

A DECAYING *OIKOS*: A UNIFIED ECOLOGICAL TRADITION IN FAULKNER AND
MCCARTHY

by

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Scholarship on literature from the southern region of the United States often compares the epistemological and ontological existentialism in the works of William Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy. Proponents of this view, like Robert Rudnicki, say, “Their writings are especially attuned to our intellectual and ethical foundations, the literal, architectural edifices that sit precariously atop them, and the zigzag fissures that whisper promises of ruin” (24). Admirers of these two authors’ dense, stark, yet soaring prose also note the similarities in narrative style, and aim their analysis at the ancient Greek influence on the literary South. Such scholars like Chad Jewett argue, “In the case of both Faulkner and McCarthy, Hellenic imagery is used for acerbic parody of the pretensions attached to these classical archetypes, specifically the Hellenic seasonal myths” (78). While scholarship comparing Faulkner and McCarthy as the progenitor and progeny of a southern literary tradition abound, few of these texts take notice of a vital point of comparison: the ways in which these authors write about the environment. Faulkner and McCarthy exist within a similar ecological tradition in literary history in which they explore themes of displacement, landownership, and the correlation between the communal health of human societies and the health of the environment, specifically in Faulkner’s *Go Down Moses*, and in McCarthy’s *Child of God* and *Suttree*.

Go Down, Moses advances Faulkner’s clearest environmental views and provides the strongest link to McCarthy’s southern novels, ecologically. In the story “Delta Autumn,” Ike McCaslin, in regard to his annual hunting trips, mourns the fact that “until now he was the last of those who had once made the journey in wagons without feeling it and now those who accompanied him were the sons and even the

grandsons of the men who had ridden for twenty-four hours in the rain or sleet behind the steaming mules" (320). Faulkner typically writes about a pre-World War II period of history before the massive industrial and technological advances to occur later, though there are some exceptions. Conversely, McCarthy records the actions of Lester Ballard in *Child of God* and Cornelius Suttree in the eponymous *Suttree*, the contemporaries of the sons and grandsons of Ike and his friends. Lester and Suttree live in a post-war, post-nuclear age and the environmental concerns surrounding them express a different form of ecological anxiety than that of Faulkner's novels and stories, which mourn the loss of the wilderness and the ongoing degradation of the environment. Faulkner's ecology deals primarily with an environment in the process of decay, whereas McCarthy writes about a post-nuclear, highly industrialized world in which the environment has already suffered large-scale destruction. Other than the difference in their historical moments, however, Faulkner and McCarthy's ecologies function in ways too similar to consider them parts of separate traditions.

1. Ecology in *Go Down, Moses*

Before continuing, one term requires a proper definition. The word ecology consists of the Greek roots "*oikos*," literally meaning "household," and "*logos*," meaning "word." François Pitavy defines ecology as such: "the discourse on *oikos*, household, or, in a wider meaning, habitat, environment" (81). The Greek word *oikos* originally means "household," but in reference to ecology, it signifies the greater environment and the organic relationship of all of its parts, primarily the

land and its many inhabitants. In Faulkner's works, Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi is the literary space that appropriately holds the title of *oikos*.

In *Go Down, Moses* Faulkner inaugurates his ecological tradition with a single principle concerning land ownership. The narrator delivers the information that Ike McCaslin "owned no property, and never desired to since the earth was no man's but all men's, as light and air and weather were" (5). This statement forms the base of a fully constructed view of nature in the works of Faulkner and McCarthy. The notion that individual landownership, in reality, is an unattainable goal accomplishes two things. It gives supremacy to nature, and it indicates a tension in the relationship between humanity and nature.

Frequently utilizing language that sets up the wilderness as static and immutable, Faulkner, through the depiction of land undeveloped by humanity, envisions a space untainted by the human notions of progress, ownership, and ecological stewardship. The wilderness is a "sublime space" and is "approached with awe" (Pitavy 90). In *Go Down, Moses*, the "big woods" seem to Ike and the other men with whom he hunts as "brooding, secret, tremendous, almost inattentive" (168). Elsewhere, Faulkner describes the wilderness as "impartial and omniscient," and "the eye of the ancient immortal Umpire" (172). Ultimately the wilderness, symbolizing untouched nature, transcends the time-restricted lives of humans.

The timelessness and eternity of nature and the temporality of humanity provide an essential tension overarching Faulkner's canon. Ike McCaslin rejects the progressive standards of human society, preferring

the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document:—of white man fatuous enough to believe he had bought any fragment of it, of Indian ruthless enough to pretend that any fragment of it had been his to convey; bigger than Major de Spain and the scrap he pretended to, knowing better; older than old Thomas Sutpen of whom Major de Spain had had it and who knew better; older even than old Ikkemotubbe, the Chickasaw chief, of whom old Sutpen had had it and who knew better in his turn. (181)

The attempts to inflict violence on the land by white men and Native Americans alike repulse Ike. He instead selects the company of hunters, the ones “ordered and compelled by and within the wilderness” (181-182). Unchecked human action and efforts to take control over nature—through the hubristic notion of landowning, or the overweening pride of believing that humans are important enough to sell land—initiate the tension between humanity and the land. Only those like the hunters, those with enough humility and enough insight to know their place in the universe, live harmoniously with nature, at least for a short amount of time.

Faulkner philosophically sets the wilderness apart from any external forces, including human intrusion. Somewhat contradictorily, the humans eventually destroy the untouched land, but this paradoxical logic runs through *Go Down, Moses* and holds a central place in Faulkner’s ecology. Yoknapatawpha is a divided land and consistently experiences a strain between the idealism surrounding the wilderness and the reality of human destruction. Appropriately, “the tension between constancy and progress, motionlessness and change, eternity and the flow

of time . . . culminates with Faulkner and even abrogates itself in the concept of wilderness” (Pitavy 89). The wilderness is the idealized space where the processes of time never ravage the unconquerable vitality of the land. Old Ben, the legendary bear representing the spirit of the wilderness in *Go Down, Moses*, is “not even a mortal beast but an anachronism indomitable and invincible out of an old dead time, a phantom, epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life” (183). Old Ben wanders the big woods entirely separate from time until he dies.

Humans, on the other hand, exist purely within the restraints of time. They catalyze “the opposition between progress and continuity or, better, constancy . . . between change, alteration, and . . . the signs of motionless, near stasis, or immutability” (Pitavy 88). Faulkner calls the wilderness “doomed” because its “edges were constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes who feared it because it was wilderness.” Furthermore, “the puny little humans swarmed and hacked at it in a fury of abhorrence and fear like pygmies about the ankles of a drowsing elephant” (183). The wilderness, on its own, acts not unkindly or malevolently, but with impartial deliberation, exercising its rights to perpetuate the cycles of life and death. It is not until humans, with their fear of their own mortality and fear of the immortality of nature, intrude and attempt to subject nature to their wills that any outright opposition occurs.

Man-made objects and institutions in Faulkner’s fictive world, Yoknapatawpha County, represent the processes of time. Any person presented with Faulkner’s map of Yoknapatawpha would notice as Elizabeth Kerr—in her work exploring Faulkner’s construction of Yoknapatawpha— does, that “the roads . .

. unify the region with an imperfect wheel-like pattern, with Jefferson the hub and the roads the spokes,” representing “the theme of change and flux” (*Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha* 21). These symbols of change are far from beneficial for the land or the people, however. According to the logic of Faulkner’s ecology, the “puny humans” swarming and hacking at the wilderness commit acts of violence against the land. This violence also reflects on the moral quality of the people inhabiting Yoknapatawpha.

