennan’s analysis shows the possibilities of a material and radically open, interconnected, and material consciousness.

Though Brennan’s work is concerned strictly with inter-human transmission of affect, there is evidence for inter-species transmission as well. As mentioned in the Introduction, there
are chemicals called kairomones, synomones, and allomones that organisms use to affect species other than the species of origin. Some are even sold commercially for use in the behavior modification of domesticated animals. As part of a larger group of chemicals that facilitate interspecies olfactory communication known as allelochemicals, the cumulative effect is that what we typically think of as a self-contained subject is in fact a communally-determined, material phenomenon. A similarly deep level of environmental interpenetration is being hinted at lyrically by Abram when he writes that “There’s an affinity between my body and the sensible presences that surround me . . . Its steady influence upon my life lies far below my conscious awareness” (Becoming 29). Von Essen, Abram, and Brennan, and other iterations of contemporary materialist philosophy suggest the basis for a material consciousness, which in turn allows for a material reading of consciousness in Jeffers’s verse—a very corporeal “eye that watches.”

JEFFERS’S ECOMYSTICAL BIOREGIONALISM

Since ecomysticism is material mysticism, it then follows that place should figure prominently in the work of the ecomystic. This is why ecomysticism and bioregionalism so often go hand in hand. We saw this in the first chapter, where Austin, Crane, and Jewett depicted varying degrees of ecomystical experiences that functioned to facilitate the affective relationship between human subject and place. This dynamic reaches radical new levels in the work of Jeffers, both in intensity and in detail.

Jeffers has from the start been recognized as a regional poet, a poet associated with place. That place was the coastal range near Carmel, California, the place where he lived for most of his adult life and the setting for nearly all of his mature work. But traditional literary regionalism
is typically human-centered, concerned mainly with the cultural curiosities of the human residents of a particular geopolitical region. With the rise of the concept of bioregionalism in the past few decades, it has become clear that Jeffers is more properly a bioregional writer. The difference is one of orientation: whereas regionalism tends toward the anthropocentric, bioregionalism is biocentric.

Tom Lynch, in his book *Xerophilia*, notes that typical notions of literary regionalism center on human political definitions. He points out that common regional designations—the West, the South, New England, and so forth—are fundamentally flawed, since they lack “internally inherent meaning” (22). These terms merely define a region in geographic relation to another region, usually a distant, urban seat of political power. Bioregionalism, on the other hand, takes its cues from ecosystems, using landscape features and the non-human beings that live there as basic organizing principles. The editors of the collection *The Bioregional Imagination* define bioregionalism thus:

> By foregrounding natural factors as a way to envision place, bioregionalism proposes that human identity may be constituted by our residence in a larger community of natural beings—our local bioregion—rather than, or at least supplementary to, national, state, ethnic, or other more common bases of identity. (4).

This definition implicates Robinson Jeffers with its focus on expanding human identity beyond the individual ego and beyond anthropocentrism to the larger material world in which we are situated. The primary way in which Jeffers cultivated this bioregional ethic was via the ecomystical experience.
In the Introduction, we saw that one fundamental component of bioregionalism is the change in consciousness, the reorientation of perspective needed to produce a culture rooted in bioregions. This is the “consciousness-raising practice” that Ralph Metzner has identified as an important part of the bioregional project. I proposed that ecomysticism is one way in which this change in consciousness can be effected, primarily since ecomysticism involves an affective element. Bioregional writing, however, has done little to theorize the basis for this emotional affiliation with place. Annie Booth, in her article “Ways of Knowing,” has reviewed the epistemologies common to various forms of ecological thought, including bioregionalism. She has found that bioregionalism has tended to eschew abstract, theoretical knowledge, focusing instead on pragmatic, real-world application such as political action and environmental education. Other scholars agree: Tom Lynch, Karla Armbruster, and Cheryll Glotfelty, in their above-mentioned collection *The Bioregional Imagination*, identify the persistent under-theorization of bioregionalism as one impetus behind their decision to produce the collection (11). The concept of ecomysticism helps to address this deficiency by providing some insight into epistemological basis of the bioregional ethos. This under-theorization has left many unanswered or unsatisfactorily answered questions, the most important of which is this: how does an American overcome the cultural baggage of a Western tradition that esteems the human above all else, and values the immaterial, rational human mind or soul over the nonrational and the material? One way, and for Jeffers the primary way, was the ecomystical experience. First, I’ll briefly explore the qualities of his bioregionalism; then, I will demonstrate how ecomysticism helps to explain the source of this bioregional affiliation.

His early lyric “The Cycle” elucidates the depth of his bioregional orientation. Jeffers explores the differences between his sense of place and the expansionist, itinerant American
culture of which he is a part, in the process articulating an early bioregional ethic opposed to industrial, imperial civilization. The poem describes the changes to his coastal ecosystem from a time before humans arrived to the present in terms of biological life being replaced by technology: the pelicans, gulls, and sea lions that graced the shore are replaced at first by sailing ships, then by steam-powered ships, and finally by sea-planes. This technological progression marks the arrival and ascendency of Western civilization. He traces the movement of this civilization across the globe:

our Pacific have pastured

The Mediterranean torch and passed it west across the fountains of the morning;

And the following desolation that feeds on Crete

Feed here (10-13)

In the future, perhaps “our blood’s unrest” will lead across to Asia and even back to Europe again, or into the colonization of space. But this non-place-based civilization is not his. Jeffers distinguishes himself by avowing his deep connection to the non-human things of his particular bioregion. He identifies human technology as transient and ephemeral, and instead recognizes the relative permanence of the natural elements of the landscape: the gulls, the cormorants, the granite sea-cliffs, and indeed humans too, as long as they are humans who live in place and in communion with the non-human things of that place. His poem ends with speculation on what a traveler in the far future might find upon venturing to his lonely spot on the coast:

what moody traveler

Wanders back here, watches the sea-fowl circle

The old sea-granite and cemented granite with one regard, and greets my ghost,

One temper with the granite, bulking about here? (17-20)
He is speculating on the value of living in place, on permanence versus impermanence. His futuristic traveler will not find sea-planes but sea fowl. He will not find subdivisions or modular housing, but Jeffers’s house, Tor House, which he built of granite that he quarried on his land, a house that is quite literally, materially part of the place in which it is located. Jeffers forces our attention to this fact, pointing out that the granite sea cliffs and the “cemented granite” of his house are taken together by the gulls “in one regard” as part of the same landscape. Significantly, humans are not excluded, but implicated in this bioregional ethos. As a human who has lived in concord with the natural components of his particular ecosystem, Jeffers achieves a belonging and an identity. He is “one temper with the granite”; he inheres in the land. His “ghost” is not an immaterial spirit but a material vestige of his presence.

Similarly, the poem “Tor House” refers to his house only in one short phrase, again instructing a visitor in the far future to “Look for foundations of sea-worn granite . . . you will find some remnant” (SP 181). But for that, the rest of the poem is about the granite itself, the more essential and permanent matter of which he built his house. You might still find the granite foundation of Tor House, he claims, “after a handful of lifetimes.” But after ten thousand years, only the essential realities of river, cliff, and bay will remain. And like “The Cycle,” he brings it back to his own ghost at the close. His ghost will still remain, significantly, after the house is gone. It will be found “deep in the granite,” inhering in the most essential of ingredients even after the last vestiges of his human craft have gone. This enacts a claim of brotherhood with the basic material components of the universe over and above his fidelity to human or even living things. After the trees he planted are gone, and after his house is gone, he will remain deep in the non-human, non-living materials of the earth, since they share a fundamental nature. This
fundamental nature, as explored in “Continent’s End,” is the common matter-energy of all extant things, the material monism that unites the universe.

These poems touch on an important aspect of Jeffers’ bioregional thought: his concept of permanence. Permanence to Jeffers is noble, since permanence is a sign that something is essential, and what is essential is noble. In “Point Joe,” the speaker observes a Chinese man gathering seaweed from the shore. The act draws the following observation from the speaker:

Permanent things are what is needful in a poem, things temporally
Of great dimension, things continually renewed or always present.
Grass that is made each year equals the mountains in her past and future;
Fashionable and momentary things we need not see nor speak of.
Man gleaning food between the solemn presences of land and ocean,
On shores where better men have shipwrecked, under fog and among flowers,
Equals the mountains in his past and future (11-17)

Jeffers suggests that a human culture disconnected from the non-human world is beneath notice, since such a culture is essentially transient, ephemeral, what he disdainfully labels mere fashion. Gathering food from the land is not only the most basic and essential of human activities; it is also an activity common to all past and future human cultures as well as to all non-human life forms. In this way it is permanent, essential, and hence noble.

In a compelling enactment of the bioregional ethos, Jeffers takes his notion of the importance of “permanence” directly from the land where he lived. Reflecting on his first coming to the Monterey coast mountains, he writes,

. . . for the first time in my life I could see people living—amid magnificent unspoiled scenery—essentially as they did in the Idyls or the Sagas, or in Homer’s
Ithaca. Here was life purged of its ephemeral accretions. Men were riding after cattle, or plowing the headland, hovered by white sea-gulls, as they have done for thousands of years, and will for thousands of years to come. Here was contemporary life that was also permanent life . . . unencumbered by the mass of poetically irrelevant details and complexities that make a civilization. (715)

Achieving this nobility requires living in place, since it requires intimate knowledge of and interaction with the local ecosystem in which one lives. It requires, essentially, a bioregional culture. Human culture disconnected from the non-human world, as Jeffers increasingly sensed Western culture to be, is ephemeral and ignoble. Since Jeffers’s bioregional ethos appropriately comes directly from the land he inhabits, his point of comparison is the relatively immutable natural forms and processes that, by comparison, make human-centered culture seem evanescent and hollow.

But how did Jeffers, more than anyone else writing in America in the first half of the twentieth century, come to such a fiercely biocentric form of bioregionalism, one that caused him to stridently denounce the culture in which he was raised and educated? Simple knowledge of and interaction with one’s bioregion is not enough to generate such a radical affiliation as that espoused by Jeffers. Simple awareness of the geography and non-human inhabitants of a place is not a sufficient basis for the identification with and love of place upon which bioregionalism is premised. It is the ecomystical experience that provides the impetus for such profound affective relationships between subject and place. The mystical experience is an affective experience and, in its most extreme forms, a unitive experience. These are common characteristics of all types of mystical experiences: they produce feelings of love and awe and a sense of union. The ecomystical experience, brought on by the material forms in which the subject is immersed,
produces the same feelings but focused outwards on place. The ecomystic feels love of place, awe in the face of the power and complexity of the natural forces at play there, and an expansion of identity to include that place. This is how ecomysticism helps to answer the question I posed earlier: how does an American overcome the cultural baggage of a Western tradition that esteems the human above all else, and values the immaterial, rational human mind or soul over the nonrational and the material? Ecomysticism inclines toward a radical materialism that levels the field between human and non-human, opening the subject to the essential interdependence and affiliation of all material forms.

David Abram’s experience with ethnological field work offers helpful insight into the precursors of this idea that ecomysticism is an important catalyst to the human integration into place. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram investigates the role of altered states of consciousness in understanding and communicating with non-human entities. Based upon his experience with the shamans and holy men of various indigenous cultures, Abram asserts that the shaman’s craft is essentially ecological and natural: they act as intermediaries between their human communities and the greater biotic community of which they are part. He attributes our preconceptions that shamans commune with spirits to the prejudices of Western anthropologists and the “modern, civilized assumption that the natural world is largely determinate and mechanical, and that that which is regarded as mysterious, powerful, and beyond human ken must therefore be of some other, nonphysical realm above nature, ‘supernatural.’” On the contrary, Abram claims that those “mysterious” powers with which the shaman communicates are “none other than what we view as nature itself” (*Spell* 8).

They achieve this communication by means of mystical experiences. It is their ability to transport themselves out of the normal waking state of consciousness that allows them to “make
contact with the other organic forms of sensitivity and awareness with which human existence is entwined” (Spell 9). This state allows them to experience an existence not bounded by everyday perceptual boundaries, boundaries bolstered by culture and language. The non-human world does not have human culture or language, and so any form of genuine communication with non-human entities must take place outside of these human constructs:

It is this, we might say, that defines a shaman: the ability to readily slip out of the perceptual boundaries that demarcate his or her particular culture—boundaries reinforced by social customs, taboos, and most importantly, the common speech or language—in order to make contact with, and learn from, the other powers in the land. (Spell 9)

Mystical states allow this: they are ineffable, beyond language; they are unitive, allowing one to feel connections and ultimately unity where our rational, scientific culture would typically have us see distinct individual elements; and mystical states are as much states of feeling as states of knowledge (James 329), which means there is an affective element to this mode of knowing. This affective content, in particular, suggests ecomysticism can be one basis of the expansion of identity that is fundamental to bioregionalism. Like other mystical experiences, the insight or knowledge apprehended by the subject is indivisible from the emotional, affective component with which it is consubstantial. But whereas an introvertive mystic might associate such affective content with the personal experience of pure love or divine love, the ecomystic directs his love outwards and identifies with the more-than-human world.

