“WILDNESS IS THE CURE”:
A PASTORAL READING OF ROBERT GIPE’S CANARD COUNTY TRILOGY

A Thesis
by
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Abstract

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Robert Gipe's fictional Canard County Trilogy, *Trampoline* (2015), *Weedeater* (2018), and *Pop* (2021), has been readily accepted by critics into the Appalachian literary canon alongside works by authors such as Lee Smith, Fred Chappell, and Ann Pancake. While the series features commentary on extractive industries in Appalachia and the environmental and social degradation they have caused and continue to inflict, analyzing the trilogy through a pastoral lens sheds new light on the connection between pastoral retreats in the novels and the reclamation of land, lives, and resources from said extractive forces. This thesis analyzes how the trilogy comments on the three sub-genres of pastoral literature: traditional pastoral, anti-pastoral, and post-pastoral literature as outlined by ecocritic Terry Gifford. The series favors the post-pastoral, where protagonists listen to and contemplate nature and work towards answering Gifford's post-pastoral questions. *Trampoline* depicts its protagonist Dawn Jewell as she unsuccessfully attempts to escape the dysfunction of civilization by immersing herself in nature during several traditional pastoral retreats,

and the novel ends with her recognizing the importance of listening to nature rather than using it as a tool for escape. Similarly, *Weedeater* portrays one of its protagonists, Gene, as he attempts to find solace by tampering with nature during anti-pastoral retreats, only for him to realize that tampering with culture (art) for the sake of nature (environmentalism) is a much more productive way of gaining control over extractive forces. The lessons that Dawn and Gene learn culminate in the trilogy's post-pastoral trajectory, most evident in *Pop*, where Dawn's daughter, Nicolette, who understands the importance of listening to her environment, explores several of Gifford's post-pastoral questions, especially the fourth one: "if nature is culture, is culture nature?" (*Reconnecting* 34). *Pop* also features a post-pastoral retreat where Canard County itself is the rural Arcadia as a film crew highlights the importance of listening to the "rural," allowing the residents of Canard to express their wildness, tell their own stories, and craft their own identities. Overall, a pastoral analysis of the Canard County Trilogy shows the pitfalls of traditional and anti-pastoral retreats while underscoring the benefits of post-pastoral practices.

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I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to each member of my fantastic thesis committee. Without the instruction of Dr. Zackary Vernon and Dr. Savannah Murray, my understanding of ecocriticism and the pastoral would have been sorely insufficient, and their assistance in organizing and finalizing this thesis has been indispensable. And of course, I am unfathomably grateful for Dr. Sandra Ballard and her help in crafting this thesis into what it is today. Without Dr. Ballard, this thesis would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank Dr. Erica Abrams-Locklear at UNC Asheville for not only introducing me to the work of Robert Gipe, but also inspiring in me a passion for Appalachian culture and the ways in which such a vibrant culture shines through in its literature.

Finally, I want to thank my fellow graduate teaching faculty members and thesis writers, Zoë Benfield and Daniel Wartham, as well as my friends Kristian and Joanna Barbee and Clint and Sara Smith, without whom the writing process would have been much more stressful.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my very own Memaw. “Most of what I know about being loved, I learned from Mamaw” (Gipe, *Pop* 321), “Mamaw’s love was more about what you did. Less about what you said” (324).

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Chapter 1: Literature Review:

The Pastoral Tradition in Robert Gipe's Canard County Trilogy

The Canard County Trilogy

In a 2019 interview, Robert Gipe joked that, after working on his first novel, *Trampoline* (2015), for several years, he became "an overnight sensation at the age of fifty" (Oliver). *Trampoline* has become an Appalachian classic, with some calling it "one of the best books about Appalachia in the past decade" (Vernon, "Their Impulse"). Dealing with topics such as mountaintop removal mining and the familial dysfunction caused by drug addiction, the illustrated novel assesses extractive industries and social justice issues in the fictional Canard County to consider these matters in Appalachia as a whole. Gipe's commentary on exploitative forces such as coal mining companies continues in the sequels to *Trampoline*: *Weedeater* (2018) and *Pop* (2021).

Trampoline follows the events in the life of its first-person narrator, fifteen-year-old Dawn Jewell, in the 1990s as she gets wrapped up in her Mamaw's fight to stop mountaintop removal in Canard County in eastern Kentucky. As Dawn aids her Mamaw, *Trampoline* explores different social, political, and economic forces through the dysfunction caused by addiction which plagues Dawn's family. Dawn ultimately saves her uncle Hubert from suicide even after she has watched him enable her mother's addiction to pills (300). The dysfunction in the family is a serious point of tension in Dawn's life, as she feels as though the normal life of a teenage girl is inaccessible while she's caught up in fighting mountaintop removal and coping with her mother's addiction and abuse. However, Gipe ends the novel on a happy note, with the fight to save Blue Bear Mountain succeeding, a plot point based on the

real fight to save Black Mountain in Harlan County, Kentucky (Gipe, "Unsuitable"), and with Dawn starting her relationship with Willet Bilson, who becomes her husband throughout the remainder of the trilogy.

Weedeater, set in 2004, is told from two different perspectives. Dawn Jewell, who now has a four-year-old daughter named Nicolette, continues to narrate parts of the story while Gene, a lawn care worker known by his nickname, Weedeater, narrates other sections. Although *Trampoline* focuses primarily on the extractive force of coal mining companies with drug addiction as a subsequent, albeit vital, theme, *Weedeater* sets its sights on pharmaceutical companies and illegal drug trade as an extractive force of destruction against human health and communities, while coal mining maintains its presence as an important issue. With the opioid crisis at its worst in Canard County, Dawn is traumatized by the death of her Mamaw, her mother, and her friend Evie in the span of a few months, with her mother and Evie dying as a result of the opioid epidemic. Dawn's mother and Evie are but two of the lives lost to the opioid epidemic in Canard County. Gene has lost his sister as a result of the opioid crisis before the events of the novel, and as a result, *Weedeater* highlights how Gene attempts to create order in a world that is inherently disorderly, for example, by trimming weeds.

Weedeater also focuses on the importance of art in activism, such as when Gene alters Dawn's aunt June's "COALTOWN!" sign. The large sign, made by June for the arrival of President Bush in Canard, is her way of compromising her political beliefs for the sake of securing funding for her art class, but Gene, given his desire to set things in order, changes the sign to read "COAL=OXY" to draw attention to the addictive and dangerous qualities of

both the coal mining and drug industries (220). It is in this way that the novel highlights the role that art plays in activism.

Pop picks up the narrative in 2016 with three narrators: Dawn, Hubert, and the now seventeen-year-old Nicolette. While coal mining, drug abuse, and chemical spills are all important social and political issues explored in the novel, the concern explored most in the work is the exploitative nature of processed and sugary foods, including carbonated drinks. Dawn, reliant on sugar to cope with her trauma, is diagnosed with diabetes, and Nicolette and her friends start a company to manufacture their own healthier pop made with ingredients native to Appalachia. Meanwhile, Hubert starts a cabin-rental business to cater to a film crew that, throughout the novel, shoots for a movie that incorporates Appalachian voices and opinions.

Each novel in the trilogy features Gipe's own illustrations, which address the reader directly. This sort of direct language, Gipe has said, is meant to be reminiscent of orality, as oral tradition plays an important role in Appalachian culture, history, and storytelling traditions (Vernon, "Their Impulse"). Indeed, sometimes the non-illustrated narrative goes out of its way to reinforce the trilogy's oral inspirations, with lines such as when Dawn says: "I don't know why I said that. Yeah, I do" (Gipe, *Trampoline* 281) addressing the reader in a conversational way more indicative of the nuances of speech than of writing. This element of orality is important not only in the trilogy's Appalachian roots but in Robert Gipe's own life as well, as he anchored his career as a teacher at Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College in "interviews and oral histories in eastern Kentucky" (Vernon, "Their Impulse"). Oral histories also play a role in the ongoing performance project Gipe oversees, Higher Ground, which incorporates the stories of real people in eastern Kentucky in its

theater productions (Gipe, “Finding Higher Ground”). This idea of making the voices of rural communities heard is a prominent theme in the trilogy, and one that I believe is best examined through a lens of the literary pastoral tradition.

Analyzing the Trilogy with a Pastoral Lens

This thesis examines the Canard County Trilogy through such a lens to highlight how the series emphasizes the importance of listening to the environment, the importance of rural voices being heard, and the similarities between the two. Analyzing the trilogy through a pastoral lens also underlines the ways in which listening to the environment and allowing Appalachian locals to tell their own stories and craft their own identities aids in the struggle to reclaim Appalachian land, lives, and resources from extractive and exploitative forces such as coal mining companies, the pharmaceutical industry, and the film industry. While manufacturers of sugary and processed foods are not addressed as directly as other exploitative forces, the ways in which these convenience foods pose a threat to traditional foodways and consumer health are explored extensively in *Pop*, and the reclamation of dietary habits and the use of ingredients native to Appalachia is a major theme in the novel. *Trampoline, Weedeater,* and *Pop* each exhibit facets of traditional pastoral literature, anti-pastoral literature, and what ecocritic Terry Gifford calls “post-pastoral” literature, and although each genre of the pastoral can be found in all three novels, there is a clear trajectory leading up to the end of *Pop* that confirms Gifford’s assertion that post-pastoral literature exhibits a relationship between humans and nature that focuses more on the connections to nature than disconnections relevant to the pastoral (*Pastoral* 148). The relationship, this thesis argues, benefits humans in the fight to reclaim land, lives, and resources just as it

benefits the environment. The trilogy stresses the importance of listening to an environment by contrasting failed traditional pastoral retreats and anti-pastoral expressions with post-pastoral practices that highlight the importance of listening to the Appalachian environment, with the first two novels primarily critiquing the pitfalls of the traditional pastoral and anti-pastoral genres. Gifford makes the case that post-pastoral literature avoids the idealizing qualities of other pastoral genres and portrays nature as existing for its own sake rather than for human utilization, and that ultimately post-pastoral literature inspires and guides readers to craft a healthier relationship with their own environments, understanding the ways in which they themselves can connect with nature (148), an important outcome in a world ravaged by environmental degradation.

Pastoral poetry is one of the oldest genres of literature, with works such as Hesiod's *Work and Days* (c. 700 BCE) and Theocritus' *Idylls* (c. 300 BCE) associating shepherding and rural life with simple pleasures (Gifford, *Pastoral* 16-7). Yet pastoral literature continued to be cherished by courts and urban readers into the Renaissance (25), and from the Augustan period into modern English and American pastoralism (32-33). The broadest definition of "pastoral" literature is any work which describes a rural place in contrast to an urban one, but a more specific interpretation of traditional pastoral literature includes a "retreat" to and a "return" from "Arcadia." Arcadia was originally the site of many classical Greek pastorals, but critics of pastoral literature like Terry Gifford now use the term to mean any literary depiction of a rural area that serves the purpose of being a retreat from an urban area (*Pastoral* 1-2).

We can see one example of a pastoral retreat to Arcadia in *Trampoline* when Dawn goes into the woods in an attempt to get "farther away from the bullshit of the world" (Gipe

32), she is attempting to escape into an Arcadia. However, Gipe resists the romanticization that often pervades pastoral literature: “and then you trip over the cable running from somebody’s satellite dish, and then you see the trailer and hear the creak of the trampoline springs, and then it’s oh well, welcome back” (*Trampoline* 32). Gipe uses humor to mock what is a common trope in pastoral literature: the idealization of nature and the idea that simply being in the woods provides escape from life’s complexities and psychological or spiritual renewal.

Often in traditionally pastoral works, the harsh realities of living in a rural area are ignored for the sake of making Arcadia seem pleasurable and carefree (Gifford, *Pastoral* 2; unless otherwise indicated, page references in this paragraph are from *Pastoral*). Traditional pastoral poems, even ones that question pastoral literature’s idealization of the rural, romanticize country life to an extent that the inhabitants of the rural are made to be better off than the urban and the rural is made to be a solely creative force rather than a creative *and* destructive force (8). Early pastoral literature of Ancient Greece often acknowledged its idealization of the environment, making the shepherd’s life out to be easier and less dangerous than it was. The landscapes in these early pastoral texts were depicted as luxurious, welcoming, and simple; the environment was solely creative and not at all destructive (22). This sort of oversimplification of rural life continued throughout the Renaissance, but while ancient pastoral literature occasionally acknowledged this shortcoming, pastoral texts of the Renaissance and Augustan Age tended to blindly romanticize rural life without realizing the irony (25). Later English and American pastoral texts would incorporate the purportedly carefree lives of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The rise of Edenic qualities in anglophone pastoral literature brought further

complications, as pastoral writers defined the Arcadias they wrote about as existing to benefit and be controlled by humankind, just as Adam was to have dominion over all creatures. Modern pastoral literature especially, grounded in Eurocentric ideas of natural beauty, portrays the "innocent," uncorrupted, untouched-by-human areas of the rural as something that requires human protection (33). Because of this sort of idealization, the rural exists in traditionally pastoral works for the purpose of helping us better understand the complexities of the urban (10). As Gifford puts it, "If the pastoral is successful, the audience will know that what is perceived to be happening in Arcadia has relevance for them in their own time and (urban) place, with its own anxieties and tensions" (82). When we re-examine this literary convention, we find that nature in traditional pastoral texts exists for the benefit of humans and is never depicted as an entity that exists for its own sake, an idea that is becoming increasingly outdated at a time when the environmental crisis is exhibiting our lack of control over nature (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 4).