Faulkner points to a solution, although one that ultimately does not work, to combat this violence through the endurance of characters like Sam Fathers and through the training of Ike McCaslin. Sam embodies Faulkner’s vision of a truly mindful person, someone who knows his place in nature, who accepts the transcendent impartiality of the wilderness, and who strives to survive in harmony with it. Faulkner qualifies Sam to educate Ike because he is “the only surviving Indian who maintains the old relationship of mutual respect” (Kerr, *Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha* 13) for nature. “Ike’s tutelage under Sam Fathers,” claims Robert Myers, provides Ike with an understanding of humanity’s place in relation to nature though his “education obscures the relationship of hunters to the wilderness” (657). Sam brings Ike to see the mythic deer in “The Old People” and teaches him to respect nature by calling the deer “Grandfather” (175). Ike grows up with a respect for nature, but the company of hunters he keeps confuses his sense of the hunters’ relationship to the land. For Ike, the importance lies in having an “unforgettable sense of the big woods—not a quality dangerous or particularly inimical, but profound, sentient, gigantic and brooding, amid which he had been permitted to go

to and fro at will, unscathed, why he knew not, but dwarfed and, until he had drawn honorably blood worthy of being drawn, alien" (167). Ike knows that he is small and inconsequential in comparison to the wilderness. He walks through the big woods because some impersonal force allows him to be there, not out of any sense of personal dominance.

However, he witnesses the total unrestraint of his hunting party in the wilderness. The unproven hunters "fished and shot squirrels and ran the coons and cats," and even the "proven hunters" shot wild turkeys "with pistols for wagers or to test their marksmanship" (194). In this sense, Ike becomes isolated from the men with whom he hunts. His education under Sam Fathers teaches him to only take from nature what is necessary to survive. The hunters, instead, kill animals for sport, not out of need. Their amusement is more important to them than walking through the wilderness with awe and reverence, seeking to make themselves worthy of treading that ground, as Ike does.

Historically, not just hunting parties acted without restraint in Mississippi's forested areas. The lumber industry also rapidly harvested trees almost without regulation. The ubiquity of timber in Mississippi made the land highly appealing to lumber companies. In the late 19th Century and early 20th Century, lumber companies rapidly harvested trees, and, as a result, populations of large game decreased. This is why the mythic deer in "The Old People," and Old Ben in "The Bear" represent the spirit of the wilderness. Their appearance suggests a connection to the past, when nature was less divided and permanently affected by human development. Wiley Prewitt argues in his ecohistorical analysis of Faulkner, "It was

in this environmental mix of diminished wilderness, disappearing large game, and the pursuit of predominantly small game that [he] developed his ideas about hunting and the human connection with nature” (204). In using Mississippi as the historical and ecological context of his fiction, Faulkner writes a world in which the hunter has the greatest connection to nature. “For Faulkner’s hunters, only the pursuit of large game reaffirmed a bond between humans and the natural world” (Prewitt 204) because the scarcity of large game makes bears and deer relics of a forgotten past, objects of nostalgia for a former time when the wilderness was still vast. The proven hunters—like Ike, Sam Fathers, and Major de Spain—unlike those amusing themselves with the small game, experience the greatest unity with nature because they hunt big game, the inhabitants of the old wilderness lands that Faulkner imbues with a spiritual, transcendental quality.

Despite his stress on the importance of proper human interactions with nature, Faulkner pointedly contradicts the hunters’ ideas concerning the wilderness. He does so by making Major de Spain the owner of the hunting grounds. Because Major de Spain owns the land, it is not true wilderness. Rather, it is conserved land, which is not a mistreatment of land, but a proper reaction to the incoming tide of human development. This necessary protection of the earth indicates that the land of which Faulkner writes is a land split against itself, in which the people place value on untouched land yet proceed to purchase and sell it; in which the people desire a connection with nature through hunting, yet they claim to own both land and people. In Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha, the health of the environment directly correlates with the condition of the human heart.

The direct influence that the condition of the land has on the moral integrity of a society appears prominently in the McCaslin family history. Old Carothers' purchase of the land from Ikkemotubbe launches a family history rife with incest and adultery. The ledger Ike reads in "The Bear" includes a comprehensive collection of the moral horrors that surround the McCaslin family. This account of Ike's family proves that the notion of landowning in *Go Down, Moses* correlates to the owning of people, primarily black slaves. Also, the ability to own people legally excuses slave owners, like Carothers McCaslin, to commit moral atrocities against the people they own. Ike notices an entry in the ledger reading, "*Eunice Bought by Father in New Orleans . . . Drownd in Crick Christmas Day 1832*" (253). The next entry reads, "*June 21th 1833 Drownd herself*" (254). Ike searches the ledger again and finds "*Tomasina called Tomy Daughter of Thucydus @ Eunice . . . dide in Child bed June 1833*" (255). Through some further investigation, Ike learns that Old Carothers impregnated his slave Eunice, and she gave birth to Tomy. Carothers later impregnated Tomy, his own daughter via Eunice, who drowned herself when she learned of the pregnancy. Ike, upon learning this information agonizes, "*His own daughter. No No Not even him*" (257). Faulkner creates a logical progression of moral disintegration here. The ability to own land sometimes leads to individual people owning other people, and the ability to own people legally excuses the slave owners to commit rape and incest. Carothers McCaslin and those like him deploy the same rhetoric to justify owning land as they do to justify owning people.

Carothers McCaslin's justifications of his evil actions originate in his personal ability to own land. His disposition to abuse the land gives him a concurrent

penchant for abusing other people. Men like Old Carothers not only exploit the land, but they also use their rhetoric to rationalize their misogynistic and racist actions. The misuse of the land directly links to institutionalized racism and misogyny. In Faulkner's ecology, the one in which patriarchal men mistreat the land and underprivileged people concurrently, women of color experience the worst treatment of anyone in the Faulknerian *oikos*. Ike, arguing with his cousin and legal guardian Cass Edmonds, calls Old Carothers

that evil and regenerate old man who could summon, because she was his property, a human being because she was old enough and female, to his widower's house and get a child on her and then dismiss her because she was of an inferior race, and then bequeath a thousand dollars to the infant because he would be dead then and wouldn't have to pay it. (280)

This portion of *Go Down, Moses* not only calls for an ecofeminist interpretation, it also requires an examination of the ties between issues of race and the environment. Carothers, though he bequeaths one thousand dollars to Tomy's child which he never pays, uses his power, "a power little changed after freedom [of the slaves in America] because the lower-class Negro women and men dare not defend themselves when the white man controls both the economic system and the law" (Kerr, *Yoknapatawpha* 166), to restrict the black side of his family from receiving any inheritance. Not only does Carothers displace the black line of his family, he passes his immorality down to the youngest member of his white line, Carothers "Roth" Edmonds.

Two factors shape Roth into the morally lacking man that he is: his lineage and the recession of wilderness lands in Mississippi. His ancestral, almost genetic immorality also stems from the misuse of land. However, this abuse occurs in the owning of land, rather than in the destruction of forest areas. Roth's inheritance is the curse laid upon his family by Old Carothers: depravity. Roth even commits the same sin of incest that Old Carothers did, though it is much more indirect. The young woman who visits Ike in "Delta Autumn" informs him, "James Beauchamp—you called him Tennie's Jim though he had a name—was my grandfather" (343) and that the baby she has with her is Roth's illegitimate child. While Roth's patrimonial inheritance is the farmland bought from Ikkemotubbe, he also inherits the curse of Carothers McCaslin's iniquitous choices originating in the white man's legal ability to own land and people, consummated in the union of both his black and white lines, the child of Roth and James Beauchamp's granddaughter.