Jeffers’s ecomysticism functions in ways which are remarkably congruent with Abram’s characterization of shamanism. Indeed, if Jeffers is a prophetic poet, he is an ecological prophet, a shaman whose poetry relates to readers the lessons he has learned from communing with his
non-human neighbors. He functions as an intermediary between his readers and the larger biosphere. For instance, in a 1929 exchange with Rudolph Gilbert as to what Jeffers means by the phrase “breaking out of humanity,” Jeffers offers this two-part answer:

I may suggest several things that were meant by the one saying.

(1) We have learned within the past century or so that humanity is only a temporary and infinitesimal phenomenon in a large universe. The knowledge involves a readjustment of values that can only be managed by looking at humanity objectively, from the outside.

(2) The phrase refers also to those moments of visionary enlightenment that I should hate to call “cosmic consciousness” because so much foolishness has been written about them under that name. (*Selected Letters* 159-60)

The first part references the role scientific knowledge plays in his exhortation, while the second asserts the role that mystical states have played in his thinking on the consequences of that scientific knowledge. Ecology shows that anthropocentrism must be transcended, and mysticism shows how such transcendence is possible. Like the shaman, Jeffers uses the ecomystical experience to break out of his conditioned, anthropocentric mind and experience biocentric consciousness.

Much of his poetry reflects eomysticism’s potential for overcoming the limits of the anthropocentrism inherent to the dominant forms of Western culture. In his poem “Sign-Post,” he traces the changing perspective of one who is able to break free in this way. The poem, as the title suggests, functions as a guide for the “civilized” who is yearning to “be human again” (1):

Turn outward, love things, not men, turn right away from humanity,

Let that doll lie. Consider if you like how the lilies grow,
Lean on the silent rock until you feel its divinity
Make your veins cold, look at the silent stars, let your eyes
Climb the great ladder out of the pit of yourself and man.
Things are so beautiful, your love will follow your eyes;
Things are the God, you will love God, and not in vain,
For what we love, we grow to it, we share its nature. At length
You will look back along the stars’ rays and see that even
The poor doll humanity has a place under heaven.

The movement of the poem traces the movement of consciousness from human-centered to non-human-centered, from the mundane ego to the expansive consciousness of the mystic. This “consciousness-raising,” to echo an earlier phrase, is sparked by contemplation of and contact with non-human things: lilies, rocks, and stars. This experience does not result in a crass misanthropy, of which so many have accused Jeffers—it results in love, but not in love of humanity alone. It results in love of all things, in love of the human as one thing among the ten-thousand things. This is really the essence of bioregionalism: to see the human as citizen of the ecosystem, not as a thing apart. For Jeffers, the ecomystical experience was the way in which he was able to achieve this perspective. To love and identify with the whole—that is the central ecomystical experience, and that is the central bioregional requirement.
CHAPTER 3: EDWARD ABBEY—A HARD AND BRUTAL ECOMYSTIC

Robinson Jeffers was the first American author to base an entire poetic identity on ecomysticism, in contrast to the sometimes timorous experimentation that marked the texts in the first chapter. Whereas Jeffers’s poetry tends to explore the moral and philosophical consequences of his ecomystical experiences, Edward Abbey’s ecomysticism functions primarily as the motivation of his politics. Jeffers sometimes took up the subject of politics, too, but it was either to condemn the whole system or to announce his withdrawal from it rather than to advocate for a particular policy or position. Abbey, on the other hand, is motivated by the affective content of his ecomystical experience to advocate for the protection of those places that have touched him so. Abbey’s writing often juxtaposes two contrasting modes: lyrical, observational nature writing and bellicose polemic. Ecomysticism inspires them both.

In a journal entry dated August 18th, 1988, Abbey complains about the treatment of his work in the New York Review of Books: “like most other book reviewers I’ve had to endure now for the past twenty years, [reviewer Bill McKibben] seizes on one narrow aspect of my writing (the desert-loving, deep-ecology bit), and ignores the other ninety percent, thus misrepresenting my books and falsifying my life” (Confessions 349-50). With apologies to Ed, I aim to do the same exact thing in this chapter. I’ll take his word for it that such emphasis falsifies his life, but there is no denying that the “desert-loving, deep-ecology bit” is the heart of his work, the motivation that propels all the brash political tirades and belligerent critiques of mainstream American life, culture, and values. It all flows from his love of place, his love of the non-human world of the American Southwest, and the ecomystical experience is an important source of that love.
Scholars have provided accounts of some other sources of Abbey’s profound love of the natural world; but in keeping with the postmodern focus on cultural construction, they have tended to single out cultural sources. For instance, Diane Wakoski links him with Jeffers. She argues that Jeffers’s Inhumanism underlies Abbey’s writing, as that philosophical orientation “makes him love the desert above all things and fuels his equal desire to be in the wilderness” (30). Wakoski traces the love of place and infatuation with the non-human that infuses Abbey’s writing to another man’s writing, thereby maintaining the dematerializing network of a cultural history that accounts for culture in light of other forms of culture. While there is no doubt Jeffers was a significant influence on Abbey (I will refer to this myself), there is a danger in omitting discussion of the subject of almost all of his writing, of the self-proclaimed influence and centerpiece of nearly all of his literary output: the natural world. Ecomysticism will assert the agency of the material world, thereby directing our focus to the fact that, cultural influences aside, the non-human world has played a significant role in calling forth the writing for which he is now famous. To a degree, this might seem obvious. But it is also underappreciated and not so simple as it seems.

A HARD AND BRUTAL (ECO)MYSTICISM

Somewhat like we find in Jeffers’s poetry, Abbey’s writing evinces a constant tension between moments of profound love and awe and steadfast realism and materialism. So, much like the last chapter, we must begin by attempting to resolve the apparent contradiction at the heart of this tension, which stems from a struggle to account for such profundity in the face of unrelenting materialism. Abbey represents perhaps more than any other author the hard-case materialist for whom ecomysticism can do the most good. Abbey admits to rather mystical
moments, and yet he also rails against mystics as egotistical immaterialists. Ecomysticism can help to resolve Abbey’s dichotomous inclinations by integrating his materialism with his apparent mysticism. Ecomysticism can also help us understand the source of his ethics, his rage, and his activism. But he denied that he was a naturalist, and he often expressed his disdain for mysticism. How then can he be an ecomystic? That is the question this chapter will attempt to answer.

Abbey’s treatment by literary scholars has been generally unkind: at best, he is pondered for his inconsistencies and contradictions; at worst, he is dismissed as a politically retrograde crank. Paul Lindholdt believes that Abbey’s treatment by academics is dominated by a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” since repudiation seems to be the dominant mode of criticism (107). Most scholars, whether inclined to admiration or dismissal, seem to agree that his writing is full of gaps, inconsistencies, and conflicting statements and points of view. Even scholars apt to sympathize with Abbey’s wilderness ethos attest to this. David Pozza, in his monograph Bedrock and Paradox, writes that Abbey “willfully places himself in the midst of contradiction, seeking a balance somewhere between paradox and docile agreement” (9). Peter Quigley, in his introduction to the collection of Abbey scholarship Coyote in the Maze, points out the common refrain of “ambiguity and contradiction” in the scholarship, a theme he calls “the quality of being in-between” (8). Abbey often infused such ambiguity and conflict into his writing, openly wondering how to communicate the profound experience of the natural world without resorting to idealism, anthropocentrism, or spiritualism. It is easy to understand his reservations about mysticism given the connection to immaterialism that often marks its reception. As we saw with the persistent claims of idealism and supernaturalism that dog Jeffers, mention of nonrational affective states can lead to such interpretations, no matter how much one might protest.
Even if we disregard the common equation of mysticism with the immaterial, we are left with the fact that Abbey himself was bluntly critical of mysticism. But an examination of his use of the term reveals that for him, mysticism connotes the immaterial, the ideal, and the supernatural. In a brief journal entry from September 20th, 1975, he writes: “A day so heart-rendingly beautiful . . . that it breaks your heart to think that someday this will all go on without you—or what is worse, that you (as the mystics say) might have to go on without this sweet desert earth” (Confessions 244). Here, the word “mysticism” is used in an off-hand way to denote belief in the after-life and, implicitly, in the human soul or some other such incorporeal human element. An entry from a few years later reveals a similar association: “Mysticism is a relaxation of the mind. ‘God’ is a substitute for thought. The supernatural is a failure of the human imagination and an insult to the majesty of the real” (Confessions 266-7). This time, mysticism not only connotes supernaturalism generally, but theism as well. And for Abbey the avowed atheist—in a 1959 letter he declared, “I’m an atheist. Tho’ earthiest might be a better term” (Dispatches 11)—this connotation is a deeply negative one. In a letter to Annie Dillard from 1983, he writes that he tried to “invoke a sense of wonder and magic in the reader without invoking the mystical, the supernatural or the transcendent” (Dispatches 143). Again he associates mysticism with supernaturalism and claims that it is exactly what he tried to avoid in his own writing. In his correspondence with ecophilosopher and Deep Ecologist George Sessions, Abbey reiterates his mistrust of mysticism, calling it “too easy a way out.” He accuses the mystics of naïveté in “identifying their personal inner visions with universal reality” (Dispatches 95). With this in mind, he condemns Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism along with Christianity and Islam for their tendency “to divorce men and women from the earth . . . by their mystical emphasis upon the general, the abstract, the invisible, and by their psychological
tendency, in prayer and meditation, to turn the mind inward” (*Dispatches* 93). He disbelieves many adherents’ claims to self-transcendence; Abbey instead charges them with self-delusion and vanity.

This link between mysticism (as Abbey defined it), idealism, and narcissism reaches its apotheosis in the antagonist of his 1980 novel *Good News*. The villain, a military autocrat known as The Chief, is a caricature of idealistic progressivism, a spiritualist who believes the earth is a prison for humans as the body is a prison for the soul. He longs to build a monolithic military-industrial state that marshals all resources toward the goal of transcendence of the earth as well as our physical natures. The Chief links the desire to transcend the Earth (in interstellar travel and conquest) to the desire to transcend the body and become wholly spiritual:

> [Interstellar travel and conquest] are gross, material aims. Beyond the material lies the spiritual. We shall conquer death—*Death, thou shalt die!*—and attain divinity, become pure spirit, pure consciousness, bodiless but omnipotent, beyond space, beyond time. (187)

For Abbey, as this characterization makes clear, the mystic’s desire to transcend the self is really “a most enormous vanity,” a foolish ambition that disdains and diminishes our very real, very corporeal existence (*Dispatches* 93). He sees mysticism as symptomatic of the most destructive tendencies of humankind: narcissism, monomania, idealism/spiritualism, and utopianism, a perfect amalgam of Abbey’s critiques of twentieth-century civilization.

While the above examples display a consistent skepticism of mysticism, Abbey’s steadfast distrust of the ideal (“the general, the abstract, the invisible”) is the complimentary component of his equally steadfast faith in the material. Abbey self-identified as an “earthiest” and a “naïve realist” (*Dispatches* 78), terms that I take to connote a plain and simple materialism.
I say “plain and simple” because despite his advanced degree and life-long interest in philosophy, Ed Abbey was not a philosopher; he left us with no systematic epistemology that would amount to an ample philosophical materialism. Edward Twining characterizes Abbey as “one who obdurately insisted on the unavoidable primary importance of the material world that manifests itself to our (unignorable) senses” (20). He was essentially a child of the Enlightenment, “a rationalist and, in a fundamental sense, a materialist” (21). Abbey claimed he “was not a thinker but—a toucher. A feeler” (Down the River 57). And so Twining’s point is hard to argue.  

In his correspondence with Sessions, Abbey announces his skepticism of Spinoza’s theory of “God or Nature” because he sees a system of thought that bears little evidence that it resulted from “living engagement with persons, places, things, events, all the infinite variety and particularity of the world we actually know.” But then, realizing he has just stepped into a philosophical minefield by claiming we can actually know the physical world, he begs off the debate in typical gruff, droll Abbey fashion: “epistemologically speaking, I consider myself a naïve realist, and to hell with it. When I hear the word ‘phenomenology,’ I reach for my revolver” (78).

And yet. While he might indeed succeed in forgoing supernaturalism in his writing, he does often wax mystical. This is contradictory by Abbey’s definition of mysticism; but if we read this mysticism as ecomysticism, his mystical passages become more coherent and consistent with his frequent claims to a steadfast materialism.