The Canard County Trilogy explores several retreats to rural areas and returns to urban areas, but what constitutes "rural" and "urban" is entirely situational. In this thesis, the terms "rural" and "urban" are used in relation to pastoral theory, where the primary indicators are not necessarily the locale's city-life or country-life qualities, but instead the place being retreated from (urban) and the place being retreated to (rural). In traditional pastoral and anti-pastoral literature especially, the "rural" is defined by wildness, naturalness, and a lack of civilization, whereas the "urban" is defined by cultivation, culture, and civilization. Still, these terms are relative to the retreat in question. In other words, the rural/urban binary in a pastoral retreat depends on the context of the retreat. When Dawn goes on a walk in the woods to escape "the bullshit of the world" (Gipe, *Trampoline* 32), the

rural area is the woods while the urban area in question is her uncle Fred's house, which she is trying to escape from because of the dysfunction and tension of Thanksgiving dinner. Similarly, in *Weedeater*, Gene attempts to escape the pain of his sister's death by retreating to the "spring woods," a place entirely isolated from civilization where "couldn't nobody find [him]" (Gipe 97). The rural/urban binary in these retreats is on a micro level, with urbanity being classified by the mere presence of civilization (further highlighted by Dawn's retreat's failure when she encounters any sign of human life such as a cable or a trampoline). But there are retreats in which the binary is on a macro level, with the entirety of Canard County representing the rural area. In *Pop,* Hubert builds cabins for tourists coming to Canard County, including a film crew shooting a movie in the area. The film crew, coming from Hollywood, allows the situation to be read through a pastoral lens, as the filmmakers and film crew are retreating to the rural area of Canard County. Evidence of civilization such as cabins and vehicles (four-wheelers) no longer demarcate the urban, as the binary in this context is much broader than in Dawn's escape to the woods.

Gipe's humorous satire of pastoral idealization is most prevalent in *Trampoline*, as Dawn often turns to nature for escape to no avail:

> I walked out the door like I was leaving for good. That's always how I felt when I went out in the snow… The trees against the snow-white sky were like words on paper. I tried to read what they said. In a beautiful mystical nature language that no one could understand but me they said for me to kiss their ass. I am not a nature girl, see. Don't camp. Don't fish. Can't tell which animals are which by their poop. I just wander the woods. All. By. Myself. (75-6)

This sort of critique of traditional pastoral conventions is best described as anti-pastoral. An anti-pastoral text can take several forms. Most commonly, anti-pastoral conventions seek to portray the rural Arcadia as harsher than is typically described in a traditional pastoral, working as a corrective to pastoral literature's tendency to idealize the natural environment. Stephen Duck's *The Thresher's Labour* (1736) does so, for example, by portraying the English countryside as melancholy and unwelcoming (Gifford, *Pastoral* 120-21). Anti-pastoral can also be a direct response to the faults inherent in pastoral literature's idealization. A conspicuous example is Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Nimphs reply to the Shepherd" (1600), which satirizes the idea expressed in Christopher Marlowe's "The passionate Sheepheard to his love" (1599), the idea that love is represented by springtime. Raleigh's poem suggests that, if love is spring, then it cannot withstand winter, and so Marlowe's theme is revealed to be an unrealistic ideal (138). Dawn attempts to retreat into an Arcadia several times throughout *Trampoline*, ultimately failing in the process. Gipe's humorous take on traditional pastoral literature is unarguably an anti-pastoral convention.

In her article "Mountaintop Removal Mining Fiction," Summer Harrison includes *Trampoline* along with Ann Pancake's *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (2007) in her analyses of two prominent works discussing mountaintop removal in light of their protagonists' engagement with the natural world (733). In the article, Harrison coins the term "trampoline thinking" to describe the way Dawn learns to see "the world from alternative, often 'higher' perspectives and then [integrates] these into a new understanding of [her] local context" (745). "Trampoline thinking" provides us with a way to identify retreats to Arcadia that conform to a pastoral tradition as opposed to an anti-pastoral critique of the idealization of nature, as often these "higher perspectives" entail a retreat to a space where a broader

perspective can be reached. For example, Dawn obtains both a literal and figurative higher perspective at the end of *Trampoline* when she gets the opportunity to observe the county from a bird's-eye view in a helicopter (311). Analyzing "trampoline thinking" in light of pastoral conventions can help shed light on when a retreat to Arcadia in the trilogy is traditional pastoral or anti-pastoral.

Arguably the most tragic of the three novels, *Weedeater* places a special emphasis on the refuse present in Canard County and the tragedy left in the wake of the opioid epidemic. Finding new purpose, it would seem, entails a strong emphasis on the alteration of nature as a tool for consolation. Gene's role as a lawn care worker and his subsequent nickname, Weedeater, underscore this approach to reshaping nature to feel a sense of control. *Weedeater* stands out in the way it comments on the straightforward use of nature for human purposes during a pastoral retreat:

> I piled brush and heaped up rocks, tried to tidy the woods best I could… Ever since that time, when I see something human-made out in the woods, like a little run of rock wall, or rocks set in a square–most times, I expect I'm like you, I think, well, they must've been a house here, or some cow pasture or cornfield, and generally, I expect that's right, that's what it was. But now I think too maybe that was some other person's life flown all to pieces and they come out here to set something in order where nobody but the birds and the squirrels could bear witness. We just don't know what all's happened, do we? (98)

Weedeater spotlights another type of anti-pastoral literature, that which subverts the traditional pastoral not by commenting on nature's idealization, but by depicting an Arcadia in which the *explicit* purpose is to *use* nature. While traditional pastoral works only use

nature inherently in the rural's commentary on the urban, an anti-pastoral text may depict purposeful usage of the environment for human endeavors.

Sometimes, however, the trilogy depicts characters engaged in post-pastoral practices as opposed to traditional pastoral or anti-pastoral retreats. Although those sorts of anti-pastoral works that Gifford discusses, those that portray nature as unwelcoming and harsh (*Pastoral* 120-21), attempt to respond to traditional pastoral's idealization, they are still incomplete in their portrayal of nature. Being only a reaction to the pastoral, anti-pastoral works that depict nature as primarily destructive are overcompensatory in their portrayal of Arcadia as unwelcoming and continue to *use* nature to, among other things, refute or challenge the traditional pastoral genre. Even those anti-pastoral works that do not explicitly respond to existing pastoral works are in conversation with them. Duck's *The Thresher's Labour*, for example, is "a worker's reply to the eighteenth-century idealisation of the reaper" (Gifford, *Pastoral* 120), and as Leo Marx states in his influential *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), a quintessential ecocritical text that discusses the effects of industrialization on pastoral literature in America, much American pastoral literature utilizes the anti-pastoral presence of technology to provide "the counterforce in the American archetype of the pastoral design" (26). Hence, both the traditional and anti-pastoral genres are not in conversation *with* nature, but instead *use* nature to get their points across. While traditional pastoral and anti-pastoral literature fails to accurately capture the relationship between humankind and nature, Gifford explains that there is a type of pastoral literature which "has avoided the traps of idealisation in seeking to find a discourse that can both celebrate and take some responsibility for nature without false consciousness" (*Pastoral* 148).

Post-Pastoral Literature

While pastoral literature fosters a view of nature that assumes humankind's control over it, post-pastoral literature fosters a different, often healthier relationship with nature. In other words, the post-pastoral attempts to reclaim pastoralism, depicting nature not as a theater for human affairs but instead as existing for its own sake (148). "[I]f we are to listen," Gifford states, "we need to reclaim from idealization the notion of 'holism'" (*Reconnecting* 3), which in this context means understanding nature, with all its creative *and* destructive elements, as something that does not exist solely for our benefit, a holistic view of nature necessary if we are to become "responsible planet stewards" (7). Gifford's *Pastoral* (1999) and *Reconnecting with John Muir* (2006) both outline six questions that post-pastoral texts attempt to answer that set them apart from traditionally pastoral and anti-pastoral literature:

1) "can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?" (*Reconnecting* 31). In other words, a post-pastoral text may create a sense of awe in the face of the natural world and our relationship with it that is so humbling that the self-image that breeds anthropocentrism in traditional pastoral literature shifts to an ecocentric self-image (*Pastoral* 152).
2) "what are the implications of recognizing that we are part of [a] creative-destructive process" or "a creative-destructive universe equally in balance in a continuous momentum of birth and death, death and rebirth, growth and decay, ecstasy and dissolution" (*Reconnecting* 32; *Pastoral* 153)?
3) "if the processes of our inner nature echo those in outer nature in the ebbs and flows of growth and decay, how can we learn to understand the inner by being closer to the outer?" (*Reconnecting* 32).

4) "if nature is culture, is culture nature?" (*Reconnecting* 34). A post-pastoral text might comment on culture as being natural since humans are natural beings, a theme comparable with the idea that nature is a product of our cultural perception of it.
5) If culture is nature and nature is culture, "how, then, can our distinctively human consciousness, which gives us conscience, be used as a tool to heal our troubled relationship with our natural home?" (*Reconnecting* 34). A post-pastoral text might recognize "that with consciousness comes conscience" and draw comparisons between our *understanding* of the environment and our *responsibility* to live in harmony with it and protect it from environmental degradation (*Pastoral* 163).
6) "how should we address the issue that the exploitation of our planet emerges from the same mind-set as our exploitation of each other?" (*Reconnecting* 35). A post-pastoral text might recognize that "the exploitation of the planet is of the same mind-set as the exploitation of women and minorities" (*Pastoral* 165).

Gifford asserts that a post-pastoral text does not necessarily have to exhibit each of these elements (hence the phrasing: "a post-pastoral text *might* do this"), but a work of literature that exhibits a relationship with nature that differs from that offered by a traditional or anti-pastoral work would contain some of these facets in more than a few ways (*Pastoral* 150). These elements allow ecocritics to ask questions about and analyze texts in order to determine whether or not their depictions of humankind's relationship with an environment produce an idealized view of nature as existing for our benefit or propose a healthy or healing relationship with nature that avoids its exploitation and destruction by reducing the distance in the human/nature binary.

While much of *Trampoline* and *Weedeater*, when interpreted through a pastoral lens, critique the risks of romanticization, there are genuine retreats to Arcadia in the novels that instead exhibit Gifford's criteria for post-pastoral practices. When Dawn retreats to the sky in the helicopter, for example, her awe in the face of the landscape's holistic continuity conveys a humbling, ecocentric view rather than an anthropocentric one. Suddenly the presence of cables and trampolines matters not in the immensity of nature's sovereignty, and she ultimately concludes that "the world had a life of its own, fine without us" (Gipe, *Trampoline* 311). The bird's-eye view ultimately leads Dawn to conclude that nature is its own entity, and can exist entirely independent from human need and consumption, a contrast to the idealized natural landscape that she seeks earlier in the novel. However, it is *Pop* which explores these six aspects of post-pastoral literature most evidently, and it especially explores Gifford's assertion that the key to a post-pastoral mindset that underscores humanity's connection to its many environments is *listening* to nature.

If nature exists for more than human utilization, then Gifford argues that we must listen to nature's side of the story. In his article analyzing Charles Frazier's *Nightwoods* (2011), Gifford looks at the novel as a text which promotes the idea of *listening* to nature. The novel depicts its protagonists as learning to read the signs of nature ("Nature's Eloquent Speech" 567-8), and when the two child protagonists escape into the woods (in this case, a literal escape from someone attempting to murder them), they listen to their inner natures as well. The killer "reads" the landscape without actually paying attention to his environment, imparting his own subjective meaning on it without considering nature itself, and is thus slowed down by the environment. The escapees, on the other hand, listen to the landscape and are better able to navigate it (571). Gifford's analysis of *Nightwoods* juxtaposes the

exploitative character of using nature to one's own benefit with the importance of listening, contemplating, reading, and understanding nature.