In Faulkner's ecology, the reduction in the size of wilderness lands denotes a corruption in human society. The vitality of the land reflects the health of human communities and individuals, and the sickness or waning health of the land has direct individual and cultural impact. Roth lacks moral fortitude because, unlike Ike who had "old Sam Fathers who had taught him to hunt," he never experiences life in the wilderness, the "dimension free of both time and space," and never moves "among the shades of tall unaxed trees and sightless brakes where the wild strong immortal game ran forever" (337). This moral privation traces back to his childhood bereft of the experiences that Ike, Sam Fathers, Major de Spain, and Cass had, and to his ancestral history.

Displacement from the land, a theme that reoccurs later in McCarthy's ecology, shapes Roth Edmonds. While, unlike McCarthy's Lester Ballard, no individual people force Roth out of the land, he is bereft of Ike McCaslin's idealistic vision of the wilderness. His non-interaction with land untouched by human hands is a form of displacement. He does not belong to the land, and Faulkner accentuates this fact in his descriptions of the journey to the hunting camp in "Delta Autumn:" "Now they went in cars, driving faster and faster each year because the roads were better and they had farther and farther to drive, the territory in which game still existed drawing yearly inward" (319). Roth spends his hunting trips in a small, forested area on the Delta that recedes yearly due to the expansion of human development. Also, the land that does remain cannot truly be considered wilderness because humans preserve and conserve it, rendering the "wildness" of it artificial. Conservancy, while beneficial for the earth, by definition cannot keep the wilderness wild because human hands play a role in its preservation. As a result, Roth exemplifies the displacement of southern society from the land overall.

Faulkner employs individual characters like Carothers McCaslin and Carothers Edmonds to represent southern society both in terms of the people who inhabit the land and in their relationship to the land. In "The Bear," Ike questions Cass, "Don't you see? This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both lie under the curse?" (265). Ike sees the South as cursed due to institutionalized slavery and the white man's correlating claim to ownership over the land and the continued destruction of the wilderness.

The Faulknerian tradition portrays the South as a land blessed by God, wholesome and beneficial for every living thing, at least before human hands played a part in cursing the earth. Ike calls the land “this South for which He [God] had done so much with the woods for game and streams for fish and deep rich soil for seed and lush springs to sprout it and long summers to mature it and serene falls to harvest it and mild winters for men and animals” (269-270). However, at one point, God looked on the land “and saw no hope anywhere” (270). Human activity corrupts the land, and, concurrently, the corruption of the land further draws the moral lifeblood from human society. Essentially, in Faulkner’s ideology, God cursed the South because of slavery, environmental abuse, and the patriarchal subjection of women.

This curse offers proof that humans and nature should live in a balance, and when that relationship becomes unbalanced, both the land and human morality diminish. By Ike’s reasoning such an imbalance causes humans to justify an attitude towards slaves “to whom . . . they shrieked of was another specimen another example like the Brazilian macaw brought home in a cage by a traveller” (270). When humans commit acts of violence on the land, they subsequently act violently towards each other. The McCaslin family line represents the imbalanced relationship between humanity and nature and their state of being ties to the “curse” of the land of which Ike speaks. Old Carothers, all of his progeny, and the ledger recording his family history signify the South, with all of its horror and memories of slavery, misogyny, incest, and rape. Furthermore, the ledger is a “chronicle which was a whole land in miniature, which multiplied and compounded

was the entire South" (279). Through the McCaslin family, and on a larger scale Yoknapatawpha and the South, Faulkner illustrates a land pitted against itself and split in two, entirely unbalanced. Yoknapatawpha suffers an imbalance between race, gender, and the relationship between humanity and the land.

One of the defining features of Yoknapatawpha, the pinnacle of Faulkner's ecology, is the division of the races. The McCaslins "illustrate how the white and colored children of the white father might grow up on the plantation together, in two castes" (Kerr, *Yoknapatawpha* 164). Given the established relationship between humanity and the land, the imbalanced relationship of black and white is an ecological issue. The basic etymological roots of ecology confirm this: "*oikos-logos*." The *oikos* consists of the whole environment, including its human inhabitants. In Faulkner's ecological tradition, human power outweighs that of the rest of the *oikos*. The power that the whites hold over the blacks poses a threat to the *oikos* of all Yoknapatawphans. Threats to people of a different race from the dominant whites tie to threats to nature and morality in that any imbalance in the *oikos* threatens the safety of all of the other aspects of an ecological system, including the lives of non-dominant races and genders. Slavery, misogyny, and other hateful immoralities upset Yoknapatawpha's ecological balance and push the *oikos* closer to complete disintegration. As is evident, Faulkner's ecology encompasses the entire meaning of *oikos*, in that it deals with individual people, households, greater communities, and the habitat in which the communities dwell, the environment.

To understand this imbalance of nature in favor of humans, some historical and biographical information helps make sense of Faulkner's bleak views of the

South in *Go Down. Moses*. In 1940, when he wrote "Delta Autumn," the world was a worried place, a place with the uncertainties of war looming in the minds of most people. Michael Grimwood observes in his biography of Faulkner, that up to this point, Faulkner "had watched the war in Europe with a growing apprehension that it would engulf him and all he was laboring to preserve" (257). The fears of war and its effects on the earth heavily influenced Faulkner's negative views of human progress. Humans use technological advances and political rhetoric to enact violence on the land and people.

The political climate during the early 1940s placed every society in danger, including Faulkner's literary world. One of the men with whom Ike goes on a hunting trip in "Delta Autumn" complains of America, "Too much cotton and corn and hogs, and not enough for people to eat and wear. The country full of people to tell a man how he cant raise his own cotton whether he will or wont, and Sally Rand with a sergeant's stripes and not even the fan couldn't fill the army rolls" (323). The men on this hunting trip express Faulkner's geopolitical anxieties and "Their fear that civilization is going bankrupt" and "their apprehension that the woods are vanishing" (258). In other words, Faulkner integrates the perceived dissolution of civilization with the depletion of the woods.

"Delta Autumn" integrates the vanishing of the wilderness with the disappearance of all the factors that form an ecology. Its "central subject . . . is not race relations or the failure of love, or the wilderness, but the gradual depletion of energy from the earth, from history, from men's lives, from Faulkner's career" (Grimwood 261). The decline in the health of the land saps the energy from

individuals, whole communities, and their collective narrative, the stories about their *oikos*. Because the land suffers, all aspects of human life, whether individual or communal, follow in the same manner, undergoing diminution in energy and vigor. In the later years of his career, Faulkner felt a decline in his own work and also in art in general. He equated his personal failures, and the failures of the world, to the depletion of energy from the *oikos*.

The description of the land surrounding the Delta affirms Faulkner's personal anxieties over the dissolution of both human artifices and the land. He describes how the land has "the impenetrable jungle of water-standing cane and cypress gum and holly and oak and ash, cotton patches which as the years passed became fields and plantations" (323). He continues, "Most of that was gone now. Now a man drove two hundred miles from Jefferson before he found wilderness to hunt in" (323-324). The human conception of time—contrary to the unchanging eternity of the wilderness—ushers in disintegrating progress. Human change saps the land of its vitality and fecundity, and ultimately alienates humans from the land.