Abbey’s most celebrated work, Desert Solitaire, reveals the full depth of his debt to mysticism. He describes his subjective experience of the desert in terms that typically identify an

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14 I would quibble with the label of “rationalist.” Abbey himself claimed he was a “feeler,” and his prose does not often feature logical argumentation as its primary mode.
experience as mystical: unity, mystery, ineffability, etc. Upon first seeing the landscape where he was to live for a few summers, he describes it as a “monstrous and inhuman spectacle”—not a description apt to inspire love and devotion. But that is exactly the effect, as he immediately relates: “I feel a ridiculous greed and possessiveness come over me. I want to know it all, possess it all, embrace the entire scene intimately, deeply, totally, as a man desires a beautiful woman” (5). There is a paradoxical tension between his impression of the scene and the desire it inspires, a paradox rather typical of mystical experiences. Rudolf Otto identifies this as the tension between “the daunting and the fascinating . . . a strange harmony of contrasts” (31). Otto demarcates several component characteristics of the mysterium tremendum that clearly resonate with Abbey’s first encounter with Arches. His three elements of the adjective tremendum are germane: awfulness, majestas, and energy. Awfulness denotes numinous dread or awe (15), and majestas denotes might or power (19). These two characteristics are signaled by “inhuman” and “monstrous” in Abbey’s parlance.

Energy is a bit more complicated, but perhaps also more important to our present concern with Abbey’s first impression of the desert and the sexualized, feminine metaphor he employs. Otto uses the term Energy to refer to the energy of the mysterium tremendum, not of the one who perceives it. This energy is symbolically expressed as vitality, passion, emotional temper, and so forth (23). But Otto does posit a “kinship” to this energy in the subject, who himself becomes possessed by the energy of the mysterium tremendum (24). Further, Otto identifies Energy as the characteristic that leads to ideas of a personal, anthropomorphic god, since this energy is often expressed in terms “borrowed from the sphere of human cognitive and affective life” (23). Herein lies the root of Abbey’s passionate anthropomorphism, his desire to know and possess the land, to love it like a woman. The Energy radiated by the material mystery—the inhuman
desert—encourages anthropomorphism and desire, which unsurprisingly leads a heterosexual man to employ sexualized feminine metaphors. Here, attention to ecomysticism presents us with this alternative to the predictable interpretation of Abbey’s metaphor as a symbol of the patriarchal imperiousness that is often claimed to mark the white male experience of nature.

Abbey’s experience and the language he uses to communicate that experience are further elucidated by Otto’s analysis of the *mysterium*, specifically the characteristic of “fascination.”

[It] may appear to the mind an object of horror and dread, but at the same time it is no less something that allures with a potent charm, and the creature, who trembles before it, utterly cowed and cast down, has always at the same time the impulse to turn to it, nay even to make it somehow his own. The ‘mystery’ is for him not merely something to be wondered at but something that entrances him; and beside that in it which bewilders and confounds, he feels a something that captivates and transports him with a strange ravishment . . . (31).

There is great congruence between Otto’s description of the attraction of the *mysterium* and Abbey’s first impression of the desert: the scene is somehow intimidating and revolting, the “wholly other”; and yet it invokes passion and desire, and is inexpressibly attractive. Otto’s language clearly parallels the language of sexual attraction: ravishment, allure, charm, entrances, etc. But of course Otto attributes this reaction to the contemplation of the *mysterium tremendum*, that which is beyond all things, that which inspires all religion and ideas of god. Abbey attributes it to the contemplation of the landscape. The theistic, the supernatural, and the immaterial are supplanted by the atheistic, the natural, and the material. But it is no less mystical for that materialism. It is ecomysticism.
The theme of a material mysticism recurs many times throughout Desert Solitaire, and this theme often seems at odds with Abbey’s avowed “naïve realism.” In the “Author’s Introduction,” he writes

It will be objected that the book deals too much with mere appearances, with the surface of things, and fails to engage and reveal the patterns of unifying relationships which form the true underlying reality of existence. Here I must confess that I know nothing whatever about true underlying reality, having never met any . . . For my own part I am pleased enough with surfaces—in fact they alone seem to me to be of much importance. (xiii)

This would seem to be a direct and explicit denial of mysticism, since mysticism would typically claim to engage with “the true underlying reality of existence.” But then how to explain the myriad examples of mysticism in Desert Solitaire and elsewhere in his oeuvre? Abbey himself suggests the resolution of this paradox: he longs for “a hard and brutal mysticism,” a terminology suggestive of ecomysticism: hard, as in material, real; brutal, as in clear-eyed, accepting, naturalistic (6). His hard and brutal mysticism is ecomysticism.

The concept of unity is one way in which we can examine the duality of materialism and mysticism in Abbey’s writing and the ways in which ecomysticism can resolve such duality. A feeling of union is one hallmark of mysticism. As discussed in previous chapters, this union is often interpreted as a union with the godhead—whatever divinity or pantheon marks the religious/cultural tradition within which the mystic is situated. More abstract, philosophical notions of mysticism, such as that found in the neo-platonic philosophy of Plotinus, often refer to union with some non-personal entity. Plotinus refers to this as The One, the irreducible source of all things about which nothing can be said without diminishing it. The notable thing is that
whatever the object of union, it is not a physical, perceptible thing. Whether the mystical tradition is more theistic or more philosophical/abstract, the thing at the center—the thing to be united with—is a mystery only graspable in the throes of mystical transport. It is the *mysterium tremendum*, regardless of the cultural paradigm through which it is explained afterward. In a letter to George Sessions from August 30th, 1979, Abbey attacks notions of “Union with God, union with the All-Source, union with The One.” Instead of the dissolution of the ego and transcendence of self, Abbey sees in such notions “self-love, self-importance, self-obsession.” Because these traditions typically achieve such union through meditation, prayer, and similar exercises, Abbey is immediately skeptical. Anything that seeks to deny or transcend the senses, any practice that seeks answers in one’s own mind rather than the material world is, for Abbey, narcissistic and untrustworthy (*Dispatches* 93). In his critique of such turned-inwardness, it is hard not to detect a note of Jeffers’s influence—specifically, the latter’s insistence that personal salvation lies in one’s capacity to turn outward to the “inhuman” world.

It is Abbey’s dedication to turning outward—to the material world, the world of the senses—that prompts his critique of mysticism. But it is the introvertive form of mysticism he rejects; alternately, he manifests a form of ecomysticism in his writing. The unity we find in Abbey is not the transcendental merging of human soul with the immaterial source of all being, but a material union based on ecological principles yet still attended by the awesome emotional experience common to all mystics. In *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey frequently compares the emotional and psychological effects of his city-bound life to his sudden solitary desert experience. One common theme of these ruminations is compression versus expansion, or reduction versus enlargement. While living in the trailer that is his temporary home in Arches, he builds a simple “terrace” outdoors (table, fire pit, etc.) so he has an outdoor space for himself. Inside the trailer,
he is “surrounded by the artifice of America” and feels lonely. But outside, his loneliness is dissipated as he is “invited to contemplate a far larger world, one which extends into a past and into a future without any limits known to the human kind” (97). He goes barefoot in order to make physical contact with “that larger world—an exhilarating feeling which leads to equanimity” (97).

Though this scene is perhaps short of the ecstatic pitch of a true mystical experience, we see the beginnings of ecomysticism here. By simple physical exposure to the desert landscape, his mind expands as his world expands. Consciousness and landscape mirror each other, to a degree, in a dynamic materialism. The country-city dichotomy Abbey is drawing here is reminiscent of the dichotomy we saw in Crane, where the pernicious influence of the city contrasted with the ecomysticism induced by the country. The dynamics of this dichotomy make more sense if we recall Colin Wilson’s ecological explanation of the mystical state. Wilson emphasized that “consciousness is by nature relational; it has a web-like structure,” and we apprehend meaning in proportion to the connections in our web. He defines mystical states of consciousness as moments when we have a “bird’s-eye” view that allows us to see more connections, to expand the web of our consciousness to encompass more—hence things appear more meaningful (59-60). In Abbey as in Crane, the city constricts while the country expands. Even the desert that Abbey beheld, a place often construed as harsh and empty, is orders of magnitude more complex that any cityscape. In a city, the environment is largely static, dead, and species poor. In the wilderness, the environment is dynamic, alive, and biologically rich and complex. The expansive desert invites contemplation of the unknown complexities of this vast, strange ecosystem, and his mind therefore strains to encompass more—hence things appear more meaningful. Abbey’s language approaches the colloquial equivalent of Otto’s esoteric Latin
**mysterium tremendum.** The experience is exhilarating—the peak experience—followed by peace and calm.

One particular scene on this terrace relates a prototypical ecomystical experience. As Abbey’s mind turns outward to the larger, more-than-human world, he begins to apprehend the unity of the diverse material universe—the diversity-in-unity in Stace’s formulation of extrovertive mysticism. Abbey watches dusk approach on this terrace, and the strange, obscure light of twilight modulates the mundane vision and further pushes the experience into the realm of the mystical—and finally to union:

> In the mixture of starlight and cloud-reflected sunlight in which the desert world is now illuminated, each single object stands forth in preternatural though transient brilliance, a final assertion of existence before the coming of night: each rock and shrub and tree, each flower, each stem of grass, diverse and separate, vividly isolate, yet joined each to every other in a unity which generously includes me and my solitude as well. (99)

The experience is clearly mystical: his surroundings seem “preternatural” in the sudden brilliance of twilight, and he experiences union. And yet the experience is clearly ecomystical: his experience is based on an encounter with other material forms of existence, and he finds not only union but individualism as well, the paradox of unity in diversity, as each individual organism is isolate and yet joined. The experience involves an ecological vision: he clearly sees the divide between individual organisms as simple physical fact, and yet he clearly apprehends the vast and deep interconnectedness that ecology and other sciences are continually pushing to new and remarkable depths.\(^{15}\) It is akin to Bennett’s “heterogeneous monism of vibrant bodies” that she

\(^{15}\) This insight—the existence of “opposite tendencies” that cause life forms to function both as individuals and as parts of a larger whole—is foundational for systems theory.
proposes as the new paradigm of materialism (121). Likewise, Abbey simultaneously recognizes both the heterogeneity and the monism of the material world. This realization reveals the radical holism of which he is a part in ecomystical union.

THE ECOMYSTICAL BASIS FOR LUDDISM AND BIOREGIONALISM

Anyone who is even slightly familiar with Abbey associates him with the desert Southwest. He was famously dubbed the “Thoreau of the American West” by Larry McMurtry. But his biography reveals a rather itinerant man. After growing up in Pennsylvania, his life was lived largely on the move. He attended college in Pennsylvania as well as in New Mexico and Scotland. His choice of employment, working mainly seasonal and temporary government jobs, required frequent moves around the country. Abbey’s unsettled family life, including five marriages, entailed further roving to be with wives and children scattered here and there. In short, can we really call such a nomad an advocate for the sanctity of place? Can we call Abbey a bioregionalist?

Some would argue that we cannot. Tom Lynch’s *Xerophilia*, a monograph about bioregional literature from the American Southwest, shows ambivalence about Abbey’s status as a bioregional writer. Lynch claims that a book such as *Desert Solitaire* does not qualify, since its audience is urbanites back east (28). The works Lynch considers true bioregional texts are mostly ones that are “published by regional presses and circulate primarily within that region” (29). If the definition of bioregional writing hinges on questions of audience, *and if* one agrees with his characterization of Abbey’s audience, then perhaps Lynch is correct. But I am not so concerned with whether Abbey was a bioregional *writer* as much as whether he was a bioregionalist more generally. By this I mean I am concerned with Abbey’s belief in the need for
deeper and more intimate human connection to the local non-human world in which we live and the extent to which he asserted a biocentric, egalitarian sense of identity. And that would seem to hinge on his affiliation with place.

Though he led an itinerant life, Abbey qualifies. His travels took him far and wide, but he always returned to the desert Southwest. And though he lived all over the Southwest, Abbey can still claim a bioregional orientation based on the cohesive bioregion within which he mainly traveled and lived. Kirkpatrick Sale, in *Dwellers in the Land*, helpfully defines the various regional sub-divisions of bioregionalism: the ecoregion, the georegion, and the morphoregion. The largest region is the ecoregion, amongst which he lists the Sonoran Desert as an example (55). From this perspective, Abbey lived the vast majority of his life in the same ecoregion, engaging with the same community of flora and fauna in similar climates and landscapes. His itinerancy then seems no obstacle to his bioregional orientation.

If we apply Lynch’s criterion that bioregionalism involves “place-conscious self-identity,” then Abbey qualifies on that count, too (18). His literary output is impressive in its singular focus on the Southwest, and he frequently refers to this ecoregion as “Abbey’s country.” Most importantly, this place-conscious self-identity is based upon affinity: the desert Southwest is where Abbey’s affections lay. Abbey himself asserts the role of affection in the relationship to place, writing that “The land belongs to them that love it” (*Confessions* 141). Despite his use of phrasing that suggests possession or dominion, Abbey is staking out political positions that resonate with bioregionalism: those that love and identify with the land have a more valid claim to it that than any distant, urban seat of power.16 This is an anarchist as well as a bioregional position, one that asserts the superiority of local, decentralized power structures based on

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16 Abbey was often writing about federal land whose fate was controlled by politicians and bureaucrats far removed from conditions on the ground.
personal knowledge of and affiliation with the land. And affinity, love, affection—these are the marks of affiliation with the land, and affiliation with the land is a mark of bioregionalism.