"Reading" and "listening" to the landscape play a prominent role in *Pop*. When Nicolette and her friends are first starting their pop business, they decide to take a hiking trip into the woods to search for flavors they can incorporate in their soda. Hiking with Hubert and his love interest Tildy, they're able to learn a lot about Appalachian plants and their properties. At one point, Tildy warns the girls: "Honey, don't put that in your mouth. You'll pucker up like a lemon and be lost to the bathroom fever" (127). While post-pastoral literature does not necessarily need to include a retreat to Arcadia as traditional pastoral literature does, this is an example of a pastoral retreat where characters are engaged in post-pastoral practices—that is, they contemplate those six post-pastoral aspects that Gifford discusses. Not only does this escape into the Arcadia of Canard's woods show the girls the creative *and* destructive potential of nature, but it also brings them (and Hubert) the solace Dawn seeks in her pastoral escapes in *Trampoline*: "[Tildy] done a marching step on the balls of her feet like a drum major. I said, 'feeling spry?' She said 'We need to get out in the woods'" (125); "I'll have to say, between Tildy's gentle spirit and the rambunctiousness and intelligence of them younguns, my dry cod heart opened somewhat to the warmth of the world" (128). Their *listening* to nature allows this pastoral retreat into Arcadia to bring the protagonists comfort. Whereas Dawn attempts to *use* nature to escape the hardships of the urban in *Trampoline*, Hubert and Nicolette in *Pop* are simply being contemplative, exploring the woods and considering what nature, regardless of its connection with human affairs and the urban, has to say.

Perhaps the most discernible example of post-pastoral conventions in *Pop* can be seen when we zoom out to view the rural/urban dynamic from a macro lens. While the urban area in some retreats in the trilogy is represented by the absence of civilization, in this particular retreat, the urban area is represented by Hollywood and the film industry whereas the Arcadia is the entirety of Canard County and, by extension, rural Appalachia. A major plot point in the novel is when Quin Pennyroyal, Marajah, Sandy, and the rest of their Hollywood film crew come to Canard County to shoot for their sci-fi, Appalachian, monster movie, eventually titled *The Sugar Pill*. The film starts off as a movie about space aliens selling Appalachians drugs that turn them into wild-animal-like creatures, but after *listening* to the natives of Canard County, the filmmakers include a few features that express themes prominent to their social situations. "Big pharma," real estate companies, and the coal mining industry end up in the mix, with these large corporations working with the space aliens (Gipe, *Pop* 76-7). Sandy, the writer, after deliberating with the citizens of Canard County, decides that the drug that Appalachians are taking in the movie should be prescribed as a diabetes treatment, and that the monsters that Appalachians turn into should end up being the heroes rather than helpless victims (78-9). As Tildy states, "Wildness aint the disease. Wildness is the cure" (79). It is Sandy's willingness to listen to the rural–in this context, the inhabitants of Canard County, who will come to be representatives of "wildness" and animal-like beasts–that makes this sort of pastoral retreat for the Hollywood film crew one in which they exhibit a post-pastoral mindset: "Sandy took notes. We kept talking. Nobody had ever asked us what a movie about us should be like" (79).

We can also see a running theme throughout the novel that the delineation of "nature" and "culture" is no longer a possibility, a running theme that explores Gifford's fourth post-

pastoral aspect, nature as culture and culture as nature. After all, it is Dawn's frustration with culture purportedly invading nature that prevents her from enjoying her pastoral escape: "and then you trip over the cable running from somebody's satellite dish, and then you see the trailer and hear the creak of the trampoline springs" (Gipe, *Trampoline* 32). In both the case of Dawn in *Trampoline* and Gene in *Weedeater*, the escapee is unable to truly find solace until they recognize the important role that culture plays in the biosphere, with Dawn recognizing that cables and trampolines have a place in Arcadia and Gene realizing the role that art can play in activism. It is only after their realizations that Dawn and Gene are able to practice what we might call post-pastoral thinking. Nicolette, on the other hand, experiences many post-pastoral retreats[1] and engaged in post-pastoral practices in *Pop*, in large part thanks to her intuitive connection with nature, a connection that aids her in understanding Gifford's fourth post-pastoral question and the analysis that ecocritics have been proposing for decades that "nature" and "culture" should not be binary terms.

Ecocriticism and the Nature/Culture Binary: What Constitutes Arcadia?

Although Frederick Turner's 1985 article, "Cultivating the American Garden," was published decades ago, its inclusion in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) is an indication of its lasting value in the field of ecocriticism. Turner asks questions about how we as humans delineate "nature" and "culture" and concludes that "nature" is everything and that the separation between nature and culture is only a social construct. He makes the case that doing something like preparing a meal with

[1] Because post-pastoral literature does not require a retreat to Arcadia, the term "post-pastoral retreat" will be used in this thesis to indicate a pastoral retreat to Arcadia in which the characters in question are engaged in post-pastoral practices.

fresh ingredients can aid us in being mindful of the natural qualities of our day-to-day lives, qualities that we often falsely claim are "artificial." Turner proposes that we "seize our … artistic and esthetic capacities" (50) by acknowledging the natural aspects of our cultural creations, creations like food, music, and gardens.

Similarly, scholars like Timothy Morton have claimed that art plays a role in what he calls "the Ecological Thought": "Art forms have something to tell us about the environment, because they can make us question reality" (8). Zackary Vernon expresses a similar sentiment in his article "Environmental Pedagogy, Activism, and Literature in the U.S. South": "As humanities scholars, it is our responsibility to assert the importance of the arts in shaping Americans' perception of the environment and how that perception inspires or precludes the desire for and implementation of environmental reform" (228). Not only do these assertions align with Robert Gipe's own pedagogy[2] highlighting the intersections between the humanities, activism, and environmental protection, but they can also be applied to a pastoral reading of the Canard County Trilogy to analyze ways in which artistic and cultural expressions play a role in environmental activism and, ultimately, the biosphere as a whole. Cooking, for example, is often considered a cultural practice, but ecocritics like Turner would argue that preparing a dish using natural ingredients–perhaps ingredients grown in one's personal garden or herbs native to one's local environment–can aid us in understanding that, although we are cultural beings, we are very much natural beings as well, and we frequently express the importance of nature in our cultural lives through such acts.

[2] Gipe's own history of activism and his practice of connecting education, environment, and oral histories align with the idea that nature and culture are more intertwined than a strict nature/culture binary suggests. For more on Gipe's pedagogical practices and his environmental activism, see: Gipe, "Finding Higher Ground"; Gipe, "Unsuitable"; Tomlinson; and Vernon "Their Impulse."

Not only do such "artistic and esthetic capacities" exhibit the fourth aspect of post-pastoral literature, that nature is culture and culture is nature, and are thereby examples of post-pastoral practices, but they can also be used as an analytical tool to underline when cultural spaces could be considered "natural" Arcadias.

An Arcadia in a pastoral text, by definition, is something entirely separated from the urban, so the idea that an Arcadia can be, for example, a *constructed* place, seems almost contradictory. I would argue, however, that post-pastoral literary conventions provide the opportunity to analyze cultural constructions as Arcadias that highlight the role that culture plays in the environment and environmental protection. Some scholars have declared that pastoral literature is a thing of the past because the borderland between civilization and nature has grown too extensive (Gifford, *Pastoral* 174). This lack of a borderland is what the trilogy draws attention to in *Trampoline* when Dawn's retreat to Arcadia is impossible due to civilization's invasion of it. There is no longer an Arcadia to retreat to. Gifford argues that this lack of a borderland is precisely why post-pastoral literature exists. The same impulse for retreat and return that spawned traditional pastoral literature now drives us to create a new genre of literature to help us navigate the dialectical experience between nature and culture and how we should respond to the ever-increasing blending of the rural and the urban (174). The Canard County Trilogy's response to such a dilemma can be gleaned from analyzing the series, and *Pop* in particular, through a post-pastoral lens. The trilogy's response entails the construction of Arcadias–expressions of culture that underscore its interconnectedness with nature–a notion not entirely infeasible in a world where the borderland between nature and civilization has grown increasingly thin.

In rejecting the pastoral tradition of nature as an entity entirely separated from civilization, the trilogy is able to provide readers with an example of how to utilize the "artistic and esthetic capacities" that Turner references as post-pastoral practices to construct areas of pastoral retreat. Nicolette, a representative of the new generation, does so in *Weedeater* when she unknowingly utilizes a song to memorize the environment of a cave (125), and does so more intentionally in *Pop* by attending Appalachian food festivals (15). This interpretation brings with it several implications. First and foremost, it provides ways for those constructing these Arcadias to reclaim the Appalachian landscape and culture that is being harmfully utilized by the extractive forces that Gipe explores. The growing attention to traditional Appalachian cooking detailed in *Pop* and the ensuing food festivals that Nicolette attends with June reclaim an important aspect of Appalachian culture that is threatened by the convenience of processed and sugary foods. When we analyze this fact using a post-pastoral lens, we can see how the protagonists' methods of reclamation do so in a way that listens to and respects the environment. Tildy shows Nicolette and her friends how to form a connection to the land through contemplative attention when they go out on a walk in the woods. The post-pastoral practices in *Pop* contrast with the traditional and anti-pastoral retreats in *Trampoline* and *Weedeater* by depicting a connection between the protagonists and their environments that underscores a healthier relationship with nature, a relationship that, I would argue, allows them to reclaim the land from extractive forces and *listen* to nature as an entity that exists outside of anthropocentric utilization.

Chapter Outlines

The second chapter of this thesis will examine *Trampoline* and what can be gleaned from interpreting the pastoral retreats in the novel as humorous commentaries on the romanticization of nature. Each book in the series features a protagonist who takes part in pastoral conventions in different ways, whether that be going on traditional or anti-pastoral retreats or practicing a post-pastoral mindset. Dawn's attempts at using nature to escape the dysfunction of the urban sheds light on the ineffectiveness of traditional pastoral retreats. Furthermore, her retreat to her aunt June's house partway through the novel, a sort of inverse pastoral retreat wherein Dawn escapes into the urban from the rural, comments on the increasing tendency of Appalachian youth to leave–or "escape from"–Appalachia. The chapter concludes by analyzing Dawn's final retreat in the novel, one in which she understands the importance of returning to civilization after a pastoral retreat and the significance of contemplating her environment whilst on said retreat. This scene, as Dawn's successful attempt at going on a post-pastoral as opposed to a traditional pastoral retreat, predicts the trilogy's eventual trajectory: that resolving the many issues tackled in the trilogy cannot be done by *using* nature to escape, but by *working with* and *listening to* nature to reclaim land, lives, and resources.

Chapter three will examine *Weedeater* in a similar light, focusing instead on Gene's attempts at finding solace during anti-pastoral retreats rather than Dawn's traditional pastoral retreats. Following the metaphor of weedeating, Gene first tries to feel a sense of control by bringing order to his environment. It is only after he contemplates the fourth post-pastoral aspect, nature as culture and culture as nature, that he shifts away from tampering with nature to feel a sense of control and towards tampering with culture. Specifically, Gene tampers

with an art project in order to make a statement about the similarities between the exploitative natures of coal mining and the drug industry. In doing so, Gene not only accentuates the role of art and activism in the biosphere, but he also furthers the trilogy's post-pastoral trajectory by reaffirming the importance of culture in nature.

While *Trampoline* and *Weedeater* feature unsuccessful traditional and anti-pastoral elements, *Pop* conveys Gipe's ultimate trajectory, one that promotes a post-pastoral mindset. This trajectory, particularly evident when analyzed in light of Timothy Morton's concept of "ecological thinking," sheds light on the importance of *listening* whilst on a pastoral retreat, both in the smaller context of listening to nature and wildlife and in the larger context of listening to those who inhabit rural areas–citizens of rural Appalachian communities, for example. When *Pop* is analyzed through a post-pastoral lens, several important themes are highlighted: the importance of listening to the rural in a successful pastoral retreat to Arcadia; the intersections between a view of nature that recognizes its independence from the realm of human utilization and the reclamation of that land from extractive forces; and the power of constructed Arcadias in crafting such a relationship with nature, recognizing the natural aspects of cultural acts, and reclaiming land, lifestyles, and narratives.

I conclude by drawing attention to the direction that the trilogy takes in its commentary on the pastoral. Throughout *Trampoline* and *Weedeater*, the protagonists attempt to reclaim land, lifestyles, and narratives by escaping the urban and using the rural. They are ultimately left disappointed when their romanticized predictions about nature fail to be reality and attempts at reclamation and solace fall short. While *Pop* has three narrators, the spotlight definitely shines on Nicolette as the youngest protagonist, a representative of youth in Appalachia and, by extension, the future of Appalachia. Nicolette's methods of

constructing Arcadias and connecting with her natural environments paint a hopeful picture for the future of Appalachia, a future in which the escapism of traditional pastoral and anti-pastoral retreats gives way to post-pastoral practices, practices that can play a role in the reclamation of land, lives, and resources from exploitative forces. A pastoral reading of the Canard County Trilogy, along with emphasizing the above-mentioned themes, also highlights the potential for analyzing post-pastoral texts in light of the idea that ecocritics like Morton and Turner have been expounding for decades: that ecology and the biosphere should take into consideration topics, aspects, and even Arcadias that are often classified as cultural rather than natural.