Faulkner symbolizes the passing of time, bringing with it depletion and destruction, through flood imagery. Recording the impermanence of human occupation on the Delta, he writes, "no man, millionaire though he be, would build more than a roof and walls to shelter the camping equipment he lived from when he knew once each ten years or so his house would be flooded to the second storey [*sic*] and all within it ruined" (324). Time, as seen in the flooded river, ruins humanity's works, leaving behind the detritus of past ages. The river acts as the capstone of Faulkner's ecology. Representing time, the river causes the greatest tension

between the immutable eternity of Ike's idealized wilderness and the reality of temporality. Time, the most powerful element of Faulkner's *oikos*, divides the land and the people inhabiting it more than any other factor. Time ravages the environment through cycles and fluxes of change. Grimwood later argues, that in "Delta Autumn," "The river is an agent of entropy, a vital power seeking as its whole purpose the erosion of its sources" leaving behind only "the remnants of lost time and lost lives" (261-262). That once healthy, verdant land, by processes of change and human progress, becomes "the land across which there came now no scream of panther but instead the long hooting of locomotives: trains of incredible length and drawn by a single engine . . . and all that remained of that old time were the Indian names on the little towns" (325). Though "settlement and cultivation" achieve a "defeat of the wilderness, civilization has not replaced it with anything permanent" (Grimwood 262). This river, coupled with the human destruction of the wilderness, leaves the land vanquished and barren, subject to the depleting influence of time.

Conflating Ike McCaslin's voice with the authoritative narrative voice in stories like "The Bear" and "Delta Autumn" proves dangerous when processing information concerning the elements of Faulkner's *oikos*. Faulkner equips Ike with admirable, yet naïve, views of environmental ethics and conservation. In his mind, Ike crafts a romanticized ecology of pre-industrial days, a primordial vision of the immensity and immortality of the wilderness. And yet, Faulkner interjects little inconsistencies into Ike's views, primarily in the artificiality of the land in which Ike hunts. The fact that Major de Spain owns the land where Ike and the other men hunt outright contradicts notions of the immutability of the wilderness. Ike, Cass, Sam

Fathers, Boon Hogganbeck, and Major de Spain make sport in a piece of land owned and conserved by a person, a fact that denies any possibility that the “Big Woods” are true wilderness, land untouched by human development. While conservation might keep human intrusion from further destroying the land, there is still a level of artificiality to it. Ike’s experiences, though environmentally valuable, never allow him interaction with the wilderness, which arguably no longer exists anywhere. He learns all of his woodsman skills in conserved land simply because he has no other option.

However, Faulkner’s refutation of Ike’s idealism still holds environmental clout by giving importance to conservation. Lawrence Buell claims, by separating the authoritative narrative voice from Ike’s voice, Faulkner makes “clear that the space of the hunt, the space of the wilderness, was no safe refuge: that it was not immune from village and town institutions” (10). For example, Major de Spain sells the land to a Memphis lumber company. Though Faulkner never includes a narrative of what happens to the “Big Woods” after their sale, the assumption is that the lumber company demolishes the woods, contributing to the rampant deforestation in the post-bellum South. On a grander scale, the deforested wasteland lining the road to the hunting grounds in “Delta Autumn” warns humanity of the dangers of not conserving land. Though conservation negates any notions of a true wilderness, the land, at least, still survives.

Furthermore, Faulkner’s environmental ethic of conservation ties into his views of human society. The decline of the land marks a disintegration of human society and history, and harbors “the sense of postbellum and early twentieth-

century Southern history as a history of environmental degradation was not simply an epiphenomenon but an integral part of Faulkner's declensionary vision of Southern history generally" (Buell 15). In a sense, Faulkner's works contain a cautionary didacticism, a warning depicting the degradation of society when people do not make efforts to conserve the environment. He also warns of the increasing difficulty to implement environmental protections with the passing of time.

In the literary tug-of-war between Ike McCaslin's romanticized conceptualization of wilderness and the unrelenting passing of time and progress, the wilderness suffers defeat. The tension that Faulkner creates in *Go Down, Moses* between the land and the cycles of time escalates, and the taut wire between the two competing factors rips away from the land in favor of time. Faulkner's divided land becomes a land of depletion and human leftovers. This history of the McCaslin family line records the story of a decaying *oikos*.

2. The Development of McCarthy's Ecology in *Child of God*

If Faulkner writes an elegiac account of what the land once was and never will be again, then McCarthy composes nightmarish accounts of the world that now is. Faulkner sings a dirge, a funereal mourning of the loss of the wilderness, and McCarthy imagines a hellish landscape in which people find themselves displaced from the land, and where time leaves nothing behind but waste and remnants. McCarthy's ecology of the South follows what happens to the earth a generation after Faulkner, continuing in the same tradition as a witness to the violence committed upon the land by time and human progress. McCarthy's works build

upon the past, particularly in the Faulknerian tradition. Steven Frye writes in *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*,

his own work is infused with the historical weight of the twentieth century—the traumatic social transformation of the American South I n the postbellum period, the human carnage of two world wars and the genocidal waste that attended them as well as the angst that emerges from the development of the technological and nuclear age.

(7)

Furthermore, in McCarthy's fiction, "Violence is a reality endemic to the world's existence" (Frye 8). In essence, McCarthy's works realize the anxiety over decay found in Faulkner's fiction, and envision an ecology marked by displacement, depletion, waste, and violence.

McCarthy's *Child of God* continues Faulkner's theme of displacement from the land. The connection between human morality and a positive relationship with the land finds embodiment "as the necrophiliac Lester Ballard—after losing his land—precipitously descends into a psychological abyss, into realms of cruelty and perversion unimaginable" (Frye 15). Displacement initiates Lester's mental and moral disintegration. From the start of the novel, Lester serves as a warning to human communities. McCarthy does not depict Lester as something alien or unknown to human morality, but rather—while directly addressing the reader—as "A child of God much like yourself perhaps" (4). By suggesting kinship, McCarthy insinuates that every person has the capability to act like Lester. In terms of ecology, the implication that every person is capable of Lester's subsequent atrocities

indicates an *oikos* reminiscent of Faulkner's anxious vision in *Go Down, Moses*. The households, the habitats, and greater environment of McCarthy's eastern Tennessee reflect the defeated landscape of "Delta Autumn" and actualize Faulkner's environmental fears.

Following his eviction from his house and land, Lester returns to nature. However, despite this return, Lester succumbs to a familiar Faulknerian evocation: the dangers of landowning. McCarthy, through Lester Ballard, notes a kind of obsolescence in the American pastoral ideal. John Grammer observes that Lester's type of man, "an armed man, prepared to defend the country and his own liberty and property, was for our ancestors the ideal republican citizen, the foundation of stable order" (39). Upon his displacement from his property, Lester immediately reverts to an atavistic, animalistic state wherein he perverts nature for his own purposes. When Lester leaves his old home for the woods, McCarthy records, "Ballard passed by and went behind the barn where he trod a clearing in the clumps jimson and nightshade and squatted and shat . . . He wiped himself with a stick and rose and pulled his trousers up from the ground. Already green flies clambered over his dark and lumpy stool" (13). This sequence of the novel propels Lester with increasing intensity toward a complete reversion. His animal-like defecation foreshadows a further disintegration of his human identity. Ballard's atavism and consequent moral perversity connotes a certain absurdity in the republican ideal that landowning is an American right and near moral imperative. This background in American political rhetoric causes Lester to misuse nature, particularly as his terrifying sexual hunger intensifies.