While Jeffers’s poetry explored the depths of his personal bioregionalism, Abbey was concerned with political action focused on protecting the wild areas he loved. But his books, particularly his nonfiction, do regularly mix this activism with the inspiration for that activism: the desert-loving, deep-ecology bit that I am going to focus on here. That is where we will discover the ecomysticism that motivated his bioregionalism and his activism.

Ecomysticism can help us understand the basis for Abbey’s life-long political project of opposing, wherever and whenever possible, our technocratic, statist, consumerist culture. If the ecomystical experience facilitates the profound integration of the human with the non-human and such an experience is based upon the senses, then technology that disrupts or intervenes in that sensory experience is problematic, as it by consequence helps maintain the human alienation from the non-human. Paul Lindholdt has written about Abbey’s aversion to technology, chronicling the parallels between Abbey’s writing and neo-Luddite thought. While Lindholdt focuses on the politics of Abbey’s neo-Luddism, ecomysticism focuses on the primary experience, on the actual physical experience of the individual upon which such politics might be based.

Just as Abbey’s trailer represents the constraints that human “artifacture” places on human perception and consciousness, other forms of technology are held up for castigation in a similar vein. The theme of expansion versus contraction explored above is often the mode by which he critiques human technology and its effect on human consciousness, since Abbey strongly links the senses with consciousness, as we would expect from a materialist. On a nighttime walk, he carries a flashlight but leaves it off, explaining that “like many other
mechanical gadgets it tends to separate a man from the world around him.” He is referring to the way artificial light constricts the pupil, which is detrimental to low-light vision. With the flashlight turned on, he can see only the narrow cone of light it emits; the rest of the world is lost in darkness. But he leaves it off, thereby remaining “a part of the environment.” Again the theme is contraction versus expansion, and technology is the culprit. His immersion, his inclusion in the larger world, is facilitated by the naked senses, since his eyes adapt to the darkness and his “vision though limited has no sharp or definite boundary” (13). The violation of the boundaries of his vision echoes the violation of ontological boundaries; he is not an isolated being but a part of the whole in which he moves. Again it is the unaided senses—in this case, vision—that facilitate the human integration into the non-human world. And again it is technology that disrupts that integration.

Even at this level of personal Luddism, Abbey is evincing a faith in human sensory experience that, while rather quotidian, is remarkable for its latent phenomenology. In recognizing that humans’ vision is “limited,” Abbey implicitly acknowledges the benefits of the technology at his disposal: the flashlight could help him transcend that limit. And yet he freely chooses his “limited,” unaided vision as preferable, since the senses are our primary mode of engagement with the world. But why? If our senses are our primary source of engagement and communion with the world, then might not augmented senses result in some kind of superior engagement or more fully realized communion?

David Abram’s phenomenological materialism builds a similar critique of technology that can help understand why the unaided senses are especially important to this sense of unity with the non-human. Abram attributes the source of our obliviousness to and usurpation of the natural world to the fact that most of us “consciously encounter nonhuman nature only as it has
been circumscribed by our civilization and its technologies” (*Spell* 28). We cannot help but encounter nature through our senses, but when our senses are conditioned by technology, a certain distance emerges between subject and object, a distance that easily slides into distinction. Abram notes how both scientific and religious discourses tend to assume a “qualitative difference between the sentient and the sensed”: science, with its aspirations to objective truth, posits a sensible world distinct from the sensing subject; and religion posits an immaterial soul distinct from the material world. Though often viewed as oppositional worldviews, science and religion both “perpetuate the distinction between human ‘subjects’ and natural ‘objects.’”

Abram therefore sees both religion and science as complicit in maintaining our conception of nature as a passive realm of objects “suitable for human manipulation and abuse” (*Spell* 66-7). Bypassing or augmenting our senses teaches us to distrust our senses, becoming the first step in our alienation from the rest of the natural world.

Abram’s second book, *Becoming Animal*, pushes this critique of technology further. He details how our civilization assumes that “the deepest truth of things is concealed behind the appearances, in dimensions inaccessible to our senses” (4). Abbey was certainly aware of the ubiquity of such assumptions. In the introduction to *Desert Solitaire* excerpted above, Abbey announces that the book will disappoint readers’ expectations for insights into “true underlying reality of existence”; instead, he claims simply that he is “pleased enough with surfaces” (xiii). This passage amounts to a facetious precursor of the critique that Abram undertakes in his second book. Abram builds a case that these “dimensions inaccessible to our senses” used to be the province of otherworldly religions or idealistic philosophies, but now are now largely the domain of the sciences. Physics, neuroscience, genetics, and other sciences investigate the microscopic, macroscopic, or otherwise unseen reality that is “concealed from direct
apprehension, yet which presumably precipitates, or gives rise to, every aspect of our experience” (5).

Though the rise of the scientific worldview has led to many changes from past religious conceptions of the universe, common to both is the distrust of the senses. The persistent refrain in philosophy, religion, and science is that real reality is hidden, secret. This secret was the domain of prophets and wise men, but now falls to the scientist who possesses the technology capable of penetrating to the deeper levels of truth hidden beneath mundane existence. Our civilization thus maintains the “cult of expertise” that tends to disdain the idea of “honoring and paying heed to our directly felt experience of things” (4). Since science has taught us that the fundamental determining factors of our reality are in fact invisible to the unaided human senses, “We’ve taken our primary truths from technologies that hold the world at a distance” (7).

Abbey’s Luddism is clearly motivated by a desire to eliminate that distance, and that desire is fed by his ecomystical experiences. As a material mysticism borne of sensory experience, ecomysticism maintains the mystic’s traditional passion for the object with which he is driven to unite. For Abbey the ecomystic, that object is the non-human world that exists at the scale available to the human senses, rather than the microscopic or the astronomical scales. Technology that distorts or supplements that scale of reference is met with skepticism. So while Abbey admitted that his vision was limited without the aid of the flashlight, he also detailed the different way in which his vision was limited with the use of the flashlight: the cone of light it emits allows a greater visual acuity within that cone, but it also blinds the subject to anything outside the cone. The vision it enables is deeper but narrower. A vision that is broader and more encompassing has clear resonance with an ecological sensibility, since the narrower the vision
the fewer relationships and connections are apparent—the web of consciousness is smaller. But even further, there might be a connection between the peripheral vision and the nonrational parts of our consciousness.

Paul Shepard speculates on this connection in light of the Native American practice of “nightwalking.” Thought to be a way to sharpen night vision, the practice of walking at night while not looking at the trail might help improve peripheral vision by forcing the eye’s rod cells into a primary role. But since peripheral vision is thought to feed “directly into the unconscious,” such practice might be able to “enhance access to our unconscious” (Coming Home 56). Though this idea of a connection between peripheral vision and the unconscious or nonrational mind has been coopted by various new-age ideologies, there is also scientific evidence of its validity.18 Abbey’s skepticism regarding technology, then, appears to be at least partly an aversion to that which stands between him and the direct affective experience of the landscape, an experience often manifest as ecomysticism.

Paradoxically, technology increases the affective and conceptual distance between human and non-human even when it closes the actual, physical distance. The primary example of this is the access to Rainbow Bridge afforded by the construction of Glen Canyon Dam and the subsequent flooding of the canyon. In Desert Solitaire, Abbey recounts his antediluvian hike from the main canyon up the side canyon to the bridge, taking the occasion for some of his usual denunciations of tourism. The dam will allow the trip to Rainbow Bridge, which was formerly a six-mile one-way hike up from the river, to be nothing but a “routine motorboat excursion.”

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17 This contrast of visual styles is a common theme in various primitivist writings. I have referenced this idea above in Ortega y Gasset and Von Essen. This dichotomy is often presented as a result of the difference between the hunter/gatherer and the agriculturalist, as in Paul Shepard: “The change from gatherer to planter was a change in psychic orientation. Whereas the gatherer reads signs and hunts for unseen or moving plants and animals, the planter contemplates the mystery of generation. This invites focus rather than the open awareness to looking and listening” (Nature 22).

architecture of the dam allows humans to utilize another bit of technology—the motorboat—to close the distance between human and non-human from a full-day, physically-challenging trek into a quick, effortless pleasure cruise. This situation precludes the understanding that “half the beauty of Rainbow Bridge lay in its remoteness, its relative difficulty of access, and in the wilderness surrounding it, of which it was an integral part.” Quickly speeding up the canyon amid the deafening roar of a motorboat prohibits any meaningful interaction with the surroundings, thereby reducing the bridge to “an isolated geological oddity, an extension of that museumlike diorama to which industrial tourism tends to reduce the natural world” (192).

The isolation facilitated by technology seems to go both ways here, as both the humans and the bridge itself are isolated. But this is misleading, because the bridge is only isolated to our human perspective. It has achieved status to us as an object, a singular thing, as opposed to its proper place as one part of the geology of the place. This is another way that technology disrupts the human communion with the non-human: technology tends to isolate humans from the surrounding environment, but it also singles out and isolates individual features of the environment, resulting in atomization rather than holism. Relying on the human senses and the human body, hiking through the wilderness six miles to reach the bridge allows for an entire day of intimacy with the canyon ecosystem—physical, sensuous contact with that particular interplay of rock, water, sun, flora, and fauna that make that canyon individual and unique. Isolating one feature—the natural bridge—at the expense of the rest results in human alienation because there is nothing to be intimate with, nothing with which to develop a close, affective relationship: an ecosystem is a living, dynamic thing, but an isolated rock arch is just an inert object. As the intricate canyon walls fly by in a blur and the cascading call of the canyon wren is obliterated by the two-stroke roar, the human and the geological oddity both grow singular, atomized, apart.
But why even be concerned about this? Abbey’s ecocentrism means he is concerned about the canyon ecosystem for its own sake: he sees inherent value in the non-human rather than contingent or utilitarian value. But his description of this event also evinces an underlying concern for the human subject, and this concern is in part founded on his ecomystical experiences. The alienation of the natural object applies to both the sandstone bridge and the human tourist. Abbey’s ecomystical experiences have shown him the possibilities of radical union with the non-human, and the ecstasy, joy, and insight of the experience speaks to its personal value, but also to the political utility of such experiences. Such a material monism as is apparent to the ecomystic begets a greater respect for and affiliation with the non-human. And that effect is obviously conducive to both the well-being of the subject and to affecting the kind of political change for which Abbey advocated: the preservation of wild spaces and the restriction of human expansion and dominion. But both of these motivations—the ecocentric and anthropocentric valuations of the landscape—are predicated upon the holistic perspective engendered by ecomysticism. This holism is a material monism consistent with ecological principles even as the experience of this holism is often nonrational and deeply affective.

Such ecological monism is apparent in Abbey’s contemplation of the predator-prey relationship. He emphasizes not the domination or violence inherent in the relationship, but the communion and the union. Catherine Albanese, in her study of American “nature religion,” suggested that cannibalism was the “ultimate form of nature mysticism,” since “external foe and victim became internal sustenance” (75). She is referring to the cannibal’s belief that he will absorb the virility or prowess of the enemy/victim by consuming him. Though Albanese doesn’t specify her definition of “mysticism,” it seems likely she is referring to the belief in an immaterial power that can transfer from one individual to another. But it also seems likely that
the union that takes place—victim and victor become one—also plays a part in her use of the label. If we transmute this interpretation from human cannibalism to interspecies predatory behavior, we arrive at something like we see in Abbey.

In the chapter “Water,” after speculating on the dangers of dying in the desert of thirst, he suggests such an unlucky subject should just accept fate and contemplate the vulture circling above: “if all goes as planned, your human flesh will be working its way through the gizzard of a buzzard, your essence transfigured into the fierce greedy eyes and unimaginable consciousness of a turkey vulture” (117-8). Again, Abbey is preceded by Jeffers in this specific imagery (see Jeffers’s “Vulture”). And like Jeffers’s poem, religious, transcendent language is employed to describe a plainly material process. The transfiguration of one’s essence—what would in other contexts be tantamount to the transmigration of the soul—becomes a meditation on the profundity of digestion, an insight into the awesomeness of everyday material processes. Essence and consciousness are implicitly construed as entirely material: there is no discernible difference between “flesh” and “essence,” just as there is no qualitative difference between the vulture’s eyes and consciousness. All is resolved into a material monism. The union is more radical this time, as the desert’s unlucky casualty literally becomes one with the non-human. If essence and flesh are one, then human and vulture become one when death unites them.