Chapter 2: The Critique of Traditional Pastoral Idealization in *Trampoline*

> You walk on and on, thinking you're going deeper into the woods, deeper into the past, farther away from the bullshit of the world, and then you trip over the cable running from somebody's satellite dish, and then you see the trailer and hear the creak of the trampoline springs, and then it's oh well, welcome back.
>
> –**Dawn, in Robert Gipe's *Trampoline,* p. 32**

"Trampoline Thinking" and "Complex Pastoral"

To walk "farther away from the bullshit of the world," as Dawn attempts to do in the above epigraph, is the goal of what Leo Marx calls "sentimental pastoral" literature: "The first [kind of pastoral], or sentimental kind is difficult to define or even to locate because it is an expression less of thought than of feeling. It is widely diffused in our culture, insinuating itself into many kinds of behavior. An obvious example is the current 'flight from the city.'" (5). It is this sort of sentimentality that results in the idealization of nature, as writers of traditional pastoral literature write from a perspective of wanting to escape the urban, not from a perspective of wanting to be in, listen to, and appreciate the rural. In this chapter's epigraph, Dawn is trying to escape from the dysfunction of her family's Thanksgiving dinner celebration, where they criticize her appearance and her role in Mamaw's activism against strip mining. In Dawn's attempt at escaping into nature "away from the bullshit of the world," she fails to realize what she might bring back to benefit her relationship with the urban. She's simply trying to escape. In this way, not only is she explicitly *using* nature as an escape, but she also enters the rural space with a preconceived notion of what nature should

be like and hence never sees nature for what it really is. The epigraph, flaunting sarcastic language like "oh well, welcome back," is a humorous critique of the pastoral tradition, one that can easily be read as anti-pastoral. However, the trilogy, and *Trampoline* especially, critiques the traditional pastoral genre and the idea of a sentimental retreat into nature through more strategies than just humor. What's more, close comparison between the sentimental retreats in the novel and the complex ones reveals the trilogy's ultimate post-pastoral trajectory.

In discussing Dawn's attempt at using nature to escape her dysfunctional urban surroundings, critic Summer Harrison states the following:

> Gipe actively parodies a romanticized representation of nature reminiscent of western nature writing… Far from claiming a special connection with the more-than-human world, Dawn emphasizes the difficulty of communication with it. Here, nature offers no comforting escape from the 'bullshit of the world.' Instead, the creaking trampoline reminds Dawn of her inability to evade her flawed situation. (745)

Nevertheless, there are genuine retreats into Arcadias throughout the novel, retreats which adhere to the literary conventions of pastoral literature. Towards the end of the novel, for example, Dawn retreats in a helicopter to see Canard from a bird's-eye view. This helicopter retreat, as this chapter will discuss, is best defined as a complex, post-pastoral retreat as opposed to a traditional pastoral retreat.

The key to differentiating Dawn's sentimental retreats from her complex ones resides in the process of analyzing how the rural retreat contributes to the protagonists' (and by extension, our) understanding of the urban. In her article, Harrison coins the term "trampoline thinking" to describe the way Dawn learns to see "the world from alternative,

often 'higher' perspectives and then [integrates] these into a new understanding of [her] local context" (745). The titular object of the novel, a trampoline, is not only an item commonly found in Appalachia, but it is also a metaphor that reminds us of the second-half of any pastoral retreat: just as we may escape, retreat, or jump up on a trampoline, we must also return or come back down. As Harrison asserts, the trampoline, the retreat, still provides a higher albeit temporary perspective. Harrison's "trampoline thinking" provides us with a way to identify retreats to Arcadia that conform to a pastoral tradition as opposed to an anti-pastoral critique of the idealization of nature, as often these "higher perspectives" entail a retreat to a space where a broader perspective can be reached. For instance, in the humorous "away from the bullshit of the world… oh well, welcome back" example (Gipe, *Trampoline* 32), Dawn gleans no new perspective, and it is clear that the purpose of the retreat was entirely escapist. "Trampoline thinking," in other words, allows us to better recognize when a pastoral retreat is "complex" as opposed to "sentimental": "Pastoral is essentially a discourse of retreat which may … either simply [provide] *escape* from the complexities of the city, the court, the present, 'our manners', or [offer an opportunity to] *explore* them. This is the difference between the pejorative and the primary senses of the pastoral, between Leo Marx's 'sentimental pastoral' and his 'complex pastoral'" (Gifford, *Pastoral* 46).[3]

Although Harrison's article does not engage pastoral literature directly, her concept of "trampoline thinking" can be phrased as a question to discover when a retreat in literature escapes from the complexities of the urban or explores them: does the character retreating

[3] A "complex" pastoral retreat is not necessarily a post-pastoral retreat, and likewise, post-pastoral literature need not involve a retreat to Arcadia. Nevertheless, because post-pastoral practices entail contemplating the connection between humankind and nature, a pastoral retreat that includes post-pastoral practices (i.e. a post-pastoral retreat) must necessarily be a "complex" retreat, as a "complex" retreat means that the retreater connects the rural and the urban by integrating the rural perspective back into the urban.

bring back a new perspective from the rural, and can that perspective be integrated into an urban context? This escapism is something that Dawn desires throughout the novel, as indicated in the first of five acts of the novel: "Escape Velocity." Escape velocity, according to Merriam-Webster, is "the minimum velocity that a moving body (such as a rocket) must have to escape from the gravitational field of a celestial body (such as the earth) and move outward into space" ("Escape Velocity"). Throughout the three chapters of "Escape Velocity," Dawn constantly contemplates running away from her problems, from the stress of joining the fight against strip mining, and from the dysfunction of her family. Dawn engages in destructive behavior, including stealing two cars from her family members and wrecking one of them. Despite her efforts, as her supportive cousin Denny states, she is "Having trouble reaching escape velocity" (Gipe, *Trampoline* 42), or in other words, cannot reach the speed required to escape the "gravitational field" of Canard County. Dawn's inability to truly "escape," is caused by her inability to listen to nature, read its signs, and exhibit "trampoline thinking" by bringing some knowledge of Arcadia back into the urban. Her trouble is that she does not wish to return to the urban, represented by the civilization of Canard County. She is trying to reach escape velocity, but on a rural retreat, as with jumping up on a trampoline, return is inevitable. Because she strives to escape rather than return, Dawn does not see any point in achieving any alternative view or higher perspective to integrate back into her local context; her retreats remain sentimental rather than complex, and so, in the case of her first retreat to the woods, she does not so much as try to change her perceptions or learn anything to bring with her when she returns home.

Her inability to listen to nature is exhibited in the second major retreat to Arcadia in the novel. After she begins to regret getting involved in her Mamaw's fight to stop strip

mining on Blue Bear Mountain, Dawn walks up the mountain in the snow. Dawn's first-person narrative here epitomizes her inability to listen to nature at this stage in the trilogy: "I am not a nature girl, see. Don't camp. Don't fish. Can't tell which animals are which by their poop. I just wander the woods. All. By. Myself" (76). While the words "I just wander the woods. All. By. Myself" may imply that she at least gains some comfort from being alone in the woods, her attempted suicide on the very next page discredits such an interpretation (77). So once again, Dawn fails to find solace in nature due to her failure to truly listen to and observe her surroundings. This retreat is another attempt at using nature as opposed to understanding it. We can assess by the fact that she fails to bring back knowledge of the rural into the urban that this retreat exhibits no "trampoline thinking" and is thus a sentimental retreat. Moreover, some of Gipe's humor highlights how this is yet another *humorous* critique of sentimental pastoral: "The trees against the snow-white sky were like words on paper. I tried to read what they said. In a beautiful mystical nature language that no one could understand but me they said for me to kiss their ass" (76). Despite this humorous critique, one character present during this trip to Arcadia exhibits "trampoline thinking," a character who, despite her best efforts, is unable to teach Dawn how to listen to her environment.

When Dawn reaches the top of Blue Bear, she encounters her great-aunt from Ohio, aptly dubbed Aunt Ohio. When Dawn asks what Aunt Ohio is doing at the top of the mountain, she responds, "I been coming here long before you was born, little darling" (78). Seemingly in response to nothing in particular, Aunt Ohio exclaims "Mother Nature" before pulling twigs from her pocket and starting a little campfire (79). While this certainly shows Aunt Ohio's superior outdoorsmanship, it isn't clear that she is able to read the signs of nature, as Dawn is unable to do, until she states:

> "You must breathe… There is no substitute. The air going in, going out. Focus on that." Aunt Ohio raised both her eyebrows as high as they would go. "If you do," she said, her finger raised like some twisted stick of Christmas candy, "there's no stop to it. Natural. It's what your body wants to do." Aunt Ohio pulled on the pipe. "It's like music," she said exhaling. "See," she said, running her hand through the smoke, "like music." (81)

Not only does Aunt Ohio display an ability to listen to nature as Dawn tries to do on the same retreat, but she also conveys to Dawn the natural aspects of her own human body: we breathe because we're natural beings. Aunt Ohio tries to impart this knowledge to Dawn so that she may better cope with the harsh realities of the urban, making this trip to Arcadia a "complex" one where she might have something to bring home if only she makes an attempt to do "trampoline thinking." What's more, by correlating the natural act of breathing with the cultural creation of music, Aunt Ohio is affirming the idea that culture is nature. In this way, the retreat, although yet another humorous critique of traditional pastoral retreats when we look at Dawn's failure to read nature, implicitly answers the fourth post-pastoral question: "if nature is culture, is culture nature?" If the act of breathing here is a representation of nature– and Aunt Ohio's exclamation that breathing is "Natural. It's what your body wants to do" explicitly states that it is–then Aunt Ohio seems to answer "yes, nature is culture and culture is nature." Correlating the act of breathing to music also foreshadows Nicolette's use of music (culture) to help navigate her environment (nature) in *Weedeater* (125). While *Trampoline* clearly critiques sentimental pastoral escapism, there are also clear readings that point to the trilogy's post-pastoral themes that culminate in Nicolette's relationship with nature in *Weedeater* and, more prominently, in *Pop*.

Retreating/Escaping *from* the Rural

While each retreat to Arcadia analyzed up until this point has viewed the rural/urban binary on a smaller scale, with any sign of civilization representing the urban, we can look at a retreat in Act Four of *Trampoline* where we must zoom out of the binary to view Canard County as the rural and the city of Kingsport, Tennessee, as the urban. After getting into some trouble with her uncle Hubert, Dawn goes to stay with her aunt June in Kingsport. What's interesting about this retreat is that it is not a retreat to the rural and back again, but is instead a retreat *from* the rural, into the urban, and eventually back to Canard County. While in Kingsport, Dawn attends a gathering of activists who have been fighting coal companies, or as Dawn puts it, a "hippie party" (Gipe, *Trampoline* 214).

It is on this retreat that Dawn learns how to actually observe her surroundings and listen to that which is around her. Even if her surroundings on this retreat in particular are more urban than those of Canard, her retreat to the hippie party in the countryside within this retreat to the urban Kingsport gives her the time, space, and introspection needed to live in the moment. In response to June saying she missed the people of Canard after living in Kingsport for so long, Dawn retorts by saying that she wouldn't miss the people, but the environment: "I said I'd miss our lay of the land, the way the mountains at home pitched up in your face, didn't lay around polite and easy, willing to work with you, the way they did in Tennessee and Virginia" (221). However, on her return trip back to Canard, Dawn's newfound ability to see nature for what it is allows her to realize that people and the environment, culture and nature, are not as separated as she once thought:

> Blue Bear wasn't just about winning a fight. Everything I could see from Mamaw's porch, every place I had run through on a four-wheeler, every birdsong and spring flower, every ferny frog that come up beside a yellow muddy trail–all that kept me alive sure as if it was air I was breathing… there was only the mountains could talk sense to me. Winter, summer, spring, and fall. Didn't matter I couldn't understand what they were saying. It was like if my best true friend were from Africa or Russia or something, and they didn't speak English, but they had a look in their eye or a sound in their voice made me calm down, made me look up, look out, instead of just letting my eyes go burning blank with panic and mad at the world. I couldn't let that get torn down. When this reason for fighting came into my mind that night riding home with Decent Ferguson, the faces of my cousin Denny and his daddy rose up before me. Those coal miners who had been so good to me, who had loved me through my tree-hugging ways, needed mountains and woods more than any of us. They loved it here, and they had to tear it up to stay… I knew maybe not them but other coal-mining people would be mad at me, would hate me, but after that night, I never was mad at them… (225-26)

Her retreat *from* the rural and *into* the urban provides her with the mindset needed to listen to nature on a retreat to Arcadia rather than escape from civilization. This is shown when, after returning to Canard once, her Mamaw insists that she stay in Kingsport for a while longer, where she furthers her knowledge of living in the moment by finally starting her relationship with Willet Bilson: "I could not do anything but love him–love his ability to focus on living, to care so deeply about a game, to focus so completely on watching it, analyzing it" (Gipe, *Trampoline* 239).