Ballard's macabre lusts find their roots in his rejection from the *oikos* and from the wasteful violence inflicted on the land by humans. In a strange scene where Lester masturbates while watching an interracial couple have sex in a car, McCarthy describes Lester as "a misplaced and loveless simian shape scuttling across the turnaround as he had come, over the clay and thin gravel and the flattened beercans and papers and rotting condoms" (20). This quote captures Lester's most essential qualities. He belongs to no human society and he inhabits a landscape littered with the objects of human wastefulness. He is a reject forced to wander a chaotic, trashed land that nurtures his sexual deviance.

Lester's devolution marks a notable difference between McCarthy's ecology and Faulkner's. McCarthy incorporates into his conceptualization of nature a level of primordial, natural violence, which Faulkner rejects. To Faulkner, violence is inflicted on nature rather than an integral force of nature. Arguably, McCarthy adopts a more realistic view of wilderness in his ecology. He recognizes that "If wilderness, that is, the part of nature untouched by human cultivation, were to enter into the aesthetic discourse of pastoral writing, it could only imply an anthropomorphous projection onto wilderness" (Guillemin 52). Whereas Faulkner utilizes wilderness as part of his literary aesthetic, a rather anthropocentric concept, McCarthy dodges that issue by creating a literary landscape devoid of true wilderness. However, McCarthy still holds to the principle of Faulknerian ecology that states that human violence enacted upon the land permeates into human communities and contributes to failings in human morality.

Furthermore, McCarthy sheds Faulkner's idealism concerning nature. While McCarthy would agree that nature is immutable and impartial, Eric Link contends that he also integrates a literary naturalism into his works "in which the ambitions of individuals are routinely circumscribed by the coercive pressures of environmental, biological, economic, and social forces," and in which "Violence is the explicit manifestation of the conflict inherent in natural systems" (156, 157).

Faulkner sets the wilderness apart from human violence, but McCarthy's naturalism integrates the two. Lydia Cooper also maintains that since "Ballard is spatially and geographically located in the real world" (48), McCarthy indicates that a portion of Lester's viciousness is bred by the inherent brutality of nature. In McCarthy's ecology, violence joins the ranks of all of the other natural processes.

Though many of Faulkner's ecological principles remain true in McCarthy's works, natural, primal violence also contributes to Lester's violent impulses, not just the human abuse of the environment. While wandering the countryside of Sevier County, Tennessee, he witnesses hunting hounds chase a boar. Regarding this incident, McCarthy writes,

Ballard watched this ballet tilt and swirl and churn mud up through the snow and watched the lovely blood welter there in its holograph of battle, spray burst from a ruptured lung, the dark heart's blood, pinwheel and pirouette, until shots rang and all was done. A young hound worried the boar's ears and one lay dead with his bright rosy innards folded upon the snow and another whined and dragged himself about. (69)

Lester admires the natural, animalistic violence of this scene. The language depicting the flying gore as a primordial ballet “presents wilderness beauty and pastoral melancholia side by side with extreme depravity” because “the protagonist’s depravity marks the premise for representing wilderness beauty in its true, feral state” (Guillemin 53). In this sense, McCarthy rejects the aspect of Faulknerian ecology that claims violence occurs solely by the passing of time and through human agency, as seen in the barren landscape caused by flooding in “Delta Autumn,” and affords nature an inherent violence.

Though McCarthy correlates some of Lester’s violent impulses with the violence of nature, he also attributes Lester’s moral perversity and deranged psychology to an *oikos* in ruin. Lester is a complicated figure, not simply the embodiment of environmental violence. Rather, “McCarthy complicates” the origins of Lester’s malevolence “by blending Lester’s depravity with an unmistakable sympathy for his alienation and loss of the land, colored by the brutality and ignorance of all those he encounters” (Frye 45). In this way, Ballard parallels the Faulknerian norm in that his moral values, twisted as they are, stem from the quality of his human community and the health of the environment.

Neither Lester’s community nor the habitat in which he resides provides him the nurturing necessary to protect him from perversity and cruelty. Instead, the people with whom Lester comes into contact reject him, and the land falls subject to the chaos imposed on it by human activity. Somewhat ironically, Lester laments his environment: “Disorder in the woods, trees down, new paths needed. Given charge Ballard would have made things more orderly in the woods and in men’s souls”

(136). Paradoxically, Lester desires to introduce structure to his wounded *oikos*, yet he preys on the people and the land with his grotesque desires and his strangeness. He becomes “the personification and the dark psychological embodiment of the very chaos he apparently laments” (Frye 45). It is as though his yearning to reorder his habitat transforms into a deep hatred flowing from his dispossession and social rejection and disgust for the occupants of the land.

McCarthy further complicates Lester by forcing the reader to have sympathy for his predicament. In a sense, Lester commits horrible, unforgivable atrocities, yet he also cohabitates the land with other despicable people who mistreat both Lester and the earth. Essentially, “the narrator excoriates Ballard while commanding the audience to empathize with him,” and “Ballard is a recognizable personification of evil, but while the audience is encouraged to despise that evil . . . they are never permitted to view evil . . . as something entirely ‘other,’ entirely different from themselves” (Cooper 47). McCarthy in no way excuses Lester’s actions, but he does paint him painfully sympathetic. Lester is correct to call his home a “chickenshit town” (56). He lives in a toxic environment where the people reject a boy who witnesses his father commit suicide and whose mother runs away from him, dispossess him of his land, and make a spectacle out of him to the point of creating an animal of him. He dwells in an environment where trash dump foremen commit incest with their daughters, where the inhabitants litter the earth with their garbage, and where the men remove a man in police custody from his room at a hospital and force him to show them where he keeps his victims, threatening cruel extrajudicial measures so that he will do as they say. Lester’s community contains

some of the same misanthropy, brutality, and immorality as he does, with less severity, though.

All human figures in McCarthy's works reflect the health and quality of their environments. For example, it is appropriate, given McCarthy's environmental concerns, that the dumpkeeper exhibits some of the worst values in *Child of God*. Not only does he name his daughters—in an absurdly grotesque fashion—Urethra, Cerebella, and Hernia Sue, but he also commits incest with one of them when he encounters her having sex with another man in the woods. This discovery angers him and “Next thing he knew his overalls were about his knees and he was mounting her” (27-28). The dumpkeeper's horrific immorality directly links to the state of the environment where he lives. He lives among mounds of garbage and human waste, underneath a “ropy column of foul black smoke” which “rose from a burning slagheap of old rubber” (30). The sexual perversity permeating Lester's community, a perversity that grabs hold of Lester himself, relates to the corruption of the land. Individual people and whole human communities bring violence upon themselves by destroying their habitat. Lester Ballard's toxic environment breeds a toxic community.

The people of Lester Ballard's hometown live and die in an asphyxiating environment. The slagheap at the dump spits noxious black smoke into the air. Accordingly, Lester's first victim of necrophilia dies of asphyxiation while copulating in a car. When he finds her body in the car, he appears as “A crazed gymnast laboring over a cold corpse. He poured into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman” (88). This passage illuminates both the toxicity of

McCarthy's *oikos*—Lester's victim dies from the exhaust fumes of a car—and the subsequent effects it has on those whom it does not kill. It perverts them, urging Lester and his peers to act upon their corrupted desires.