Lest we think this transfiguration of the human essence reveals an anthropocentric orientation that in its own way continues the legacy of human/nature dualism, Abbey engages in a similar meditation later in the chapter the features only non-human subjects. He evokes the scene of a post-thunderstorm puddle filled with singing frogs, speculating on why they sing and death, violence, and predation are often invoked as means of communion with the other in Abbey. See, for instance, the infamous scene in *DS* where he kills a rabbit with a rock, a grisly deed with pleasant psychic results: “No longer do I feel so isolated from the sparse and furtive life around me, a stranger from another world. I have entered into this one. We are kindred all of us, killer and victim, predator and prey . . .” (34).
whether there is any joy in their song. These songs attract predators and Abbey again is led to
ruminate on the material unity manifest in the process of predation. “A few of the little
amphibians,” he writes, “will continue their metamorphosis by way of the nerves and tissues of
one of the higher animals, in which process the joy of one becomes the contentment of the
second” (125). Materiality becomes process in this passage. Abbey uses the word
“metamorphosis” to mean both sexual reproduction and predation, collapsing these somewhat
contrasting processes into one single process of becoming, a nexus of life and death, production
and destruction. Abbey’s conception of matter and material processes here and elsewhere is
radically progressive. He is describing a vision of matter and materiality as becoming more than
being, as process more than product. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost describe “active processes
of materialization”—as opposed to “monotonous repetitions” of matter—as one common
characteristic of the new materialists (8). Such notions of materiality are, at least to some degree,
derived from modern physics: the theory of relativity, for example, “subverted the idea that solid
matter persists as such,” and instead revealed a continuum of energy and matter that undermined
the “stability or solidity we take for granted” (11).

Abbey is groping toward just such a materiality himself in these passages. He collapses
affect and body into a material monism: the frog’s joy becomes the predator’s contentment just
as the frog’s body becomes the predator’s nerves and tissue. The unity implicit in such “active
processes of materialization” is teased out by Abbey’s emphasis not on death or destruction but
on change and becoming. Just as in the passage about the vulture, he speculates on the literal,
material union that is engendered by this conception of an active, protean materiality.
Significantly, Abbey avers that “Nothing is lost, except an individual consciousness here and
there, a trivial perhaps even illusory phenomenon” (125). Echoes, here, of the mystic’s
transcendence of the self, the destruction of the ego. Recounting an extended solo sojourn in Havasupai Canyon, he claims to have “lost to a certain extent the power to distinguish between what was and what was not myself” (200). But the mystical way is here transformed into an entirely material process; the mystical way is now the ecomystical way.

It is this process of material union that reveals, despite Abbey’s contention otherwise, how central ecomysticism was to his activism and politics. The Glen Canyon Dam occupies a special pace in Abbey’s work. Often held up as the apotheosis of everything he was fighting against, Glen Canyon Dam plays an essential role and provides the central motivation in his two most famous works: Desert Solitaire and The Monkey Wrench Gang. He returned to it again and again in his writing beyond those two texts as well, since the dam represents the myopia, antagonism, and urbanized anthropocentrism that he loathed. In a 1984 letter to Karen Evans, he explains that his writing employs the dam as “a handy symbol of what is most evil and destructive in modern man’s attack on the natural world” (Dispatches 159). So his account in Desert Solitaire of his trip down the canyon before it was flooded to make Lake Powell (lovingly referred to as “Lake Foul”) provides a particularly potent insight into the nature of Abbey’s motivation as a polemicist and an activist. The chapter “Down the River” not only provides insight into Abbey’s central motivation, but it also provides evidence that his ecomystical experiences are central to understanding that motivation.

The chapter starts right off, after a few paragraphs of angry historical context, with a description of his trip down the canyon with a companion in terms that blur the line between the sensual world and the spiritual world. He calls the canyon an “Eden” and a “part of the earth’s original paradise.” But immediately after characterizing the canyon in mythic terms, he switches immediately to the language of matter and life, calling it a “living thing . . . which never can be
recovered” (152). Process invades the mythic. Continuing with this theme, Abbey compares the pleasure of their first launch on to the river to “that first entrance—from the outside—into the neck of the womb” (154). But this sensuousness is immediately followed by further mythologizing, followed by further sensuousness, and so on:

We are indeed enjoying a very intimate relation with the river: only a layer of fabric between our bodies and the water. I let my arm dangle over the side and trail my hand in the flow. Something dreamlike and remembered, that sensation called déjà vu—when was I here before? A moment of groping back through the maze, following the thread of a unique emotion, and then I discover the beginning. I am fulfilling at last a dream of childhood and one as powerful as the erotic dreams of adolescence—floating down the river. Mark Twain, Major Powell, every man that has ever put forth on flowing water knows what I mean.

(154)

Déjà vu, dreams, and myth intertwine with the sensual experience of floating the river. His hand trails in the water, tracing a line through the maze of the canyonlands the way the thread traces a line through the Minotaur’s maze of his consciousness. His sensuous experience in the present, physical world mirrors myth—or is it the other way around? He is possessed by dreams, but they are carnal, sensual dreams. He invokes the mysterious, inexplicable psychological phenomenon of déjà vu, only to actually recall the very real source of this sensation.

As the material and the immaterial worlds collapse, Abbey’s writing veers ever more into ecomystical union. As Abbey and his companion float downstream through the dramatic landscapes of Glen Canyon, their experience takes on ever greater characteristics of the mystical experience, specifically the feeling of unity and the feeling that their experience is “full of
significance and importance,” as William James phrased it (329). The river becomes a central theme, for obvious material fact as well as for the metaphorical weight it carries. Their voyage is increasingly “dreamlike” as they progress “deeper into Eden” in a “delirium of bliss” (160-2). But the journey is entirely passive: they simply float, and he comments several times on the laconic nature of their voyage (160-1). Returning again to William James, “passivity” is one of the four principle characteristics of the mystical experience in his estimation: “the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power” (330). The Colorado River is the superior power in Abbey’s world. On their “dreamlike voyage,” human will is rendered superfluous as “the river itself sets the tone” in the fulfillment of “its mighty purpose” (161). That mighty purpose is to be subsumed into something greater than itself: the Sea of Cortez. The human purpose then parallels the river’s purpose, as both entities strive toward a kind of union. Everything seems to flow toward unity as “Words fail,” indicating the ubiquitous mystical quality of ineffability. Abbey and his companion attempt to converse, but the dialogue quickly devolves into absurdity, pointlessness. Instead, he plays his harmonica, and the “thin sweet music . . . floats for a while like smoke in the vastness all around us before fading into the silence, becoming forever a part of the wilderness” (162-3). Even the sound from his harmonica seems to lose itself in its desire to become part of something greater.

As the pair progress “Farther still into the visionary world of Glen Canyon,” their ecomystical experience increases in intensity. Verbal language drops away and is replaced by “direct denotation”: gestures, glances, pointing. This non-verbal communication marks the ineffability of their experiences as it marks the inhuman world with which they are merging. This failure of language is prelude to the failure of boundaries, as distinctions are slowly dissolved
“into blended amalgams of man and man, men and water, water and rock” (185). But the transcendent language and mystical imagery refer to a very material process:

We are merging, molecules getting mixed. Talk about inter-subjectivity—we are both taking on the coloration of river and canyon, our skin as mahogany as the water on the shady side, our clothing coated with silt, our bare feet caked with mud and tough as lizard skin, our whiskers bleached as the sand . . . (185)

Beyond the amalgams of “man and man, men and water” is the amalgam of ecology and mysticism reflected in the passage. This union is material: it is an empirical process, detectable (theoretically) at the molecular level. The inter-subjectivity he refers to is then illustrated through a series of examples that represent the very material integration of their bodies with the non-human material world in which they are immersed. Subjectivity, then, is posited as materiality and, even further, as an attribute of non-human materiality. This inter-subjectivity exists not only between the two companions, but between them and all the other “subjects” that make up the ecosystem: river, rock, sand, and so forth.

In this disruption of the contained living subject via the expansion of subjectivity, Abbey’s ecomysticism manifests a radical materialism that is similar to that which we have seen in all the other authors so far. It is a precursor, also, of the notion of subjectivity common to many of the new materialists. Jane Bennett sees the “project of naming where subjectivity begins and ends” as a fundamental component of the doctrine of human exceptionalism that is used to justify instrumental valuations of the material world (ix). David Abram likewise writes of the “mute layer of bare existence” that unites all things and challenges our distinctions between animate and inanimate matter (Becoming 29). In both Becoming Animal and The Spell of the Sensuous, one of Abram’s primary theses is that consciousness is not an internal, cloistered
phenomenon, but more like a medium in which beings participate: “Mind arises, and dwells, between the body and the earth” (Becoming 112). Abbey’s ecomystical experiences in Glen Canyon clearly facilitated his profound love of this place. It is a love that recognizes inherent rather than just instrumental value, and this valuation is based upon the “inter-subjectivity” he apprehends in the throes of the ecomystical experience. The experience in Glen Canyon was a persistent motivator in his life’s work. Being able to recognize other life forms and even the non-living entities as fellow subjects worthy of respect and admiration is a catalyst for resisting those who would destroy them for ephemeral or selfish goals.

Abbey’s prevailing mission as a writer and an activist was to combat what he saw as the exploitation and degradation of non-human nature by the various extraction industries that catered to (and facilitated) an exploding population in the arid Southwest. Often in his writing, particularly in his journals and letters, he praises action over contemplation and theorizing, claiming the real heroes are not writers or philosophers but activists and organizers. Given his dedication to protecting the wild places of the desert Southwest from development, and given the central role that ecomysticism has played in motivating that dedication, I think we can say that focusing our attention on the “the desert-loving, deep-ecology bit” is not really a distortion of his life or his work, based on what we know. He was trying to forward a bioregional ethos by combating the Western tendency toward utilitarianism that drives environmental degradation. One way he tried to effect this was by subverting our ideas of subjectivity and consciousness, and he did this primarily through a radical materialism inspired by ecomysticism.

Much like Jeffers and Abbey, an important theme in Gary Snyder’s work is the subversion of human egocentrism and the promotion of biocentric egalitarianism. His work shows evidence that this theme has been inspired by ecomystical experiences. As a practicing Buddhist and scholar of Eastern culture and religion, his ecomysticism clearly has some relation to his Zen practice, but I am not so concerned here with origins as much as with outcomes. To examine the ecomysticism in Gary Snyder is a thorny prospect, since it would be easy to get drawn into a quagmire of theology. But since much fine scholarly work has already addressed the role of Buddhism in Snyder’s work (indeed that seems to be a primary mode of Snyder scholarship), I will refrain from a lengthy analysis of the depth of influence Snyder’s Buddhist practice has had upon his metaphysics or upon his poetry. But to ignore it altogether would be an egregious omission. I therefore will take Snyder’s interpretation of Buddhist principles as the starting point and instead focus on the ways in which his particular practice of Buddhism is both primitive and ecological. These three strains—the Buddhist, the primitive, and the ecological—have the common perspective of ecocentrism, and the ecomystical experience is often the means to that perspective as depicted in Snyder’s poems. In Snyder we arrive at a merger of all the threads running through this dissertation: primitivism, bioregionalism, materialism, ecology, and mysticism.
Snyder is in many respects a prototypical primitivist, and his critique of agricultural-industrial civilization takes as its thesis the central argument of primitivism: the centralized, industrial nation-state founded upon large-scale agriculture is a troubling and destructive mode of human existence, a mode that is really a deviation from the primary mode that has existed for hundreds of thousands of years—hunting and gathering. But his cosmopolitan, cross-cultural education and experience have led him to a rather more distinctive perspective on the essential characteristics of that lost primitive mode of life. He sees in many Asian religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, etc.—the systemization of the primitive mind, maintaining the primitive into modernity, something that the main channel of Western culture seems to have abandoned. This primitive mind is characterized primarily by its ecocentric perspective, its integration of the human with the natural, its recognition of the imbrication of the human, the non-human, and the spiritual, and its embrace of non-rational states and knowledge.

One such example of this widespread primitive belief system is the “Circum-polar Bear Cult” that Snyder references in “Smokey the Bear Sutra.” This “cult” refers to the various forms of bear worship that mark the northern circumpolar region; it refers to an amalgam of cultural characteristics that are common across continents and across cultures. Snyder calls it a “religious complex” that “may be the oldest religion on earth” (Place 29). From the common characteristics that he finds across various indigenous cultures, Snyder constructs his vision of a shared pan-cultural primitivism that was common to all human societies and formed the root of our experience for at least tens of thousands of years.

Based on his study of Native American culture and myth, Chinese and Japanese religion and history, anthropology, and ecology, Snyder believes that industrial civilization is an
aberration—a type of “counterculture”—since the more primitive modes of existence are more ancient and sustainable. In an interview with Paul Geneson, Snyder says that the ‘60s counterculture in America really “had its roots 40,000 years ago” (Real 68), referring to the tribalism, communalism, and the exploration of consciousness that began to flower during the hippie movement. These characteristics of the ‘60s subculture represent to Snyder a bubbling-up of some of the characteristics that defined human societies for most of human (pre)history. Therefore, what we label a “subculture” is really the fundamental human mode of existence: “the subculture is the main line and what we see around us is the anomaly” (Real 68). This “main line” displays cultural differences across time and place, of course, but there is also something essential about this mode of human existence that transcends time and place to achieve a kind of universal foundation for human society.