This retreat is also the trilogy's way of commenting on the trend in Appalachia of young folks, ages fourteen to thirty, leaving, retreating from, "escaping," or negotiating ways to remain in the region. According to the Stay Together Appalachian Youth (STAY) Project, an organization founded in 2008 dedicated to offering young Appalachians opportunities for development, promoting resources for the youth, and envisioning a diverse, inclusive, and healthy Appalachia:

> Central Appalachia faces an exodus of young people due in large part to the lack of economic and educational opportunities. Youth from this region grow up in communities with an average high school completion rate of 68% and a 7% college completion rate. Roughly 17% of residents in these counties live in poverty, with young people disproportionately affected. ("What is STAY?")

This trend of "escape," as the trilogy shows, has been around for quite some time. Even the character of Aunt June, from a generation before Dawn, left her home: "I miss the racket people made when they got together. Everybody talking at once. Everybody jammed up together on the porch or in the front room, the kids all keyed up." Dawn responds, "that's what I'd miss the least," to which June confirms, "Yeah… that's why I left" (Gipe, *Trampoline* 220). Dawn, however, after learning to live in the moment, to listen to her environment, begins to see that nature and culture are one and the same. She decides that retreat from Appalachia is not the same as escaping the dysfunction she so desperately desires to be rid of. This is fitting, considering that in a complex pastoral retreat, the return is just as vital as the retreat. Dawn begins to understand this so much that when her Mamaw tells her to spend more time in Kingsport, the "urban," and more time with Aunt June, Dawn retorts "What about Blue Bear?" (235). This commentary regarding youth leaving

Appalachia continues throughout the trilogy, especially regarding Dawn's daughter in the second and third novels, Nicolette, who realizes through the connection she makes with her environment that Appalachia is worth staying in and fighting for. Regarding *Trampoline*, this realization that the environment can be reclaimed through activism and the knowledge about the importance of return in a complex pastoral retreat is what Dawn needs for the final retreat of the novel, where she rides in a helicopter to receive a bird's-eye view of Canard County.

Dawn's Post-Pastoral Retreat

The final pastoral retreat in *Trampoline* stands in contrast to the prior traditional retreats. This escape to Arcadia is a complex pastoral retreat as opposed to a sentimental one. At the end of the novel, after saving Blue Bear Mountain from strip mining and beginning her new relationship with Willet Bilson, Dawn is given the opportunity to see Canard County from a bird's-eye view by riding in a helicopter. While a helicopter could hardly be classified as a strictly "rural" place or a typically "rural" mode of transportation, the sight of the landscape Dawn observes is a clear indication of its ruralness relative to the "ballfield next to a community college" that the helicopter retreats from (Gipe, *Trampoline* 310). Moreover, with this scene being located at the end of the novel, the retreat metaphorically represents Dawn finally being able to briefly escape from the "bullshit of the world," the dysfunction and social issues of the ground below. What she asserts is clear evidence of her gaining a new perspective of the urban area in question:

> We moved fast through the air, but the ground was not a blur. It was paths and trails and roads, muddy clearings and ponds and gas wells. Mostly it was the tops of trees. I couldn't take my eyes off the ground. Everything was of a piece. The number of

> colors shrunk. There were hardly any people. People were scarce, gone inside, and the world had a life of its own, fine without us... I saw torn-up land, the towns and trailers, creeks and ditches, dog lots and garden plots, and everything was just as it is, no better no worse. All of it made, everything made–some by people, some by forces bigger than people, some by a mix of the two. (311-12)

The higher, trampoline perspective blurs the dysfunction of the urban space of ground-level Canard–the torn-up land of strip mining jobs and the dog lots and gas wells dotting the otherwise natural area–into a rural landscape, providing Dawn with the knowledge that "Everything [is] of a piece," an understanding that she is able to integrate into her fight against mountaintop removal. Finally, after repeated attempts to escape into the woods, Dawn's literal travel to a higher altitude allows her to have access to a new perspective that shows physical and metaphorical "higher level" insights and helps her to move toward one of Gifford's major post-pastoral questions: "can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?" Dawn gains a sense of awe in the face of the landscape's holistic continuity as it conveys a humbling, ecocentric view rather than an anthropocentric one. Suddenly the presence of cables and trampolines matters not in the immensity of nature's sovereignty: "the world had a life of its own, fine without us" (311). Furthermore, Dawn finally realizes that the purpose of a pastoral retreat is not to get away from the urban and into the rural–on the contrary, just as cables running through the woods entails, "everything [is] of a piece" and there is really no rural to retreat to–but to exhibit "trampoline thinking," which allows her to integrate a new, higher perspective from wherever she retreats to, regardless of its rural- or urban-ness, into the context from whence she has retreated.

Dawn's growth throughout the entirety of *Trampoline*, as far as her ability to successfully retreat into Arcadia is concerned, is driven by her learning how to properly see nature not as an entity separate from civilization to be used for purposes of escape, but as an entity to be listened to and observed that is not so disconnected from culture and humanity. This final retreat, a retreat to Arcadia which breaks *Trampoline*'s trend of failed sentimental retreats, points towards the trilogy's post-pastoral trajectory, a trajectory which shows how we might craft a relationship with nature where we can simultaneously contemplate and listen to the rural and bring a higher perspective back into the urban to reclaim our environment from extractive forces as Dawn reclaims Blue Bear Mountain from the coal mining companies that wanted to strip mine for their own, anthropocentric benefit.

The Role of *Trampoline* in the Trilogy's Post-Pastoral Trajectory

A pastoral reading of *Trampoline* provides us with several key themes vital to analyzing the trajectory of the trilogy, a trajectory which culminates in a healthier relationship between the protagonists and their environments in *Pop* as they move away from traditional and anti-pastoral retreats and towards post-pastoral practices and post-pastoral retreats like Dawn's flight in the helicopter. First, Dawn's repeated attempts at escaping into the wilderness bring to light the importance of "trampoline thinking" as a tool for discovering when and how a character's pastoral retreat in the series can be considered complex. Understanding that the character in question is bringing some sort of knowledge from the rural back into the urban is the first step towards analyzing if nature is being *used* or if it is being *listened to*.

As the trilogy progresses, the idea that nature and culture are not as binary as may be presented in an idealized traditional pastoral retreat results in the conclusion that Arcadias need not be traditionally "rural." Most importantly, understanding how *Trampoline* presents the ever-blurring borderland between nature and culture aids us in analyzing how the trilogy engages these artificial Arcadias in the final novel, *Pop*, as a way to better grasp the importance of the nature within our culture. Dawn is unable to escape to nature because cultural artifacts, such as the cable and trampoline in the epigraph, have begun to invade the borderland between nature and culture. It is important to a post-pastoral reading of *Pop*, and an analysis of cultural acts as natural, to ask the fourth post-pastoral question: "if nature is culture, is culture nature?" (*Reconnecting* 34), and *Trampoline* begins to shed light on that question with Dawn's frustration at civilization's supposed invasion of nature.

Finally, while *Trampoline* certainly comments on the trend of Appalachian youth retreating away from the mountains, *Pop* presents the trajectory of the trilogy as post-pastoral with the youth who want to stay, namely Nicolette and her friends. But before we can dive into the post-pastoral questions in Canard County in 2016, we must first look at Canard's continued anti-pastoral expressions in 2004 with *Weedeater*.

Chapter 3: From Anti-Pastoral Retreats to Post-Pastoral Practices in *Weedeater*

> I piled brush and heaped up rocks, tried to tidy the woods best I could… Ever since that time, when I see something human-made out in the woods, like a little run of rock wall, or rocks set in a square–most times, I expect I'm like you, I think, well, they must've been a house here, or some cow pasture or cornfield, and generally, I expect that's right, that's what it was. But now I think too maybe that was some other person's life flown all to pieces and they come out here to set something in order where nobody but the birds and the squirrels could bear witness. We just don't know what all's happened, do we?
>
> **–Gene, in Robert Gipe's *Weedeater,* p. 98**

"To Set Something in Order": From Anti-pastoral to Post-pastoral

Anti-pastoral literature can take several forms: it can directly critique the idealization of traditional pastoral literature, as *Trampoline* does, or it can depict Arcadia as a place in which nature is explicitly conveyed as something to be used. In the case of *Weedeater*, there is a notable anti-pastoral retreat that appears to be the latter. The anti-pastoral expressions in Robert Gipe's *Weedeater*, set six years after the events of *Trampoline*, begin with the title. "Weedeater" is the nickname given to Gene, the lawn care worker who is introduced in this novel as the second narrator alongside Dawn, but according to the blurb on the back of the book, it is also a metaphor for "how we put our lives back together when we lose the things we thought we couldn't bear losing, how we find new purpose in what we thought were scraps and trash caught in the weeds." Focusing primarily on the effects of the opioid

epidemic in 2000s rural Kentucky, many of the characters in *Weedeater* experience excruciating loss at the hands of the illegal drug trade. Most notably, Dawn loses her mother and best friend, Evie. However, the narrative also depicts Gene dealing with the loss of his sister, who committed suicide before the events of the novel after her husband, an addict, cheated on her. In explaining how he coped with the death of his sister, Gene states:

> Sister's old man tried to get me to work then, but after Sister shot herself, I couldn't do it. Couldn't do nothing, really. They's a couple days couldn't nobody find me. I run up on the mountain behind Granny's, out where me and Brother played when we was boys. I stayed up there in the spring woods, little sprigs of green and purple, pretty yellow sprouts poking up through the dead leaves, for most of a week. (Gipe, *Weedeater* 97)

This retreat is akin to that which Dawn takes to escape the "bullshit of the world" in *Trampoline*, as both Dawn and Gene escape to the woods to avoid the harsh realities that await them in civilization. Even so, while the anti-pastoral commentary in *Trampoline* revolves around the trilogy's humorous mocking of the traditional pastoral retreat, Gene's retreat is anti-pastoral in the way it *explicitly* advocates for the *use* of nature for the sake of human consolation.

As this chapter's epigraph reveals, Gene, in coping with his sister's death, attempts "to set something in order" after his life has "flown all to pieces" (98). An anti-pastoral text might call for using nature, not necessarily to promote human exploitation of the environment but instead to challenge the ways that traditional pastoral texts romanticize escapes to unaltered natural settings. The irony of viewing nature as untouched and untouchable is that using Arcadia as a realm of escape is, in a way, exploiting it, producing in

turn an ideal that promotes a relationship with nature that portrays it as solely creative rather than creative *and* destructive.

Gene's retreat certainly stand in contrast to Dawn's retreats in *Trampoline*, as his desire to "set something in order" highlights how nature is susceptible to civilization's impact. Whereas Dawn talks about unexpectedly tripping over cables in the woods, Gene would not be surprised to find "something human-made out in the woods, like a little run of rock wall, or rocks set in a square" (98). Nevertheless, there is more than just the anti-pastoral commentary in Gene's desire to control his environment; Gene also learns a lesson regarding the ineffectiveness of anti-pastoral retreats which, though they may provide him with temporary comfort, pose no long-term solutions.

While *Trampoline* provides ample evidence that Dawn's traditional pastoral retreats give her no solace–most notably her attempted suicide on one of her retreats–there is no evidence in *Weedeater* that indicates that Gene's anti-pastoral retreats are not at least *temporarily* effective. However, there are several indications throughout the novel that Gene's coping mechanism does not provide any long-term solace. Most prominently, Gene's outburst when his late sister's husband harasses him truly conveys that the peace Gene has gained in the woods is not long-lasting:

> I threw my hands around his throat and I thought I'd snapped his neck in that first grab. I didn't, but he went down backwards trying to get away from me, and all my hurt came pouring down through my hands, like hot black asphalt, all the hurt of Sister's shooting herself, and never having no mother nor father, and Granny dying, and never getting ahead and never having no one to love, it all came out and I was

dead sure I was gonna kill that man, and I was dead sure I was gonna feel better when I did. (166-67)

While Gene's reaction is not entirely unwarranted (his sister's husband can be considered one of the primary antagonists of the novel), lines like "all my hurt came pouring down" and "I was gonna feel better when I [killed that man]" show how Gene's earlier retreats did little to soothe his pain in the long run. The climactic chapter of *Weedeater*, "COALTOWN!", depicts Gene on a retreat of a different sort, one where he "set[s] something in order" by expressing a creative decision that can have a positive impact on the environment and the opioid crisis in Canard County. This retreat, rather than being anti-pastoral, underscores post-pastoral practices as it explores the role of art and activism (culture) in the biosphere.