Ballard's perverse atavism reaches its fullest intensity when he begins dwelling in the cave system of Sevier County, Tennessee. While it would seem that this troglodytic reversion marks a return to nature for Lester, it actually emphasizes his alienation and his separation from his *oikos*. "The cave system that Lester inhabits," reasons Dianne Luce, resembles more of a "spiritual underworld corresponding to Lester's lost, blind, and constricted state of soul" (156), than an enlightened homecoming to humanity's true habitat: nature. After his ramshackle cabin burns down, Lester finds a new home "in the bowels of the mountain" with his "pallets of stone where dead people lay like saints" (135). Though he lives in the bowels of the earth, Lester, by way of his exile in the caves, actually feels estrangement from the land because he is forced to live underneath the land where he naturally belongs. Furthermore, this moment symbolizes Lester's complete removal from his *oikos* as both the land and the people inhabiting it reject him.

Child of God, just by its title, implicates all of humanity in Lester Ballard's crimes. McCarthy reminds his readers that Lester Ballard is a human and, that while he is responsible for his perversity, a large portion of his depravity is owed to the disintegration of his *oikos*. Lester's human society, particularly with the figures like the dumpkeeper, exists in a degraded land riddled with the trash and waste of its inhabitants. Even more, the people of whom McCarthy writes refuse to take care of Lester and make a spectacle of him. In a horrifying, yet appropriate end, the

government gives Lester's dead body to a medical school where the students methodically cut open and observe his body, where "At the end of three months when the class was closed Ballard was scraped from the table into a plastic bag" (194). Lester provides the clearest image of what happens when human institutions mistreat the land and, concurrently, mistreat the people who live on this earth.

3. *Suttree* and the Disintegrated *Oikos*

McCarthy travels westward from the more rural Sevier County to Knoxville in *Suttree*. Though the novel rests in McCarthy's familiar Appalachian setting, with this work his "vision becomes more expansive in terms of social texture and human interchange, with the blending of the rural and urban, the comic and the tragic" (Frye 52). In other words, with *Suttree* McCarthy constructs his most dynamic and comprehensive ecology of the South until he returns to the region when he writes *The Road* in 2006. *Suttree* incorporates the tensions between humanity and the environment with human social institutions, architecture, and the pollution of the river.

McCarthy does not relent in his blistering initial description of Knoxville in the early 1950s. His writing immediately indicts humanity for its desecration of the land through his account of industrial iniquity and waste. The narrator invites the reader on a journey through a city covered with "sootblackened brick," where "engines cough like lions in the dark of the yard," and where the citizens must walk "Down pavings rent with ruin, the slow cataclysm of neglect" (3). Industrial overreach infects the city with disease. These images immediately establish a sense of place, or rather, this "epistolary address to the reader makes clear from the novel's inception

the importance of place in the author's conception, as the surreal, the gothic, the grotesque, and the carnivalesque in a rich integration of formal motifs and allusions" (Frye 53). Ultimately, this letter, assumedly from Cornelius Suttree himself to the reader, sets the ecological tone for the rest of the novel.

McCarthy's Knoxville represents an *oikos* nearing complete disintegration. It is "the encampment of the damned" (3),

The city constructed on no known paradigm, a mongrel architecture reading back through the works of man in a brief delineation of the aberrant disordered and mad. A carnival of shapes upreared on the river plain that has dried up the sap of the earth for miles about.

Factory walls of old dark brick, tracks of spur line grown with weeds, a course of foul blue drainage where dark filaments of nameless dross sway in the current. (3-4)

The urban constructions of McCarthy's Knoxville pose a fundamental disconnect between meaning and order, and Cornelius Suttree's chaotic, excremental habitat. The fact that the city is constructed on "no known paradigm" proves that *Suttree's oikos* is one devoid of inherent meaning or purpose, an abominable pile of concrete and brick draining the life from the earth.

Immediately following that initial description, McCarthy introduces a noteworthy difference in his ecological typology and that of Faulkner. While both authors utilize the river as a major source of symbolism in their works that evokes time and human wastefulness, the Tennessee River operates differently from Faulkner's Mississippi River. Faulkner's palimpsestic view of the river, which floods

and creates layers of memory and time, implies a nonlinear perception constructed on temporal layers. In *Suttree's* Knoxville, "the fields run on to the river, the mud deltaed and baring out of its rich alluvial harbored bones and dread waste, a wrack of cratewood and condoms and fruitrind" (4). McCarthy's river is a roving accumulation of fecal ooze. Like the architecture of the city, it has "no known paradigm." Noel Polk, a Faulknerian reading McCarthy, notices that McCarthy's Knoxville has "none of the demiurgic power or thrill of the Mississippi," but is more "like a large undulant body of water with neither shimmering surface nor profound psychological depth" (67). Though Faulkner and McCarthy both employ river symbolism to revoke linearity, Faulkner's time, while still nonlinear, rests upon a layered cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Time in McCarthy's works, as represented by the Tennessee River, accumulates in a nonsensical mass, in which none of the events and happenings particularly relate to each other, other than incidentally.

This depiction of the Tennessee River makes a hard environmental accusation. It charges the literary and historical authorities in Knoxville with the misuse of the land and the people for the purposes of the expansion of industrial human development. The brick and concrete architecture and the references to the river evoke the Tennessee Valley Authority and its dominance over the river valley. William Prather, in his ecohistorical analysis of *Suttree*, claims the TVA "dispossessed 72,000 people, one third of them land owners and two thirds of them tenant farmers" (29). McCarthy's own father, Charles McCarthy, worked as a lawyer for the TVA and defended this dispossession of the people from the land by claiming that the TVA would compensate the farmers in the area for their economic bother.

Charles McCarthy writes, "These factors are taken into consideration by TVA and an attempt is made to leave the landowner in as good a financial position as he occupied before his land was purchased . . . and we are satisfied that it pays off in dollars and cents" (quoted in Prather 32). In the repurposing of the land for capital, technological, and political advancement, the TVA alienated the people of East Tennessee from the land and from their community. The TVA implemented dams, and power plants, and removed people from their homes and, "As one result, hierarchy, not community, reigns" (Prather 35-36). McCarthy incorporates the themes of displacement and environmental abuse to issue an indictment against those who desire to use power to dry up the "sap" of the earth and its inhabitants.

"The encampment of the damned" and the people of McAnally Flats form a community of collective displacement. Cornelius Suttree, a self-exile, lives among the slummers J-Bone, Boneyard, Hoghead, Callahan, and Gene Harrogate, all men who at some point suffer displacement. Whereas Faulkner tends to highlight the effects of alienation from the land on individual characters like Lucas Beauchamp or Roth Edmonds to comment on society at large, McCarthy immediately establishes an entire community of the dispossessed. Though most of *Suttree* traces the life of Cornelius Suttree, the episodic events of the novel emphasize the culture, lifestyle, and actions of the dispossessed people of McAnally Flats.

This literary representation of Knoxville comprises a lonely, industrial environment in which the people struggle to find community and dignity in an *oikos* deprived of the land by government, industry, and great technological advances. The episode where Suttree brings some fish he caught to the riverside market and

subsequently embarks on a drunken bender accentuates the bustle of the dispossessed community and the culture-wide desire to find dignity in a city that desecrates the land. McCarthy's description of the city illustrates the human reaction to alienation from the land. Suttree wakes up and hears "everywhere in the hot summer air the drone of machinery, the lonely industry of the city" (63) and passes through a "landscape of old tires and castoff watertanks rusting in the weeds and bottomless buckets and broken slabs of concrete" (64). It is appropriate that the industry of the city is "lonely." The wasteful nature of the city's industry ends the concomitance between the land and its inhabitants, rendering the people of Knoxville lonely.