When asked about how he synthesizes American Indian myth with Zen practice, he remarks that “it’s all one teaching,” linking that teaching to Chinese and Indian traditions as well. He sees the different primitive traditions as different expressions of this “one teaching,” a path that involves the whole culture in an “exploration of consciousness.” It is in this way that this primitivism has persisted into the modern era in some of the Eastern religions and, inversely, it is through some of these religious practices that moderns can access that primitive mind. Snyder’s primitivism strikes a familiar note in its criticism of modern industrial-agricultural civilization, but his primitivism becomes more distinctive in its assertion of a pan-cultural, universal primitivism that shares as its central characteristic the “exploration of consciousness itself: self-understanding, the transcendence of the self” (Real 67-8). Western civilization, in its fetishization of material wealth and its commodification of and alienation from the natural world, is the exception, the deviation, the anomaly.
This is how I will primarily understand Snyder’s Buddhism, with its emphasis on the exploration of consciousness through zazen: as his way back into the Paleolithic consciousness. This is a characterization that Snyder himself promotes: in the preface to his most important prose collection *The Practice of the Wild*, he writes this his practice is of “a kind of old time Buddhism which remains connected to animist and shamanist roots” (vii). In “The Yogin and the Philosopher,” Snyder designates between the two styles of discourse, the latter being the language of reason and the former being something else entirely. The yogin’s style of discourse is “one of deep hearing and doing” based on a set of practices that “hopes to penetrate deeper in understanding that the purely rational function will allow” (*Place* 49). Practices such as meditation and chanting are employed to help the practitioner attain this nonrational knowledge. Note the characteristic mystical rhetoric, such as the pursuit of nonrational knowledge and the implication that such knowledge is somehow superior (“deeper”) to that which is available to the rational mind.

Snyder then connects such practice to the global primitive culture to which he contrasts the urban, industrial “counterculture”:

> The alchemical, occult, Neoplatonic, and various sorts of Gnostic traditions of what might be called occidental counterphilosophy are strongly yogic . . .

Gnosticism took as its patroness Sophia, Wisdom, a goddess known in India under various names and in Buddhism under the name of Tārā, “She Who Saves” or leads across to the opposite shore. Witchcraft, a folk tradition going back to the Paleolithic, has its own associations of magic feminine powers, and plant knowledge. (*Place* 49-50)
For Snyder, the “primitive” is not a particular culture or mode of life, but more a state of consciousness that can never truly be eliminated or entirely suppressed; it is an essential part of human consciousness that asserts itself in various ways even in cultural milieux that are antagonistic. From this idea of a cross-cultural tradition of primitive mystical practice, Snyder derives the central, vital role he sees for poetry. He posits some types of poetry as “the expression of certain yogic-type schools of practice”: since poetry unites language and song, it unites the two hemispheres of the brain and becomes its own kind of meditative practice (*Place 50*). The “poet-yogin” is therefore “not too far behind . . . the shaman” in facilitating states of consciousness that enable communication between the human and non-human realms. The traditional role of the shaman is to navigate the boundaries between these realms for his or her tribe, speaking for or to animals, plants, and the landscape. The shaman was the conduit through which nature had a voice in primitive human societies, and poetry is the way in which that voice continues to speak in literate societies. Poetry is one thread in modern civilization that links us back to the shamanism of our past (*Place 51*).

Snyder has characterized his own poetry as an exploration of consciousness (e.g. in his 1964 interview with Gene Fowler). With this self-characterization, Snyder places himself in the mystical-shamanistic tradition that he identifies as a persistent counter-tradition within Western civilization—what he terms the “long ‘pagan’ battle of western poetry against state and church” (*Place 51*). Poetry, even certain kinds of poetry from the civilized Western tradition, reaches back to the primitive consciousness that is always there, even among the hyper-civilized, recalling a rather Jungian notion of the unconscious.  

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20 Jung used the metaphor of a house to describe human consciousness, with the primitive mind being the foundation upon which everything else is built and of which we are largely unconscious. (Jung 68-69)
for the tribe. This is close to the ancient function of the shaman” (Real 5). This semi-known
remains partly obscure to the tribe because it is knowledge that requires practice to achieve the
state of consciousness whereby one can apprehend it. This practice can take the form of the rites
and rituals that push the shaman beyond the rational, waking consciousness to other, nonrational
levels of understanding. This practice can also take the form of zazen, the Buddhist practice of
sitting meditation that seeks to probe to similar orders of consciousness, even to the very ground
of consciousness. Buddhism thus is Snyder’s path back to the primitive.

Snyder has characterized Buddhist practice as a means to “an inner order of experience
that is not available to language.” This ineffable experience at the heart of Snyder’s Buddhism,
though beyond language, can begin to be “hinted at or approached in some poems.” Poetry can
do this by “walking that edge between what can be said and that which cannot be said” (Real
21). By approaching the Buddhist experience of zazen through innovative language use, poetry is
one way to at least attempt to express the ineffable. In the essay “Poetry and the Primitive,”
Snyder defines poetry as “the skilled and inspired use of the voice and language to embody rare
and powerful states of mind that are in immediate origin personal to the singer, but at deep levels
common to all who listen” (Reader 52). Poetry therefore not so much expresses these special
states of consciousness—not entirely possible, since they are ineffable—but rather embodies
them: analogical re-presentation rather than literal description. Simulation and provocation rather
than definition and exposition. His Buddhist practice gives him access to the primitive, and the
primitive is embodied in poetry.

This primitive consciousness, this experience at the heart of Snyder’s Buddhist practice,
is inherently ecological. In the passage quoted above from The Practice of the Wild where
Snyder claims a primitive Buddhism that is animist and shamanist, he also claims that “Respect
This ecological ethic is embodied in the “ancient Buddhist precept ‘Cause the least possible harm’ and the implicit ecological call to ‘Let nature flourish’ (Place vii). These injunctions entail respect for both human and non-human life, coalescing to form a religious basis for ecocentric egalitarianism. Snyder employs the image of Indra’s net to capture the ecological imperative embedded in Buddhism. Indra’s net is a symbol with roots in the Hua-yen Buddhist tradition. Snyder quotes from David Barnhill, who describes it thus:

> The universe is considered to be a vast web of many-sided and highly polished jewels, each one acting as a multiple mirror. In one sense each jewel is a single entity. But when we look at a jewel, we see nothing but the reflections of other jewels, which themselves are reflections of other jewels, and so on in an endless system of mirroring. Thus in each jewel is the image of the entire net. (qtd. in Place 67)

Snyder calls Indra’s net a metaphor for a “sacramentalized ecosystem,” an image that affirms the fundamental attitude of “compassion and gratitude” that is common to most primitive foraging cultures, an attitude often formally averred in ritual and ceremony (Place 67). This image forms an apt metaphorical bridge between ecology and mysticism, as it symbolizes the heart of both worlds in one image. Snyder has written that “the empirically observable interconnectedness of nature is but a corner of that vast ‘jewelled [sic] net’ that moves from without to within” (Reader 61). He is affirming his belief that the revelations of the ecological sciences support and further elucidate the ancient, mystical understanding of the self as an illusion that obscures the profound interconnectivity—and even unity—of the universe.
Snyder thus connects his ritualistic Buddhist practice both to the primitive shamanistic tradition and to the ecological consciousness that percolates through Western civilization in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. And of course these concerns with consciousness are expressed and explored through poetry. Snyder believes that poetry and meditation are two manifestations of the exploration of consciousness and its relation to the natural world that are near-universal characteristics of primitive cultures. Primitivism, poetry, and Buddhism thereby intertwine in his vision of the essential ecological consciousness that has been a primary marker of the human experience across time and culture. Whereas the primitive practices of song, poetry, meditation, and chanting allow us access to this consciousness, ecological science has been coming at it from the other direction. Snyder asserts that the “biological-ecological sciences have been laying out (implicitly) a spiritual dimension.” This spirituality comes from the recognition of the profound interconnectivity that exists within the biosphere. He sees this as an injunction to see the “mineral cycles, the water cycles, air cycles, nutrient cycles as sacramental” (Place 188). He desires a spirituality based on the insights of ecological science as well as the insights that come from altered states of consciousness; these are complimentary, as both typically entail perceptions of interdependence, unity, and the dissolution of boundaries. So when we pare away the cultural trappings of Snyder’s Buddhism, we get at the heart of his practice, which is essentially ecomystical. Crystalizing his ecological-spiritual views into ecomysticism can help us approach his poetry in a way that reveals the material even as it recognizes the mystical. This places Snyder in the ecomystical tradition that has been unfolding throughout the twentieth century.

ECOMYSTICISM AND THE SUBVERSION OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM
Though Snyder’s prose often explores his practice of zazen in his study of consciousness, potentially belying the tendency for the ecomystical consciousness to be provoked by some encounter with non-human nature, his poetry often tells a different story. The ecocentric egalitarianism that Snyder sees as a primary injunction of his Buddhist training often manifests in his poetry as a subversion of anthropocentrism through a transcendence of self that is elicited by an ecomystical experience.

One of the techniques Snyder employs to signal the transcendence of self is the elision of the subject. It is a technique present from the beginning, as evidenced by poems in his first book *Riprap* (1959). In “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout,” Snyder manipulates syntax to eliminate the first-person subject, thereby displacing the emphasis from the human consciousness of the speaker. There is only one instance of the first-person subject, and it comes in the first lines of the second of the poem’s two stanzas: “I cannot remember things I once read / A few friends, but they are in cities” (*No Nature* 6-7). In contrast to the rich detail and naming of the natural features and processes of the landscape that mark the first stanza, the second stanza opens with the human subject characterized by negation and absence. His friends are not named; they are not given a definite number; they are not specifically placed, only that they are not part of the natural world in which the speaker exists. The subject himself is characterized by his forgetting of human things: his friends are distant and obscure, and his knowledge of books—anthropogenic knowledge—proves evanescent. Books are language, and language is often held up as the primary evidence of human uniqueness and superiority. Here, the offhand way in which knowledge gained from language is cast off suggests two things: a diminishment of the special place reserved for human language, and a gesture toward ineffability.
Directly, the poem returns to the imminent natural environment, involving the subject, but displacing him from immediate grammatical significance: “Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup / Looking down for miles / Through the high still air” (No Nature 8-10). His actions, his interactions, are primary—both syntactically and conceptually. The indicator of static being—the first-person pronoun—is elided in favor of a syntax that privileges process and interaction. Anthropocentrism is subverted both by both direct statement ("I cannot remember . . .") and by syntactical symbolism. By juxtaposing the lines that abandon anthropogenic knowledge with the lines that displace the human subject from prominence, Snyder suggests that the ability to reach beyond human language/culture to the rest of the natural world can induce a humility that moves the human subject from the center to the periphery, from a state of ascendancy to one of immersion. Though the poem avoids undue attention to the speaker’s human consciousness, the stillness, the deep attentiveness to nature, and the moves implying a state of consciousness beyond language are all markers of an ecomystical experience.

It is possible to trace these poetic devices to Snyder’s education in Chinese and Japanese language and literature. Jeff Russell, in his analysis of the influence of Chinese aesthetics on Snyder, notes that his poetry often uses the present tense, which is a direct reflection of classic Chinese poetics (125). Likewise, Patrick Murphy attributes the suppression of the first-person pronoun to Snyder’s knowledge of Japanese, since “in both conversational and written Japanese ‘I’ is almost never used” (45). These insights uncover plausible sources of influence—cultural influence. What about the influence of the material world? Exploring the genesis of one cultural object (Snyder’s poem) through the influence of another cultural object (the Japanese language) is a practice that helps maintain the “dematerializing networks” that Stacy Alaimo sees as a pervasive and problematic characteristic of both popular and academic discourse (2). To be sure,
there is value in the illuminating insight of comparative studies like the ones cited above. But if, as Alaimo claims, the “human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment,’” then human artifacts—such as poems—are equally so inseparable. Therefore, attention to the more-than-human world can also help reveal the channels of influence that lead Snyder to elide the subject.

In this poem as in so many others, it is the action that is important (drinking, looking), not the actor; or, perhaps more accurately, it is the interaction that is important, the communion among the elements of nature, humans included. The present tense simulates awareness and presence, and the lack of the first-person pronoun undermines the hegemony of the human speaker. The subject is not present grammatically, but the subject is implied, moving toward a dissolution of the barriers between subject-object. The poem emphasizes such interaction by ending on this note: the last three lines detail this interaction, as the speaker drinks snow melt and looks down the valley from his mountain perch. But even this action—the human contemplating from a raised position—avoids any possible connotation with the imperial human gaze that might be indicated from such elevated scrutinizing. This gaze does not rest on anything, but rather looks down “through the high still air.” The gaze never settles on an object; instead, the line foregrounds the medium and the process as it omits both subject and object. The action (looking) and the medium of that action (the air) are all that remain, precluding subject-object dualism and offering process and the common ground of our existence in its place. But what brings one to such an insight? What provokes this somewhat radical transcendence of self?