"COAL=OXY": Art and Activism in the Biosphere

In this novel, Dawn's aunt June, the object of Gene's unrequited love, oversees an art project for her community college class where her students, with the help of herself and Gene, make a large sign that says "COALTOWN!" for the arrival of President George W. Bush. The sign's promotion of coal mining as a symbol of economic prosperity goes against June's own political beliefs, but she insists that it is a good way to raise funding for her art classes. Towards the end of the novel, Gene overhears a phone conversation between a frustrated June and her on-again, off-again boyfriend, Kenny:

"It is the same thing. It is *exactly* the same thing. Coal started off something people needed. Something put people to work. Coal made factories run. People didn't know how bad it was going to be." [June] narrowed her eyes, kind of stamped her foot. "That's what I'm saying. Oxy started off the same. People needed painkillers cause

> they had pain. And Oxy kills pain… The money was too good. Thing too addictive. Coal addictive. Pills addictive. You hook anybody, *anybody*, up to a lie detector, they'd tell you. Coal is bad. Oxy is bad. We'd all been better off had neither one ever come in the world." (223)

This phone conversation could not be more direct in its correlation between the exploitation of the coal mining industry and the pharmaceutical industry. June draws attention to the similarities between the exploitation of land and the exploitation of lives, thereby shedding further light on Gifford's fourth post-pastoral question, the one explored most frequently in the trilogy: "if nature is culture, is culture nature?" (*Reconnecting* 34). Drawing a parallel between the environmental destruction of coal mining and the opioid crisis is yet another device that propounds what Dawn discovers during her final retreat in *Trampoline*: "everything [is] of a piece" (311). After hearing June's phone conversation, Gene clearly begins to answer the fourth post-pastoral question himself, and he considers the connections between culture and nature. Up until this point, Gene's anti-pastoral retreats have consisted of his isolation from civilization, from culture, and his tampering with nature in order to feel a sense of control. However, after hearing June's statement about the correlation between nature and culture, he tampers with something we can deem cultural, June's "COALTOWN!" sign, so that it will benefit nature and culture alike, as his prior retreats have not.

Before Gene's last retreat of the novel, he is experiencing distress similar to that which he feels before his retreat to the woods to "set something in order":

> Sister's old man on them pills holding down his mine boss job wanting to charge me all that rent, dealers sucking up his boss money, so he had to wring me out, wring a

> pill out of me every week till I whipped his butt. I paced that bitty porch, back and forth, felt like I was about to pop out my skin… So I went over there where them letters was at. (Gipe, *Weedeater* 224)

Gene's sister's husband, whose drug abuse and cheating led to her suicide, reminds Gene of the dysfunction that addiction has caused in Canard. Gene, striving to feel a sense of control, once again sets out to shape his environment, but on this retreat, rather than tampering with nature, he tampers with a cultural object. Gene goes up to where the now completed "COALTOWN!" sign is hidden behind billboard posters for the grand reveal and changes the letters to read "COAL=OXY" (224). This act is similar to his first one, as he goes to June's art project, this cultural Arcadia, specifically to set something in order. Even so, unlike his prior retreat, this one can be classified as post-pastoral rather than anti-pastoral; rather than advocating for the use of nature, this retreat advocates for a post-pastoral practice in the use of culture for the sake of activism. As the blurb on the back of *Weedeater* says, this is Gene's way of "put[ting] our lives back together" after catastrophe, but in this case Gene's tampering with Arcadia has productive implications, implications that draw a connection between nature and culture, implications explored by scholars like Zackary Vernon and Timothy Morton.

In his article "Environmental Pedagogy, Activism, and Literature in the U.S. South," Vernon expresses a sentiment we might expect Aunt June to agree with: "As humanities scholars, it is our responsibility to assert the importance of the arts in shaping Americans' perception of the environment and how that perception inspires or precludes the desire for and implementation of environmental reform" (228). Similarly, Timothy Morton discusses the importance of art in environmental issues in his *The Ecological Thought*: "Studying art

provides a platform, because the environment is partly a matter of perception. Art forms have something to tell us about the environment, because they can make us question reality" (8). Aligning with Robert Gipe's own pedagogy highlighting the intersections between the humanities, activism, and environmental protection, it should come as no surprise that this theme is expressed all throughout the Canard County Trilogy and especially in *Weedeater* and *Pop*. It is easy to separate the concept of "environmental protection," as a cultural concept, from the realm of nature itself.

"Environmental protection" is not exactly a natural thing in the strict binary of nature/culture one might find in a traditional pastoral text. However, when we apply philosophies such as Vernon's and Morton's to a pastoral reading of the Canard County Trilogy, we can more readily analyze how Gene's final retreat answers both the fourth and fifth post-pastoral questions.

The fourth question is "how… can our distinctively human consciousness, which gives us conscience, be used as a tool to heal our troubled relationship with our natural home?" (*Reconnecting* 34). The answer, according to *Weedeater*, rests not only in acknowledging the importance of art in environmental *protection* as Vernon and Morton do, but also in the *environment* itself, as earlier ecocritics like William Rueckert and Frederick Turner do. In Rueckert's "Literature and Ecology," a pioneering ecocritical essay and the first essay to use the term "ecocriticism," he discusses poems as an aspect of ecosystems:

> A poem is stored energy, a formal turbulence, a living thing, a swirl in the flow. Poems are part of the energy pathways which sustain life. Poems are a verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy), but they are a renewable source of energy,

coming, as they do, from those ever generative matrices, language and imagination. (108)

Arguing that art is an active part of the biosphere is similar to Turner's main idea in his "Cultivating the American Garden." Turner asks questions about how we as humans delineate nature and culture. The article proposes that culture, art, selective breeding, and even environmental destruction are all natural because humans are natural (41-2). In arguing this, Turner does not intend to justify environmental degradation, but instead insists that a view of nature as separate from culture removes us from our impact on the environment by implying that nature is something "over there," when in fact our artificial creations, such as the "COAL=OXY" sign, are nature, especially when they play a role in environment protection as Gene's artistic decision does.

The answer, then, to the fifth post-pastoral question–which among other things asks how our environmental consciousness can be utilized in environmental protection if environmentalism is distinctly human and cultural–is recognizing the answer to the fourth question according to the Canard County Trilogy: nature *is* culture and culture *is* nature. Gene's tampering with the "COALTOWN!" sign is a form of environmental activism, and thus it is a part, as Rueckert would testify, of the biosphere. Not only does the assertion that art plays a role in nature and the environment allow us to analyze Gene's retreat to the "COALTOWN!" sign as a pastoral one, as the otherwise cultural creation can be considered a part of nature, but it also furthers the trilogy's theme of culture as nature.

While Gene's post-pastoral retreat certainly points towards the trilogy's trajectory by exploring these questions, we can analyze a retreat taken by Nicolette in *Weedeater* to see how this text foreshadows the post-pastoral practices in *Pop*. An analysis of Nicolette's

retreat highlights the ways in which she already understands the connection between nature and culture. Whereas Dawn learns to ask the post-pastoral questions after attempting traditional pastoral retreats, and Gene learns the importance of art in the environment after attempting anti-pastoral retreats, analyzing Nicolette's character through a pastoral lens shows her as the paragon for exploring Terry Gifford's post-pastoral questions. Many of the post-pastoral practices in the trilogy are highlighted in *Pop*. Nevertheless, there is one retreat in *Weedeater* that foreshadows Nicolette's relationship with her environment, one which is particularly revealing when we see how she utilizes Turner's concept of "artistic and esthetic capacities."

"This Thing Nicolette Did": Pointing Towards the Nature in Our Culture

While Gene's narrative highlights the ability to work towards a healthier relationship with his environment–one which incorporates art and activism in environmentalism–during a post-pastoral retreat as opposed to an anti-pastoral one, Nicolette, one of the primary narrators of *Pop*, sheds the most light on post-pastoral practices, their purpose, and their productive capacities.

Her ability to listen to nature rather than use it is first highlighted, however, in *Weedeater*. Dawn, Mamaw, and Nicolette retreat to a place in the novel where Mamaw and Dawn have been before, Sand Cave. Considering this is a location Mamaw and Dawn are familiar with, and given that they decide to retreat there after Mamaw stresses herself out talking politics (Gipe, *Weedeater* 116-17), it's safe to say that this location is one that they've used for escapism in the past. Regardless, the way Nicolette interacts with the cave itself highlights her ability to coexist with it rather than assume its existence is for her own benefit.

The cave becomes the place where Mamaw will spend her final moments, as she passes away while on this particular retreat. With Mamaw barely responsive and their flashlights having gone out, Dawn is stumped as to how they will escape this suddenly *destructive* Arcadia:

> I tried to think of the way out of the cave and couldn't remember when we went left and when we went right. I couldn't remember how long the shelf.
>
> "UMMMMMMMMMMM," Nicolette said loud. "UMMMMM." She laughed–"HA HA"–laughs like slaps. She said "I can feel it, Mommy. I remember. I remember the song I was singing. It took me almost all of 'Red Rocking Chair' to get to where you lifted me up before–here." Her hand was in mine and she moved me. "Slow down, baby," Mamaw said. "There ain't no hurry." Nicolette said, "We go exactly this fast." She sang a song she'd heard at Houston's… That's how we found out about this thing Nicolette did. She sang all the time in her mind. My grandfather's old music went in her head whole. She'd sometimes sing out loud, sometimes not. And her song became how her memory worked. Everything was marked–places, things people said–by where she was in the song when a thing happened. (124-25)

Being unbothered by the cave's destructive capacities, which indeed may simply be the result of her adolescence, nevertheless conveys her comfort with the cave as it is: creative *and* destructive.

What's more, her ability to mediate her physical, natural environment with musical knowledge harkens back to "seiz[ing] our … artistic and esthetic capacities" to understand our connection to nature as Turner proposes (50). Some skepticism is warranted, as how relevant could Turner's 1985 article be to mediating an environment via post-pastoral

practices as outlined in Gifford's twenty-first century works? Still, Morton spotlights the capabilities of art and culture in his concept of "ecological thinking" in his 2010 work, *The Ecological Thought*.

In discussing how limiting the binary between nature and culture can be, particularly in thinking about the biosphere as a whole, Morton states:

> Why 'ecology without nature'? 'Nature' fails to serve ecology well… Ecology can do without a concept of a something, a thing of some kind, 'over yonder,' called Nature. Yet thinking, including ecological thinking, has set up 'Nature' as a reified thing in the distance, under the sidewalk, on the other side where the grass is always greener, preferably in the mountains, in the wild. (3)

Akin to Turner's 1985 article and Rueckert's "Literature and Ecology" (1996), Morton asserts that a strict binary in ecological thinking ignores how interconnected nature and culture have become. Especially considering the fourth post-pastoral aspect, nature as culture and culture and nature, it seems limiting to analyze retreats that exhibit post-pastoral practices as needing to be a retreat from an entirely urban/civilized/cultural space to a rural/wild/natural space. In the case of Gene's retreat, for example, his artistic decision to change the "COALTOWN!" sign to read "COAL=OXY," even if his retreat to the sign is not necessarily a retreat to a rural space, is an exhibition of art's role in ecology. In Nicolette's retreat, although the Arcadia of Sand Cave is clearly a natural space, her use of music to navigate such a space should be considered. This uniquely cultural act allows her to listen to and connect with her natural environment. Morton reiterates Turner's conclusion when he asserts: "Ecological thinking might be quite different from our assumptions about it. It isn't just to do with the sciences of ecology. Ecological thinking is to do with art, philosophy,

literature, music, and culture" (4), and Nicolette appears to apply this sort of "ecological thinking" even as a child in *Weedeater*.

Not only does this sort of analysis of cultural and artistic creations, uniquely human and artificial, as expressions of humanity's nature and ability to navigate nature have profound implications for how we read pastoral literature, but it also foreshadows many of Nicolette's post-pastoral practices in *Pop*. Without these "artistic and esthetic capacities," Nicolette would be unable to answer many of the post-pastoral questions that she does in the third and final novel of the Canard County Trilogy.

The Role of *Weedeater* in the Trilogy's Post-Pastoral Trajectory

Like Dawn's realization that "Everything [is] of a piece" in *Trampoline* (311), Gene's retreat to change the "COALTOWN!" sign to "COAL=OXY" points towards a major theme regarding the post-pastoral tradition explored more adamantly in *Pop*: in a world where the nature/culture, environment/human, and wilderness/civilization binaries are becoming increasingly blurred, can Arcadias be artificial, constructed, and/or more representative of the "culture" side of the nature/culture binary? While *Weedeater* introduces this topic by discussing the capabilities of art in the biosphere, *Pop* goes on to explore how constructed Arcadias in a world where nature is culture and culture is nature can aid Appalachians in reclaiming land, lives, and resources from extractive forces. As the book in the trilogy with the most retreats that can be considered post-pastoral, *Pop* highlights the importance of listening to the environment whilst engaged in post-pastoral practices, thereby both correlating a post-pastoral mindset and reclamation and reaffirming what Gifford outlines as a proper way to recognize nature's connection to humanity.