The residences of the people reflect the castoff nature of this city. Suttree travels "Over the stained and leaning clapboard shacks, over the barren rubble lots and the fields of wirecolored sedge, over the cratered wastes of hardpan and the railway road," among "colossi of tin and down by the stones and bracken and mud that marked the river shore" (64-65). Here, the state of the human community reflects the state of the environment. The Tennessee Valley Authority, industrial increase, and technological advances transform Suttree's city into a barren landscape, and the human settlement there follows suit.

Suttree's journey to the market progressively provides perspective on the state of the landscape, the human residences, and, eventually, the people themselves. When Suttree reaches Market Street, he breathes "an atmosphere rank with country commerce, a reek of farm goods in the air tending off into a light surmise of putrefaction and decay." In this space, he encounters "Pariahs . . . blind

singers and organists and psalmists . . . vendors and beggars and wild street preachers haranguing a lost world with a vigor unknown to the sane” (66). McCarthy further depicts this “maimed Humanity” with “Every other face goitered, twisted, tubered with some excrescence. Teeth black with rot, eyes rheumed and vacuous.” He calls them a “Dour and diminutive people framed by paper cones of blossoms, hawkers of esoteric wares, curious electuaries ordered up in jars and elixirs decocted in the moon’s dark” (67). This congregation, of which Suttree considers himself a “fellow worker in these cloacal reaches” (65), echoes the damage done to the land. They are byproducts of dispossession and alienation from the land, the outcomes of an abused environment.

The city as an urbanized, industrialized, and mechanized locus of spatial confinement strips its residents of personal freedom. The civic and municipal advancements of modernity in *Suttree* confirm Faulkner’s postulations in *Go Down, Moses* that the human development of land drains the entire *oikos*—encompassing the land, people, and other animal life—of its vitality. In an ecological sense, McCarthy’s urban center disrupts the balance of human communal health and environmental health, “for in *Suttree*, the rising tide of municipal power dominates the physical world and punishes all who stray from their assigned roles in society” (Wilhelm 99). The result of this dominance is the deranged humanity that Suttree encounters on Market Street.

McCarthy equates the health of the human community of Knoxville to the health of the land to the extent that the people’s physical features begin to resemble the state of the land. The “goitered, twisted, and tubered” faces seem deformed, but

are rather un-formed, indicating a level of disintegration that does not occur naturally. Quite unnaturally, the physical decrepitude of these people is forced upon them by their abject conditions. The impersonal “wrath of municipal power” (Wilhelm 99) appropriates the land, develops it for industry and technological advancement, and precludes the people from forming any sort of positive, natural relationship with the land. The urbanized society of *Suttree* eradicates both human and ecological dignity, in turn, annihilating the land to the point that the people who live there start physically disintegrating.

This decay extends beyond the bounds of the purely physical world, and seeps even into the more abstract moral and political realms. The “jumbled shackstrewn waste” (29) of McAnally Flats only houses the poor and racial minorities. Because of their dispossession, likely a result of a legal process like eminent domain, those of lower economic and social status must live in the slums of Knoxville. McCarthy divides the city into two spaces, according to Randall Wilhelm, and “the interplay between these spaces—civic-sanctioned urban areas and disenfranchised minority slums—provides the topographical nexus of the novel, underscoring . . . the appropriation and marking off of geographic areas based on race and economic status” (102). Very similar to the way Faulkner treats issues of racial minorities and the poor, McCarthy correlates their systemic oppression with the mistreatment and abuse of the land. By bifurcating the city in this way—between the poor and the rich, between the black and the white, and between the powerful and the powerless—McCarthy creates an *oikos* in which the political and moral ideologies of the municipal power liken themselves in the image of the land.

Deep divisions in the land and in the human community suggest an abiding sense of purgatorial liminality in *Suttree*. Given this information, it means that Suttree, the neurotic protagonist, is the archetypal modern hero: the isolated individual. Suttree himself recognizes that he is in a type of limbo, calling his world a “terrestrial hell” (14). Appropriately then, “the world of *Suttree* is presented in purgatorial terms” (Luce 226). Suttree’s journey to save Gene Harrogate from the caves underneath Knoxville resembles the excursion a Greek hero traveling through the underworld or like Dante traversing through Hell. Edwin Arnold writes of this scene that Gene Harrogate’s name “takes on a deeper meaning, for in one sense Suttree ‘harrows’ the ‘gates’ of hell to attempt the rescue, to retrieve Gene from the depths” (59). Suttree’s expedition into this hellish, nightmarish underworld is indicative of the overall life of the average person living in a McCarthyian *oikos*. For example, the further into the caves Suttree travels, and consequently the closer he gets to finding Gene, the air quality becomes “more tainted, a rising sulphur [*sic*] reek of sewage” (276). These smells harken both to the sulfurous inferno of the Christian hell and to McCarthy’s well-established fecal environment. In combining imagery of hell and the familiar excremental scents, sights, and sounds, McCarthy connects the land with the concepts of damnation and obscurity. Suttree then becomes the Knoxville everyman who is doomed to an absurd sojourn through hell just in order to survive.

Suttree’s plight, despite his insistence on his own individualism, holds no uniqueness. Suttree, like the rest of those dwelling in the “encampment of the damned,” inhabits a “terrestrial hell” riddled with the abuse of the land and the

subsequent systemic oppression of the people. The entirety of McAnally Flats suffers alienation from the land and from each other because the impersonal municipal and governmental powers of Knoxville transform the terrain into an earthly hell, a purgatorial wasteland devoid of any order, or to use McCarthy's language, "paradigm. "

To understand the type of hell that McCarthy depicts, the historical actions of the TVA require some revisitation. In a particularly morbid scene, Suttree and his friends go out drinking at Abednego Jones' shanty. Suttree asks his friend Blind Richard to feel the table and discover what the words on the bottom of the marble slab say. Richard responds, "It's a gravestone". When Richard asks who the headstones belonged to, Suttree answers, "They're just stones. They came off an island down the river before it was flooded" (369). This passage, though brief and easy to overlook, informs the novel's overall outlook on the municipal powers in the Knoxville area. By incorporating this moment into his work, McCarthy "evokes the history of the Tennessee Valley Authority and its influence on the lives of people living along the Tennessee River" (Prather 27). McCarthy holds the TVA and the American government responsible for the displacement of thousands of Tennesseans. Not only does the flooding of the Tennessee River devastate the environment, animal habitats, and human communities, it desecrates the graves of the dead. The wastefulness of Tennessee's human institutions creates and perpetuates *Suttree's* "terrestrial hell."

Departing from the similarities in Faulkner and McCarthy's ecologies, primarily from the disrupting and disintegration of the *oikos*, *Suttree* demarcates an

essential difference in the environmental sympathies of the two authors. Georg Guillemín, discussing pastoralism in McCarthy's novels, argues that primarily, *Suttree* "remains free of pastoral nostalgia" (12), an element that dominates the narrative of *Go Down, Moses*. Though McCarthy's later works, like *The Border Trilogy* and *The Road*, incorporate such nostalgia, those novels, except for *The Road*, deal solely with McCarthy's western ecology. His early southern ecology, especially in *Suttree*, looks much different. Though novels like *Child of God* and *Suttree* lament the rampant destruction and mistreatment of the land, they do not anxiously long for an unreachable pastoral past like Ike McCaslin in "Delta Autumn."