The ecomystical experience is the catalyst. Again, the poem’s form provides the clues. The first stanza avoids any implication of the interaction at the heart of the second stanza; the first stanza is simple observation of the natural world, indicating that basic attentiveness is the starting point. In the detailed description of the scene, a smoky haze results from “Three days
heat, after five days rain / Pitch glows on the fir-cones” (Reader 2-3). Snyder takes care to enumerate how many days each natural function has been working to produce the atmospheric effect, stressing that the natural processes behind the effect are at least as important as the result viewed by the human subject. And he is sure to name the exact type of tree that produces the glowing pitch. Even the title of the poem leaves no room for uncertainty as to where exactly this takes place. It is not simply a mountain scene, but a specific mountain during a specific part of a specific month. Acute awareness of the particulars of time and place produces a mimetic quality that presents nature as immanent, a real and present phenomenon, rather than (merely) as an object of contemplation or theorization. This mode of ecological attention hearkens back to Jeffers’s detailing of the particular fauna and geography of the canyon in “Oh Lovely Rock.” As such, the “environment” affects the subject; the gaze goes both ways, so to speak. It is not an accident that close attention to the particulars of place open the poem and lead directly to the speaker’s discountenance of anthropocentrism through the assertion of the evanescence of human things: “I cannot remember things I once read . . .” This evaporation of the collective human ego in the face of the non-human signifies the ecomystical, and this is reinforced by the close of the poem: “Looking down for miles / Through the high still air” (Reader 9-10). He sees far, and clearly. His mind, as the air, is still—the still point of the turning world—and high, elevated.

Another poem that works similarly by subverting anthropocentrism through the ecomystical experience is “Water” from the same text, Riprap. Here, as in “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout,” the first-person subject makes one very conspicuous appearance. The poem begins with Snyder’s characteristic detailed description as the speaker runs down a rockslide past a “this-year rattlesnake” in the shadow of a juniper tree (No Nature 1-4). Here the
subject appears, the sole instance in the poem: “I leaped, laughing for little boulder-color coil” (No Nature 5). I call this “conspicuous” for two reasons. The first reason is the comma, the only one in the poem not at the end of a line. Snyder makes the “I” visually conspicuous by placing it at the beginning of the line and isolating the subject-verb with a comma. The second reason it is conspicuous is because of the weight the verb carries. Snyder’s use of “leaped” brings to mind Wordsworth’s “My Heart Leaps Up.” The interesting comparison here is that Snyder’s “leap” occurs as a reaction to a snake on the ground, not a rainbow in the sky; the speaker is in interaction with a real material being, another life form with its own existence apart from humanity. A rainbow, on the other hand, is an illusion of human vision with no existence outside of human subjectivity. One could cynically cite this fact as evidence of Romanticism’s essential anthropocentrism, but the inverse is that Snyder brings the focus down from immaterial heavenly phenomena to material earthly things. This and the speaker’s attention to detail more generally reflect Snyder’s insistence that poetry be grounded in place (Reader 262). Additionally, the verb “leap,” regardless of possible allusions, carries a bit of irony in that the physical action will actually take the subject downwards. Since he is not leaping “up,” we cannot possibly misinterpret the action as symbolic of some sort of spiritual or metaphysical move toward transcendence or flight. His heart does not leap up; his body leaps down—literally down a talus slope, but also figuratively down to the earth as he descends to his physical place on earth.

Ed Folsom has characterized this tendency in Snyder’s work as the principle of descent, part of a larger American poetics of “descent to the land,” which carries with it the undercurrent of primitivism. Such descent is “an attempt to get in touch with the continent at some point before the white man began to write his history upon it” (217). This is a project that has significant overlap with bioregionalism, which often takes Indian lifeways as important examples
of bioregional living from which to learn. In “Water,” we see the theme of descent manifest as physical action. The one conspicuous instance of the subject emphasizes the descent of the subject to the physical place via ironic allusion to romantic transcendence.

This is the means of subverting anthropocentrism: descending to the earth, leaping as an act of physical vitality and engagement, not as an act of escaping/transcending physical reality. And this descent is what brings us to the final line of the poem: “Eyes open aching from the cold and faced a trout” (No Nature 10). When he reached the valley floor, he continued to go deeper, plunging his upper body below the surface of the water. It is not the disappearance of the human subject, but the recognition of the human place within nature, the human subject putting himself at eye-level with the non-human. Again, how is this descent possible? On one level by a simple physical act, but on another level by the altered consciousness of the ecomystical experience. The first lines of the poem invoke the altered state by emphasizing disorientation, movement, illusion:

Pressure of sun on the rockslide
Whirled me in dizzy hop-and-step descent,
Pool of pebbles buzzed in a Juniper shadow,
Tiny tongue of a this-year rattlesnake flicked (1-4)

Pressure builds and is released in a whirling, dizzying journey—not the spiritual transcendence of the extrovertive mystic, but the physical descent to the land of the ecomystic. The second couplet reveals an illusion, a vision—not the supernatural force perceived by the religious mystic, but the natural magic of camouflage perceived by an ecomystic. All steps in this ecomystical journey are triggered by expressly material phenomena. It is this encounter with the natural world that leads to the transcendence of the self, transcendence that results not in the
elevation of the human spirit but the descent of the human body, ending with his subsurface, face-to-face encounter with the non-human, a leveling of subjectivity via a literal enactment of ecocentric egalitarianism. As in “Mid-August,” the common medium of our lives is brought to the fore: it is, after all, the title of the poem.

In “Piute Creek,” we see a similar but even more complex treatment of subject by means of even more overtly ecomystical mechanics. The poem begins in the familiar descriptive mode, presenting a nighttime mountain vista under a “huge moon” (No Nature 8). At line eight, the first stanza transitions from description to an interweaving of the landscape with the state of the speaker’s mind. The natural features described thus far are “too much. / The mind wanders. A million summers” (8-9). The natural beauty provides an excess of stimulation, leading to a state of consciousness that “wanders,” suddenly transcending time or, at the very least, suddenly feeling the reality of geologic time. But the poem goes further, clearly depicting a mystical state of consciousness:

All the junk that goes with being human
Drops away, hard rock wavers
Even the heavy present seems to fail
This bubble of a heart.
Words and books
Like a small creek off a high ledge
Gone in the dry air. (12-18)

The landscape has moved him into an ineffable experience. George Hart traces the lineage of this poem’s form, a movement from “minute naturalistic description to cosmic vision,” from Snyder back to Jeffers by way of Rexroth. Hart sees here the same sort of geologic mysticism that is
found in Jeffers’ “Oh Lovely Rock” (Hart 25-26). It is a poetic form that parallels the movement of the ecomystical consciousness.

Characteristically, the mystical state is ineffable, as words and books dissipate into irrelevancy, uselessness, or both. Both time and material being seem suddenly less solid, less determinate. This is an important step on the path to unity—the ultimate end of mystical consciousness—since time and material being are qualities that can lead to differentiation: literate civilization’s conception of history foregrounds linear (rather than cyclic) time, which allows for the differentiation of specific points along the timeline; and a reductive materialism allows the absolute differentiation between singular physical objects. Mystics, therefore, often insist on their transcendence of time and space. But ecomysticism, firmly rooted in the material world, denies the transcendence of that world. How then, does this poem embody ecomysticism? The answer lies in the second stanza.

The second stanza begins with an enigmatic epigram: “A clear, attentive mind / Has no meaning but that / Which sees is truly seen” (19-21). Thus far there has been no first-person subject mentioned in any form. Significantly, the one and only reference to the speaker is the reflexive pronoun in the last line, which also happens to be the key to understanding this strange proclamation about mind. The speaker is aware of a presence in the shadows nearby, though he was only able to catch a brief glimpse in the moonlight: “Back there unseen / Cold proud eyes / Of Cougar or Coyote / Watch me rise and go” (26-29). It is not clear what “that which sees is truly seen” means until we get to these lines at the close the poem. The phrase clearly plays off of this incident, since the speaker is “seen” by the animal watching from the shadows. A clear, attentive mind has no meaning because meaning is something that human rationality imposes.
This formulation likely shows the influence of Snyder’s Buddhism, as several comments of his suggest. In an essay titled “Is Nature Real?”—a piece that pushes back against social constructionism—Snyder asserts that the various academic theories forwarding the social construction of nature are really just

a subset of that world view best developed in Mahayana Buddhism or Advaita Vedanta, which declares . . . the universe to be *maya*, or illusion. In doing so the Asian philosophers are not saying that the universe is ontologically without some kind of reality. They are arguing that, across the board, our seeing of the world is biological (based on the particular qualities of our species’ body-mind), psychological (reflecting subjective projections), and cultural construction. And they go on to suggest how to examine one’s own seeing, so as to see the one who sees and thus make seeing more true. (*Reader* 387, ellipses mine)

The “how” he references here refers to the contemplative and meditative practices that are central to these traditions. In brief simplification, we might say that both traditions seek to penetrate to the ground of consciousness. So in one sense, Snyder’s contention above is that truth is more approachable once one learns to descend to the level of consciousness that allows one to see his or her own mind. The clear attentive mind in “Piute Creek” might be synonymous with this enlightened state, since it “truly” sees that which is seeing; the clear attentive mind has reached the ground of consciousness and is therefore able to perceive its own perceiving consciousness.

But this state of mind has more overtly ecological connotations as well. In “Language Goes Two Ways” from *A Place in Space*, Snyder illustrates what this state of enlightenment means for how we experience the non-human world. He starts with Dōgen’s precept that “When
the world of phenomena comes forth and experiences itself, it is enlightenment.” Then Snyder extrapolates this precept as it manifests in the world of experience: “To see a wren in a bush, call it ‘wren,’ and go on walking is to have (self-importantly) seen nothing. To see a bird and stop, watch, feel, forget yourself for a moment, be in the bushy shadows, maybe then feel ‘wren’—that is to have joined in a larger moment with the world” (Place 179). Notably, Snyder’s example of a momentary enlightenment requires no methodical practice or meditative discipline; a simple attentiveness, a genuine attempt to reach out to a non-human other is enough of a catalyst. Snyder embeds a parenthetical critique of human egocentrism in his example, contrasting that self-importance with the actions “watch,” “feel,” and “forget yourself,” clear indicators of the capacity for openness, receptivity, and ecocentrism that he advocates as conducive to an ecomystical experience whereby the subject transcends the bounds of the ego—the illusion of the distinct self—and feels (not just knows abstractly) the radical interpenetration of bodies in the world, the profound interconnectedness that ecology reveals and materialism theorizes.

This example gives us a clearer picture of the dynamic playing out in “Piute Creek,” since the poem presents no indication that any sort of dedicated, formal meditation is taking place. On the other hand, we might certainly claim that sitting on a promontory and quietly viewing the landscape is its own kind of meditation. I refer not to any sort of cultivated, ritualized practice, but to an innate quality of the human mind. Paul Devereux’s work has found that natural sacred places were chosen for their “psychological or numinous” effects; these sites often have the ability to affect any human, regardless of cultural context (44). Typically, sites were designated as sacred due to their conduciveness to visionary states of consciousness. These states are brought on by a site’s unusual sensory experiences: the absolute darkness and strange
reverberations of a cave, the scattered and shifting light of a deep grove—or the great distances revealed to the vision by prominence, as in “Piute Creek” (44). That prominence tends to have psychological or numinous effects anyone can confirm by their own experience, whether you have climbed a mountain or simply pulled off the highway at a roadside lookout. The typical reaction to a far vista is a moment of quiet meditation. How long that moment stretches and how deep that meditation plumbs is variable, of course, depending on the person and the context. But these facts suggest that such sites are acting upon a biological mechanism, given the universal nature of their effect. The visions of the shaman and the epiphany of the poem’s speaker are manifestations of the human mind, yes, but of the human mind under the influence of the agency of the material assemblage of place. Here, it is the sensory effect of moonlight playing off the undulating ridgelines that unfold over great distances. This is a singular sensory experience, and it is clearly this experience that prompts the altered state of consciousness without any formal practice on the speaker’s part. Such a state of consciousness derives from the agency of the material, non-human environment as much as it does from the agency of the human subject.

Attention to material agency adds an important counterweight to analyses that foreground issues of form and tradition. For instance, the George Hart piece referenced earlier traces the lineage of this poetic form that proceeds from close attention to the natural world to a “cosmic vision.” But that analysis is isolated in the sphere of aesthetics, considering only the lineage of the form as it relates to the poetic tradition. The relation of that form to the material world in which it exists is not considered. But as the above analysis I hope suggests, poetic form can be at least partly explained as a manifestation of the material environment. Jeffers and Snyder often worked in a form that moved from close attention to the natural world to “cosmic vision” because that form is a reflection of the actual experience of the ecomystic in the world.
It is true that this experience in the world is also cultural. But as Snyder reminds us, as much as “nature” is a cultural construction, culture is a natural construction. And the experience of the ecomystic seems to have some genesis outside of culture. That is, the ecomystical experience seems intrinsic to the human species regardless of culture. This is strongly hinted at by the work that has been done in the past two decades exploring the biophilia hypothesis. And it is strongly suggested by anthropology and human ecology in their theorization of the role of hunting in human development. Snyder’s own comprehensive definition of meditation accounts for this theoretical work. Beyond the ritualistic methods of the Buddhist tradition, he defines meditation, at its most basic level, as the quiet attentiveness and reflection in which most beings engage. In an interview with Doug Flaherty, Snyder tries to democratize what can seem like an esoteric practice:

> There’s nothing exotic about meditation. It’s a birthright of everybody. Animals know all about it. Animals have the capacity for sitting still and tuning in on their own inside consciousness, as well as the outside consciousness, for great periods of time. . . . The calmness of deer at rest at mid-day is the order of meditation.