Chapter 4: *Pop*: A Post-Pastoral Trajectory

> It's good to be wild. Our wildness, our ease with nature, is our strength. Our intelligence.
>
> –**Tildy, in Robert Gipe's *Pop,* p. 79**

As Terry Gifford explains, for a text to be considered post-pastoral, it must engage several (if not all) of the following themes: a sense of "humbling awe" in the face of nature; nature as a "creative-destructive process"; a connection between our inner nature as humans and external nature; nature as culture and culture as nature; with environmental consciousness comes environmental conscience; a correlation between the systems that exploit nature and the systems that exploit women and minorities (*Pastoral*; *Reconnecting*). While these themes need not be exhibited on or in regards to a pastoral retreat, the Canard County Trilogy frequently engages them when the characters are retreating to an Arcadia. Gifford also outlines in his article "Nature's Eloquent Speech in Charles Frazier's *Nightwoods*" that a pastoral retreat in a post-pastoral work should promote *listening to* and *working with* nature rather than *using* nature to escape from the "urban" (567-68). In many of the pastoral retreats in *Pop* especially, this theme of listening to nature goes hand-in-hand with the six post-pastoral questions, and for this reason, this chapter will examine several retreats in *Pop* and the ways in which the novel engages both the concept of listening to nature rather than using it and several of the six post-pastoral themes. Analysis of these motifs reveals not only that *Pop* is a post-pastoral novel, but also that, as the final book in the trilogy and coupled with Dawn and Gene's characterizations in *Trampoline* and *Weedeater*

respectively, the Canard County Trilogy as a whole promotes a post-pastoral engagement with the rural. Promoting post-pastoral practices as opposed to traditional and anti-pastoral retreats, as Gifford asserts, ultimately encourages both (1) a relationship with nature that recognizes it as interconnected with culture rather than something "over there" and (2) environmental consciousness (*Pastoral* 148; *Reconnecting* 7). Finally, *Pop*, especially when put in conversation with the humorous critiques of traditional pastoral retreats and unsuccessful anti-pastoral retreats of *Trampoline* and *Weedeater*, works towards another goal of post-pastoral literature, to reclaim a more accurate and ecologically-considerate perception of nature from the idealization of traditional and anti-pastoral literature (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 3).

While Dawn in *Trampoline* must learn how to view nature as its own entity rather than as an escape from the urban, and while Gene in *Weedeater* must learn the connection between art and environment in order to utilize culture to protect nature, Nicolette in *Pop* takes part in many post-pastoral practices which highlight her ability to respect nature, her environment, and the rural in order to be a "responsible planet steward" (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 7). Nicolette, being the youngest narrator in *Pop*, the most recent book in the trilogy chronologically, set in 2016, the healthy relationship with nature she exhibits not only represents an aspiration for Appalachian youth, but she is also the trilogy's example of how Appalachians of all ages can respond to the environmental crisis and–considering the trilogy's dominant thread of exploitative forces in Appalachia–how Appalachians' relationships with nature play a role in reclaiming land, lives, and resources from extractive powers.

Constructing Arcadias: The Fourth Post-Pastoral Question and Reclamation

When Dawn attempts her first unsuccessful pastoral retreat in *Trampoline*, she laments the possibility that "you trip over the cable running from somebody's satellite dish, and then you see the trailer and hear the creak of the trampoline springs" (32). Signs of human life intrude everywhere and corrupt her romanticized view of nature. As the second chapter of this thesis explains, her frustration is due to the fact that she has yet to ask the post-pastoral question "if nature is culture, is culture nature?" This question coincides quite well with Timothy Morton's assertion that "ecological thinking" should include more than "nature":

> Ecology isn't just about global warming, recycling, and solar power–and also not just to do with everyday relationships between humans and nonhumans. It has to do with love, loss, despair, and compassion. It has to do with depression and psychosis. It has to do with capitalism and with what might exist after capitalism. It has to do with amazement, open-mindedness, and wonder. It has to do with delight, beauty, ugliness, disgust, irony, and pain. It has to do with consciousness and awareness. It has to do with ideology and critique. It has to do with reading and writing. It has to do with race, class, and gender. It has to do with sexuality. It has to do with ideas of self and the weird paradoxes of subjectivity. It has to do with society. It has to do with coexistence. (2)

While Arcadias are traditionally places in pastoral literature defined by nature, plenty, the environment, wildness, etc., when we consider assertions by scholars such as Morton, we can expand the definition of a pastoral retreat beyond that of a rural one to further analysis into the realm of the post-pastoral. Seeing as post-pastoral literature need not involve a retreat, the

nature/culture binary becomes arbitrary when analyzing post-pastoral retreats, but more importantly, one of the major aspects of post-pastoral literature asks us to consider the interconnectedness of nature and culture. There are several retreats in *Pop* that, when we analyze them through the lens of "ecological thought" as outlined by Morton–that is, when we open up the possibilities of what can be considered an Arcadia to retreat to–we can better understand how human *nature* shines through in our human *culture*. One way that *Pop* underscores the connection between nature and culture is by discussing the possibilities of *constructed* Arcadias.

Perhaps the most concrete example of a constructed Arcadia in *Pop* is actually a retreat that Nicolette went on prior to the events of the novel. Nicolette, in exploring Appalachian traditions, exhibits an interest throughout the book in Appalachian cuisine. After Nicolette tries to get her mother to eat healthier foods, Dawn laments: "She'd got like this, ever since she'd been watching them food shows and going to these Appalachian food festivals and cooking competitions with my aunt June" (Gipe, *Pop* 15). After considering that something as cultural, constructed, and artificial as an Appalachian food festival can be seen as an example of Morton's "ecological thought," we must ask ourselves what exactly such a retreat contributes to Nicolette's understanding of nature. In considering this question, it is helpful to look back to Turner's discussion of the natural qualities of our "artistic and esthetic capacities": one example he gives is particularly eye-opening. When arguing that exploring cultural acts like gardening and making music helps to connect the dots between nature and culture, Turner states that "Cookery transforms raw nature into the substance of human communion, routinely and without fuss transubstantiating matter into mind" (50). In retreating with her great-aunt June to the Arcadia that is an Appalachian food festival,

Nicolette explores her human nature and the connection between *natural* ingredients and *cultural* recipes by expressing her passion for cooking. In other words, what Turner outlines and what Nicolette does at the food festival, exploring those cultural connections to nature, is a post-pastoral practice. Nicolette explores her human nature through cultural connections before the novel even begins, highlighting how her understanding of the fourth post-pastoral aspect, nature as culture and vice versa, is already greater than Dawn's was at the start of *Trampoline*, as it wasn't until her final retreat in the helicopter than Dawn began to understand the interconnectedness of nature and culture. Furthermore, attending such an artificial Arcadia allows Nicolette to reclaim something from an extractive force, a fact best analyzed in light of a different constructed Arcadia in *Pop*.

After the strip mining job on Blue Bear Mountain was abandoned thanks to Dawn and Mamaw Cora's efforts in *Trampoline*, the county opened up a four-wheeler park on the former job site. Hubert, seeing a business opportunity, constructs cabins nearby for tourists (42). As will be explored later in this chapter, these cabins play a significant role in turning Canard County into a pastoral retreat for a visiting film crew, but for now it will suffice to recognize that these Arcadias, places made with the idea of retreating to them in mind, were *constructed*. To reassure us of the rural nature of these retreats is the fact that they cater to tourists, outsiders like the film crew who, when we analyze such a pastoral retreat using a wider lens, represent the urban while Canard County represents the rural. What makes the four-wheeler park a significant pastoral retreat is that it highlights the power of these constructed Arcadias to reclaim land, lives, and resources from extractive forces. The strip job that was once controlled by an extractive industry which exploited Appalachian land and workers, thanks to the County's efforts to construct an Arcadia, was reclaimed by

Appalachians. Similarly, Nicolette's Arcadia of exploring her passion for traditional Appalachian cuisine reclaims something as well.

While the exploitative nature of manufacturers of sugary and processed foods is not explored as adamantly as that of coal and drug companies, Dawn's bout with diabetes and Nicolette's attempts at getting her to eat healthy, traditional Appalachian foods highlight junk food's role in having a detrimental effect on exploiting Appalachians. Although coal and drug companies prey on the land and people directly, junk food and pop manufacturers exploit Appalachians by providing unhealthy but cheap foods to underprivileged residents of Canard like Dawn. In a way, just as coal companies extract land and leave behind environmental catastrophe, these sugary food manufacturers are extracting the money of Appalachians and leaving behind dietary habits that are unhealthy and void of traditional Appalachian heritage. And so, when Nicolette attends the constructed Arcadia of the Appalachian food festival to explore the natural aspects of her cultural creations, she begins to reclaim traditional, healthier dietary habits made available by utilizing local ingredients and recipes. She does so more tangibly in the creation of Feral Girl Pop, a small soda company founded by Nicolette and her friends Pinky and Marla with the intention of creating a healthier pop from local Appalachian ingredients.

Feral Girls and Wildness: A Proper Post-Pastoral Retreat

While talking one night with the film crew about the plot of their upcoming movie, Hubert's friend and implied partner Tildy states: "Wildness aint the disease. Wildness is the cure… It's good to be wild. Our wildness, our ease with nature, is our strength. Our intelligence" (Gipe, *Pop* 79). As a transgender woman, Tildy understands the arbitrary nature

of binaries, binaries such as the nature/culture, wild/civilized, and rural/urban dichotomies. The words "Wildness aint the disease. Wildness is the cure" are oft repeated throughout the novel, particularly in regards to the film crew and their willingness to *listen* to the residents of Canard County. However, there are other characters who learn of the inherent wildness in themselves and who, in doing so, learn to listen to nature.

Shortly after creating Feral Girl Pop, Tildy and Hubert take Nicolette, Pinky, and Marla out to the woods to find ingredients. Tildy pronounces the trip an evident pastoral retreat with the statement, "We need to get out in the woods" (125), or, in other words, we need to leave the house (the urban, in this context) and go to nature. Even so, this is not like the retreat that Dawn attempts to escape her troubles, nor is it like the one Gene attempts to feel like he has control over something. On the contrary, while the impetus of the retreat is ingredients for pop, they are not necessarily using nature as Gene does by gathering ingredients. Instead, Nicolette and crew are retreating to the woods to *listen* to nature, gather knowledge about its resources, and bring that knowledge back to the urban, back to their pop business. In this way, their retreat to the woods is more akin to Dawn's final retreat in the helicopter at the end of *Trampoline*, as it is a complex pastoral retreat that exhibits "trampoline thinking," integrating a wiser perspective, navigated through Tildy's wildness, back into their local context, pop making.

Nicolette and her friends exhibit a clear willingness to listen to all aspects of their environment while in the woods with Hubert and Tildy:

> Tildy said, "Them three wildings are going to make a go of this pop business, don't you think?" I [Hubert] said "Circle of life." Tildy said "Girls, look here–see them sassafras leaves? Like mittens. Three-fingered. Strong smelling. Might be good for

> your pop." We gathered a sack full alongside a mine road. Sassafras likes the edges. The girls gazed up in the trees, mimicked the birds, stopped to pluck blossoms and sprouts for one another's consideration. Scratched roots, rubbed leaves between their fingers, sniffed, ran back to check a sprig with Tildy, tasting if she did. Tildy said "Honey, don't put that in your mouth. You'll pucker up like a lemon and be lost to the bathroom fever." (126-27)

While the girls certainly do gather ingredients to use them in creating their sodas, words and phrases like "consideration," "rubbed leaves," "gazed," "sniffed," and "tasting," and the fact that they are interested in things entirely disconnected from pop making like birds and blossoms, show how they use their senses to truly contemplate nature and understand its role as an entity that is a part of their daily lives rather than something separate from them that exists solely for their use. In "Nature's Eloquent Speech in Charles Frazier's *Nightwoods*," Gifford compares the importance of listening to nature as expressed in *Nightwoods* to his own personal experience of failing to listen to the signs of nature: "I fell off the face of a mountain in North Carolina. This was partly due to my failure to read the signs in the rock in front of my nose and partly due to my physical inability to respond to them" (579). Reading the signs of nature, Gifford implies, can aid one in understanding the second major theme of post-pastoral literature: nature is a creative force, true, but it is simultaneously a *destructive* force.