In this way, McCarthy's ecology contains more realistic expectations for the environment. This is not to say that *Suttree* is not pastoral. In many ways, *Suttree* is pastoral in a manner that reflects reality and is ecopastoral. It can be categorized as ecopastoral because it "respects the ecological equality of all creatures and favors undomesticated nature over agricultural land, but, moreover, because it equates the wilderness of nature with the social wilderness of the city and the internal wilderness of the human mind" (Guillemín 13). *Suttree's* ecology prefers undomesticated land but it also recognizes the futility of returning to a sublime, untouched past. Human hands have done too much damage to the earth to ever truly reach that point. However, this novel does favor efforts to create a positive relationship between humans and the land, so that no further destruction occurs. No such relationship is truly visible in *Suttree's* narrative, but the indictment and condemnation of the human forces that mistreat the land and displace its inhabitants indicate that that sentiment does in fact exist.

From the outset, this novel places those who control the *oikos* in contempt. Suttree rejects the judges, businessmen, legislators, and all who hold power. During one of the enigmatic moments in the novel when the narrative switches to a first person perspective, Suttree thinks to himself,

In my father's last letter he said that the world is run by those willing to take the responsibility for the running of it. If it is life that you feel you are missing I can tell you where to find it. In the law courts, in business, in government. There is nothing occurring in the streets. Nothing but a dumbshow composed of the helpless and the impotent.

(13-14)

Despite his father's advice, Suttree rejects the notion that the law and business effect society positively, at least in the fashion that they are run in Knoxville. Rather, he muses to himself, "From all old seamy throats of elders, musty books, I've salvaged not a word" (14). In other words, *Suttree* as a whole takes on an accusatory tone, one that discards conventional wisdom from the judges, lawmakers, and businessmen because it is under their watch that the TVA flooded the Tennessee River Valley, displacing thousands of people. It is under their supervision that the city of Knoxville becomes a stagnant ooze of pollution and parasitic industry.

Finally, McCarthy offers a warning of what happens when human institutions and municipal powers operate completely unrestrained. Suttree's decision at the end of the novel to leave McAnally Flats and Knoxville baffles some readers. After experiencing a spiritual rebirth in his fight with typhoid fever, why would he leave his community? The answer is both "prescient and practical" as "his friends are

being herded out of town” and “the demolition of McAnally flats is imminent” (Wilhelm 106). When Suttree returns to McAnally flats after his bout with illness, he notices “New roads being laid over McAnally, over the ruins, the shelled facades and walls standing in crazed shapes, the mangled iron firestairs dangling, the houses halved, broke open for the world to see” (463). He says to his friend J-Bone, “They’re tearing everything down.” J-Bone responds, “Yeah. Expressway . . . New roads through McAnally” (463). Here Suttree witnesses the beginning of the final destruction of his *oikos*. The construction of the major highway not only further violates the already toxic environment with more concrete and metal, it also displaces McAnally’s residents yet again.

Under the circumstances, Knoxville no longer has the capability to respect the earth and nurture its human communities. While Suttree examines the new construction project, “The destruction of McAnally Flats found him interested. A thin, a wasted figure, he eased himself along past scenes of wholesale razing” (464). Suttree’s figure is haggard and wasted, mirroring the state of his city. The denouement of this novel reinforces the ecological principle that the health and vibrancy of individuals and their communities depend on the health and vibrancy of the land. Just to survive, Suttree must make the decision to “Fly them” (471), that is to depart from Knoxville permanently and search for a healthier land. Unfortunately, his *oikos* no longer sustains life, and continues forming a fecal accumulation of waste.

4. Conclusion

Faulkner's ecology of the South deeply influences McCarthy's. Both authors include an ecopastoralism—meaning that they prefer land without the marks of human abuse—in their texts that mourns the mistreatment of the land by human institutions. Both prefer undeveloped land to human cultivation. Faulkner employs river symbolism to represent time, a technique that McCarthy adopts, though he utilizes it differently, in that he departs from the Faulknerian, layered, form of nonlinearity. Rather, he portrays time, through the image of the Tennessee River, as nonsensical ooze, without reason or direction. Each author also records the moral failings of those alienated or displaced from the land. Faulkner and McCarthy construct their ecologies in such a similar way, and deploy enough of the same environmental themes, that to consider them members of separate ecological traditions overlooks their many similarities.

Admittedly, Faulkner and McCarthy have enough differences to make the claim that they are part of the exact same tradition irresponsible. For example, McCarthy's works lack the idealism and pastoral nostalgia of Ike McCaslin, and by extension, the entirety of *Go Down, Moses*. While *Child of God* and *Suttree* both mourn the loss of undeveloped lands and accuse human institutions of mistreating the environment. They do not give the wilderness a transcendental immortality or any sublime quality at all, for that matter. Simply, McCarthy's works assume a more materialist tone, in that they are more grounded in the realities of the world, reflecting a shift in environmental history. To phrase it another way, *Lester* and *Suttree* lack the pastoral idealism of Ike because their world has no remnant or memory of the wilderness like Ike has. Ike McCaslin's idealist views make no

appearance in *Child of God* or *Suttree*. Lester Ballard and Cornelius Suttree live in a terrestrial hell and McCarthy addresses that issue head-on. Despite these differences, however, the similarities in the ways that Faulkner and McCarthy write about the environment and portray a disintegrating *oikos* make it safe to say that their ecologies contain some essential unities in the southern literary tradition.

These unities include the consequent moral failings of humanity when human overreach initiates the destruction of the environment, critiques of landowning, and *oikoi* that provide little or, in McCarthy's case, no hopes for future restoration. Though Faulkner's idealistic view of a return to a mythic pastoral past differs from McCarthy's vision of an utterly wasted hellscape, that change lies largely in the difference in historical moment, and in the philosophical variance between modernity and postmodernity. Whereas the former laments the environmental losses ushered in by industrialism, colonialism, and large-scale war, and seeks a solution for the collapse and fragmentation of human society, the latter only offers up the pessimistic option of fleeing from the effects of that disintegration to a space not yet affected by the rot and decay of time's passing. That is, McCarthy's environmental anxiety originates in the peculiarly postmodern existentialism of the post-World War II, post-nuclear world in which the new philosophical understandings of the universe dictate that meaning is unknowable and time is entirely nonlinear and without order. In conclusion then, a comparative analysis of Faulkner and McCarthy's ecologies proves germane and useful to the ongoing discourse on ecology in southern literature, despite the two authors' differences in historic moments and geographical locations. Faulkner clearly influences and

informs McCarthy's works and reading the two side-by-side offers an important point of comparison in the academic fields of both Southern Studies and ecocriticism.

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Appendix: Abstract

This thesis adopts an ecocritical lens to explore the major similarities in ecology in the works of William Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy. Much of the scholarship involving both of these authors either compares them in regard to their philosophical structures or their Southern Gothic themes, or examines the ecology of each author individually. However, both Faulkner and McCarthy address environmental issues concerning landowning, anthropocentrism, and imbalance in the relationship between humans and the land. Each author also depicts what human society looks like when the *oikos*—the Greek root word of ecology, literally meaning household, but on a larger scale, habitat or environment—disintegrates. In Faulkner's text *Go Down, Moses*, and in McCarthy's works *Child of God* and *Suttree*, the decaying moral quality of human society mirrors the destruction of the environment. The findings of this essay conclude that Faulkner and McCarthy's ecologies match in ways too similar to consider them members of entirely separate ecological traditions in southern literature. Based on this conclusion, when employing an ecocritical theoretical framework, a comparative approach to Faulkner's literature and McCarthy's southern works effectively addresses the environmental and socioeconomic concerns of the American South.