(Real 17)

While “Piute Creek” does not portray anything like a formal meditative practice, it does portray the speaker in an attitude of quiet attentiveness, contemplating the view of an expansive, visually striking landscape. And this attitude of alertness is foundational to Snyder’s primitivist conception of the essential nature of the human mind.

Snyder speculates that the capacity for this kind of intense attentiveness derives from the formative role that hunting has played in human evolution, much like we saw previously in the work of Ortega y Gasset. In “The Politics of Ethnopoetics,” Snyder ventures that it is likely
Paleolithic humans possessed a superior intelligence. Larger brain size is one clue, but he also cites the requirements of the hunting and gathering lifestyle.\footnote{There is some scientific evidence to support this assertion. See, for instance: Crabtree, Gerald R. “Our Fragile Intellect.” *Trends in Genetics* 29.1 (2012): 1-5.} Civilization protects individuals, to a degree, against lapses in judgment and attention. On the other hand, a sparsely populated world of roaming hunter-gatherers required “personal direct contact with the natural world,” which in turn “generated continual alertness” (Place 128). Further, in an essay from *Earth House Hold* about his experiences at an ashram on Suwanose Island, he writes that hunting necessitates that “you must become one with the other,” likening this unitary experience to love and art. This experience of union also links hunting and the capacity for singular open awareness to formal religious practices in China and Japan: “the necessities of identity, intuition, stillness, that go with hunting make it seem as though shamanism and yoga and meditation may have their roots in the requirements of the hunter—where a man learns to be motionless for a day, putting his mind in an open state . . .” (Reader 65). From his experience spearfishing in the island’s sheltered coves and practicing at the ashram, Snyder began to understand those two experiences as related: they both involve special states of consciousness that require a radically open awareness. The ritualization of the hunter’s mode of consciousness manifests, Snyder believes, in the great Hindu and Buddhist meditative traditions. Accordingly, his Buddhism functions as a conduit by which he taps into the primitive consciousness, a foundational aspect of which is the capacity for the ecomystical experience.

As has been referenced above, various writers of a primitivist bent forward the thesis that hunting was the formative experience of human consciousness, paralleling Snyder’s contention in the same vein. The hallmark of our species—namely, our large brain—evolved during a time in which humans were exclusively hunter-gatherers. Such a lifestyle, lived in the rich and
dynamic sensory environment of nature, made “alertness a prime necessity”; this alertness—this hunter’s trance—can still overtake us, stimulating a “vibrant state” (34). Carl Von Essen, Paul Shepard, and other primitivists who embrace the human-as-hunter paradigm often cite José Ortega y Gasset’s *Meditations on Hunting* as a seminal investigation into the role of hunting in human history and consciousness. Gasset’s description of the hunter’s trance as a ‘‘universal’’ attention” that is open and all-encompassing evokes the emptiness that is often used to describe the meditative mind (150). Indeed, Von Essen explicitly links the hunter’s trance with Zen Buddhism’s practice of meditation (36). The hunter’s attention, in trying to “be on all points,” is not the engrossed, laser-like focus of one intent on some difficult task. Rather, the hunter’s focus is broad and encompassing, uniting, all-seeing, expansive, and uncluttered. It is, we might say, the very model of ecomystical meditation: it is ecological in scope; it is material in focus; and it is mystical in order.

Ortega y Gasset posits such profoundly open awareness as the ground of creativity in the human mind. He first points out the tendency of philosophers to use hunting metaphors when describing their occupation: i.e. they “hunt” for knowledge. Then, building on the passage quoted above, he contends that

the only man who truly thinks is the one who, when faced with a problem, instead of looking only straight ahead, toward what habit, tradition, the commonplace, and mental inertia would make one assume, keeps himself alert, ready to accept the fact that the solution might spring from the least foreseeable spot on the great rotundity of the horizon. (152)

The potentialities of consciousness bequeathed by our hunting heritage—the capacity for intense openness, for deep yet expansive sensory engagement with the living world—are also the
capacities that allow for the spectacular creative and intellectual discoveries that have marked the rise of civilization. Art itself then becomes an inheritance of our evolved biological and social imbrication with the natural world, transforming art from a hallmark of human civilization—that which distinguishes us from the rest of the earth—into a gift that we have received from the earth. The artist becomes interpreter, translator—not a god-like creator. Hence the poet is natural, the poem a natural construction, invoked by the non-human world. The open awareness of the speaker in “Piute Creek” correlates to the hunter’s trance, and that primitive consciousness opens him to the ecomystical experience. That primitive experience has been institutionalized by the Eastern religions, and those meditative practices are obliquely invoked in the epigram in the second stanza. The shaman, the poet, and the Buddhist overlap in their essentially primitive, singular exoteric consciousness—their ecomysticism.

This primitivist explanation of the role of a simple, concentrated attentiveness to the non-human world is the ecomystic’s extrovertive equivalent of the inward-focused meditative practice of the Buddhist. I am drawing a simplified dichotomy here, as the designation between inside and outside becomes ever murkier the closer we examine it. Indeed, Snyder himself claims to be ever more conscious of the “very close correspondences between the internal and external landscape” (Real 5). Further, the ideas of a common, catholic consciousness in which individual beings take part—as Abram and others have put forth—suggest that any attention, whether inward or outward, can be construed as attention to the mind of the world.

So this mind, in a sense, has transcended the bounds of ordinary human consciousness. This attentive mind, by seeing, is in turn seen. This is a blurring of the lines between subject and object, a cyclic phrase that disrupts the usual subject-object relation of sensory perception. This is reflected in the lines about the unseen watcher. The sight of the subject (the speaker of the
poem) is displaced by the sight of the object (the animal watching him). Though this animal is “unseen,” the speaker somehow sees himself through its eyes. The speaker’s attentive mind, by seeing through the animal’s eyes, is truly seen—by itself. This confusion of subject and object, of activity and passivity (who is the actor?), serves to highlight the essential unity of things and the dissolution of the individual subject therein. The boundaries between human and non-human are being blurred, helping to subvert anthropocentrism. The ecological experience, viewing the landscape and interacting with an animal, occasions the speaker’s mystical transcendence of the confines of the individual human ego.

Gary Snyder, after an early life of itinerancy and a decade as an expatriate in Japan, has become a model for the praxis of bioregional theory. Upon his return to the United States in the late 1960s, Snyder purchased land in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada and has spent his time since figuring out how to live on that land: fostering a sense of community with his neighbors, researching and learning indigenous lifeways, honoring and accommodating native flora and fauna, and living sustainably within the ecosystem instead of in conflict with it. It is not a stretch to say that ecomysticism has informed not only his poetry but his life. By subverting anthropocentrism and leveling the hierarchy of the humanist perspective, ecomysticism engenders a greater affiliation with the non-human world. Snyder has described this type of experience:

I have had a very moving, profound perception a few times that everything was alive (the basic perception of animism) and that on one level there is no hierarchy of qualities in life – the life of a stone or a weed is as completely beautiful and authentic, wise and valuable as the life of, say, Einstein. (Real 17)
Here is the ecomystical experience used as justification for a bioregional mode of being. Snyder links this ecomystical experience back to primitive religion, just as we might expect a primitivist to do. And he credits this experience with instilling ecocentric egalitarianism. Significantly, he employs a human example (Einstein) to show the extent to which this experience has shattered his sense of anthropocentrism. This example briefly encapsulates what I hope this chapter has made clear: Gary Snyder’s life and work represents a culmination of sorts of the many threads running through this dissertation: materialism, primitivism, and bioregionalism. And the ecomystical experience is the catalyst, the experiential spark that motivates the rest.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Ed Folsom, in his theory of an American poetic tradition of “descent to the land,” likens the land to a palimpsest, a multilayered text where meaning waits to be unearthed. It is the poet’s work to descend through these layers, and Folsom’s terminology makes clear that this work is infused by both primitivism and bioregionalism. He writes that such poetics long to “get in touch with the continent at some point before the white man began to write his history upon it,” a reference to the strains of primitivism found in Snyder and others, a tradition that goes back at least to Thoreau (217). Additionally, to descend through the palimpsest is to “rediscover ways of existing on the land without destroying it” (220)—to rediscover, in other words, a bioregional mode of ecologically-sound, sustainable living that is fully enmeshed in the native ecosystem. These two ideas are related, a state of mind and a mode of living. To reach back to a time before the white man in North America is to discover the continent before non-native lifeways and ideas were imported from Western Europe, to a time when American Indian cultures thrived via intimate knowledge of and integration into the non-human components of the greater ecosystem. And how does the poet facilitate this descent? By his “powers of transcendence,” which are marshalled “in the service of descent, of digging into this land” (220).

Twenty years ago, when he wrote the book chapter that details this poetics of descent, Folsom put together, however superficially, many of the basic building blocks of this dissertation: an earth-bound mysticism fuels an American literary tradition of recovery of primitive, bioregional knowledge. Indeed, many of the individual themes I have invoked are staples of literary criticism, especially of ecocriticism. But I believe that the manner in which I have assembled these various themes to reveal the important role that a wholly material
mysticism has played in the American literary engagement with ecology is something new. Folsom was interested in tracing a poetic tradition, a cultural trend. I have done the same, but it has been in the context of the natural world by my insistence on tracing this tradition of ecomysticism back to the natural ground from which it sprang. This has meant that I have been concerned not only with exploring a heretofore ignored trend in American nature writing, but also with contextualizing that trend in the larger field of interdisciplinary ecological thought.

If the postmodern focus on cultural construction and its insistence on the primacy of race, class, and gender has been all but absent from the preceding pages, that absence is not to be taken as an implicit counterpoint or antithesis. Instead, I hope this work will be a valuable addition to the scope of literary studies by forwarding the central ecocritical project of reinvigorating our appreciation for the agency of the material, natural world in all modes of human expression, an appreciation often buried under a near-exclusive focus on human culture divorced from any wider context.

Some might perceive a certain naiveté in this approach, a simplistic faith in biology or empiricism in general. But I hope that is not the case. Rather, what I have been aiming at is an approach that respects the mimetic aspects of literature, an approach that foregrounds the living, non-human world in which that literature is situated. Lawrence Buell wrote nearly twenty years ago about the disadvantages of the critical approaches to literary studies that had been ascendant in the twentieth-century: new criticism, myth-symbol criticism, new historicism, etc. These various critical movements, though significantly different from one another, all share the characteristic of treating the environment as an “ideological screen” that reduces the natural world to “nothing more than projective fantasy or social allegory.” Such diminishments of the non-human world “are characteristic results of a metropolitan-based enterprise of academic
criticism for which it easily becomes second nature to read literature about nature for its structural or ideological properties rather than for its experiential or referential aspects” (Environmental 36). Not that such structural or ideological properties are illusory or unimportant, but I have opted to keep the focus on just those experiential or referential aspects that Buell mentions. Indeed, this focus is necessitated by my aim to uncover the agency of the material world in generating mystical states of consciousness; such an aim requires attention to the mimetic qualities of the literary representation of nature.

More recently, in his Foreword to the collection *Prismatic Ecologies*, Buell has pointed to the future of ecocriticism, and it seemingly resonates with what I have done here. Buell writes that the first wave of ecocritical discourse tended toward a credulous “back to Nature” ethos. Then second wave ecocriticism renounced the first wave as overly-simplistic nostalgia, instead opting to focus on nature as a social construction in its emphasis on matters of environmental justice and postcolonial ecology. But the next stage moves beyond both of those modes to a new kind of post-human holism, one that “insists that humanness including human ‘culture’ is embedded in ecological processes” (*Prismatic* xi). Ecomysticism tries to embed even that most transcendent, immaterial of human experiences—the spiritual, the mystical—in the natural material world.

As ecocriticism, including the material turn in ecocriticism, tries to embrace a wholly ecological worldview, it is the seemingly immaterial human experiences that will be most resistant to that view. Just as human consciousness itself had come to be seen as something separate, outside, *above* the rest of rude nature, so too has many of the products of that consciousness: art, philosophy, reason, science, and of course religion. But as I hope this dissertation has modeled, even such things as are fairly defined by their immateriality (i.e.
mysticism) can be so embedded. At the same time, the reductive nature of a simple material
determinism can be avoided by resisting the urge to join every thread, link every phenomenon,
and trace every cause. There is much we do not know. Insisting on a material, ecological holism
does not indicate a belief in our ability to explicate every relationship and causal chain. There is
much that we do not know, and there is much that we will never know. As beings embedded in
that ecological holism, we can never completely know the medium of our existence. More than
two millennia ago, Lucretius deduced that “nature works through the agency of invisible bodies”
(18). Though our technology makes ever more of those invisible bodies visible to us, there will
forever remain that which is hidden from our sight. But perhaps we can know enough to have
faith that what remains invisible is yet of this world, part the natural magic of this world rather
than a supernatural incursion from another.
Works Cited


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