While the awe in the face of nature that Dawn experiences in *Trampoline* is also present in Nicolette's retreat with Tildy, as her willingness to feel, see, smell, and taste nature exhibits how she understands her lack of knowledge of nature, there is also an acknowledgement of the second post-pastoral theme. The girls are cautious of what plants

they eat, for they know and are learning more about nature's destructive potential. They taste something only if Tildy, who has remarked on her wildness and understanding of the Appalachian wilderness before, does, and they listen to and trust Tildy's advice about which plants are dangerous for human consumption. In this way, and with Tildy and her wildness as a mediator between their civilized selves and the wilderness, Nicolette and her friends are able to listen to nature in a way that Gifford was unable to when he fell off that mountain. According to this particular retreat, it is important to listen to nature and read its signs precisely because it allows one to explore the post-pastoral questions that should be answered if we are to become "responsible planet stewards" (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 7). Furthermore, reading the signs of nature not only allows Nicolette to exhibit her understanding of nature and humanity as connected but it also ironically is the thing that allows her to succeed in the pop business. Without Tildy's knowledge of these ingredients native to Appalachia like sassafras, Nicolette and her friends would be unable to continue their production of Appalachian soda. Feral Girl Pop, like her exploration of traditional Appalachian cuisine, is Nicolette's way of reclaiming dietary habits from, in this case, soda manufacturers, as Feral Girl produces a soda that is not only healthier than other brands but that also utilizes ingredients native to Appalachia, giving it greater ties to the land and spreading knowledge to consumers about local ingredients and their health benefits. It is in this way that Nicolette's connection with nature and her ability to read the signs of nature in all its creative *and* destructive capacities allows her to reclaim from extractive forces that which has been taken from underprivileged Appalachians. It is through a pastoral reading of *Pop*, I would argue, that we can clearly see the ways in which listening to the environment and asking Gifford's six post-pastoral questions aids in the process of reclamation.

Ghosts and Aliens: Listening to Nature

Several post-pastoral practices in *Pop*, when analyzed through the lens of Morton's "ecological thought," strengthen the novel's emphasis on the importance of listening to and contemplating the environment without the intent of exploitation. In the third chapter of *The Ecological Thought*, dubbed "Forward Thinking," Morton argues that thinking ecologically doesn't mean thinking about what we can see–nature, for example–but thinking about what we cannot see. After all, those aspects of the environmental crisis that we can see, such as changing weather patterns and rising ocean levels, happen at a pace slow enough to render them forgettable, at least when compared, as Morton does, to vehicular manslaughter or a house fire (98). "The ecological thought spreads out in both time and space, but thinking big doesn't contradict being intimate… Ecology is about relating not to nature but to aliens and ghosts" (100). That is, just as we should consider art and culture when looking at the biosphere as a whole, so too should we take into account concepts that go beyond what can be physically observed and metaphysical things such as ghosts. We limit our understanding of ecology when we fail to take into account these non-observable phenomena, as not everything in the natural environment, such as climate change, can be readily observed. What's interesting about Morton's analogy, aliens and ghosts, is that *Pop* quite literally uses ghosts and aliens (or, at the very least, fictional aliens portrayed by Appalachians) to convey the importance of listening to our environment. While Morton speaks specifically about the role of metaphysical thinking in recognizing the environmental crisis, the ghosts and aliens in *Pop*, when we read them as elements of the pastoral, aid the protagonists not in understanding the environmental crisis necessarily, but in understanding the importance of

paying attention to and listening to their environments. Listening to nature and recognizing its connectedness with humankind is the key to a post-pastoral mindset that promotes a holistic view of culture and nature as one and, in some instances, allows those engaging in these post-pastoral practices to reclaim that which has been taken from them by exploitative and extractive forces. When we look at the example of aliens in *Pop* in particular, we find a larger commentary on the importance of listening to local Appalachians, the "rural" side of the binary in that specific retreat, and recognizing their autonomy and the right they have to tell their own stories and to self-made identities, a major theme that Gipe promotes both within the trilogy and in his own pedagogy as a community college instructor.

Appalachian ghosts: Nicolette's unconscious pastoral retreat

In an interview with Vernon, Gipe discusses some of the ideas he was tossing around for *Pop* while still working on the novel:

> Dawn's daughter Nicolette… is like a little Appalachian savant… I haven't written all of it, but I think in the third novel Nicolette will be visited by ghosts of people like Nimrod Workman and Elizabeth Wooten. All of these people will be active, literal spirits in her life. But they're ghosts. And you can say they're dead, but Nicolette is still a carrier of the tradition in her own way. (qtd. in Vernon, "Their Impulse")

In *Pop*, Nicolette is, in fact, referred to by her great-aunt June as a "little Appalachian savant" (292), and although Nicolette mentions no names, she does encounter ghosts of past Appalachian storytellers and activists. There is one particular instance in which Nicolette has a vision where her two ghost guides–referred to in the novel as Uncle Galax and Mamaw

Remedy, though Galax is later revealed to be the Appalachian storyteller Ray Hicks (330)– show her manifestations of Appalachian residents in diverse contexts:

> We flew down a funeral parlor receiving line… A little girl in black and white holding a chicken said, "We don't eat my chickens. We eat the store's chickens." Bunch of little kids sang, "there was an old woman and she had a little pig. He didn't eat much cause he wasn't very big." A gray-headed woman shook her finger, said, "I would not live in a house below the road." A sweet dark-eyed woman behind a store counter said, "Honey, you can't put energy drinks on your EBT." One woman held a pot of chicken and dumplings. Another turned towards from her video-poker-machine stool, asked did I have a light. (272-73)

The ghosts instruct Nicolette on such issues as reproductive health in Appalachia and implore her to work towards solutions. The manifestation of a groundhog traveling with Nicolette and the ghosts gives one particular speech about reproductive health:

> You need to get up there and take care of these younguns. They aint learning about their bodies. Nobody teach em. Babies having babies. They don't know how to talk to one another. These boys aint got nobody talking sense to them about rubbers. Nobody making them do right. These doctors not giving girls birth control, not giving them the birth control they want, not letting them tie their tubes when they want. (269-70)

As the trilogy's "Appalachian savant," the ghosts and the groundhog from her vision expect Nicolette to play a role in bettering these ails, as exhibited by the groundhog: "It's bullshit, girl. You see it… you have powers. Use them" (269-70). The novel ends with Dawn talking about how she plans to act on certain issues that plague the country: "There are… Prisons to be abolished. Narcan to be distributed. Sex offenders to be called out. Trans rights to be

fought for. Racial justice to be showed up for. Trauma to be named… Mamaw didn't raise no backsliders" (330-31). While it is Dawn who narrates these final lines, not Nicolette, the pluralization of "backsliders" (331), as well as Nicolette's expressed interest in the meaning of her visions just a few pages earlier (326), show that Nicolette didn't just hear her metaphysical guides, she is contemplating their words and intends to act in the same way one might listen to nature on a post-pastoral retreat.

But how might we analyze her vision as a "rural" space that she retreats to? We turn again to Morton's *Ecological Thought* for the answer. In discussing how thinking ecologically requires us to think about the environment in ways we don't normally, requires us to dig into our unconscious, Morton reminds readers that "Freud described the unconscious as a wilderness area" (9). Considering this definition of our unconscious thoughts as a wilderness area, I would assert that it's reasonable to associate Nicolette's "retreat" into her dream-like vision as a pastoral one, a retreat to a wilderness place that is just as "natural" as her prior retreat to the woods with Tildy.

First, however, we must ask if this vision truly is a part of Nicolette's unconscious mind. To dismiss this vision as a product of Nicolette's unconscious mind rather than a real occurrence where she interacts with real ghosts would be an affront to the Appalachian oral tradition that inspires the trilogy. Still, there are several indications after Nicolette's vision that imply she was unconscious throughout the chapter. When Dawn finds Nicolette after her encounter with Uncle Galax and Mamaw Remedy, she points out that "Nicolette sat sleeping," and Nicolette says to her mother: "I passed out again. I went on a journey" (Gipe, *Pop* 276-77). What's more, June provides an explanation as to why Nicolette had visions of people and events she ostensibly didn't know: "Those were all people Houston took you to

meet when you were little. You heard people say all those things. I was with you for most of it, but you were three, four, five years old. You were Houston's pet. You went with him everywhere. You don't remember, do you?" (292). Whether or not Galax and Remedy are real ghosts, the text clearly indicates that Nicolette's unconscious plays a pivotal role in what she sees in her vision and how she sees it.

Examining the way Nicolette's retreat into her unconscious, dream-like vision attempts to incite her to action, we can see how this post-pastoral retreat is another which shows the importance of listening to "nature," or, in this case, the metaphysical ghosts which Morton insists should be considered an aspect of the "ecological thought." The issues that the ghosts and the groundhog explore, such as reproductive health, and indeed the ghosts themselves, are ostensibly detached from what we may consider "nature," but when we lend value to Morton's "ecological thought" and the post-pastoral idea that nature is culture and vice versa, we can read this retreat as another that promotes the importance of listening to and understanding our surroundings in the grand scheme of the biosphere. Moreover, Nicolette, as an "Appalachian savant" and a representative of the youth of Appalachia in the second-half of the 2010s, underscores the importance of this sort of post-pastoral listening, not only in the fight for environmental protection, but also in the fight to alleviate other issues in Appalachia not often associated with "nature," "wilderness," or the "rural" like reproductive rights.

Appalachian aliens: "It's good to be wild"

While Nicolette's vision clearly adheres to what Morton means by the metaphysical aspects of nature, the "aliens" in *Pop* are in fact only Canard's residents portraying aliens.

Still, these aliens–as the "rural" aspect of yet another post-pastoral retreat in *Pop*–also comment on the importance of listening during a post-pastoral retreat. To analyze the role that these aliens play in the novel, we must first look why their space, Canard County, is considered an Arcadia by those who retreat there, in this case, a film crew. Although the literary pastoral tradition began in Ancient Greece, its tendrils have reached far beyond the classical age. As Leo Marx explains:

> The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination. The reason is clear enough. The ruling motive of the good shepherd, leading figure of the classic, Virgilian mode, was to withdraw from the great world and begin a new life in a fresh, green landscape. And now here was a virgin continent! Inevitably the European mind was dazzled by the prospect. With an unspoiled hemisphere in view it seemed that mankind actually might realize what had been thought a poetic fantasy. (3)

This "unspoiled hemisphere" may have been the impetus behind an imaginative new Arcadia to retreat to in pastoral literature, but what happened when that hemisphere was colonized? In 1900, the Official Census considered the American frontier in the West to be settled (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 28). But there remained a region in the United States widely considered by many to be reminiscent of the American frontier despite its settlement. In his late-nineteenth-century essay, "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains" (1899), William Goodell Frost describes Appalachia as a region stuck in time, with its people still partaking in the ways of frontier-life practiced by their ancestors who settled the mountains (7). This blatantly romanticized depiction of Appalachia still carries weight, as Katie Algeo expounds in her 2003 essay "Locals on Local Color." Algeo sheds light on the many outsiders who

traverse Appalachia, from local color writers to tourists, and how they impose their romanticized expectations and stereotypes onto Appalachians without truly hearing their stories or recognizing their self-made identities (47). The importance of allowing Appalachians to tell their own stories and overturn Appalachian stereotypes is a common thread throughout Appalachian discourses.

Robert Gipe's own pedagogy calls for oral history projects which preserve Appalachian stories and identities and provide students with avenues through which to express their own identities and archive the stories of their neighbors. Tommy Tomlinson's biographical piece on Gipe, "From the Hills of Harlan," presents the results of one such project: "Another wall is covered with a peaceful mountain scene built from a mosaic of hand-shaped tiles. The tiles spell out quotes from some of the oral histories Gipe's students collected. More than 200 people worked on the mosaic." It is not surprising then that Gipe presents the theme of Appalachians crafting their own identities in the Canard County Trilogy. This commentary regarding Appalachian residents defining themselves is especially prevalent in *Pop*, as the protagonists work with a group of individuals from outside the region, film makers to be exact, to present a narrative about Appalachians. However, the film crew actually listens to the residents of Canard to avoid imposing identities onto them as other idealizing outsiders might. As Hubert affirms: "Nobody had ever asked us what a movie about us should be like" (Gipe, *Pop* 79). The theme of listening to Appalachians mirrors that of listening to nature when we analyze the film crew as partaking in a post-pastoral retreat to the "rural"–in this case, Canard County.

When a film crew comes to Canard County, they plan on making a science fiction film about "a new street drug being sold by space alien gangsters literally turning hillbillies

into wild animals" (76). After talking with some of Canard's residents, the filmmakers make several changes to the plot. The most profound bit of constructive criticism comes from Tildy, who offers insightful observations about the way the filmmakers are portraying Appalachian people, and it is here that she states the line that is this chapter's epigraph:

> "When the people turn into wild things, like it's a bad thing, I don't think that's right." Sandy [the screenwriter] smiled a little. Tildy said, "Wildness aint the disease. Wildness is the cure." Billy Wayne said, "Preservation of the world, wildness is." Sandy picked up a cookie, started munching on it, smiled some more. Said "Can you tell us more about that?" Tildy said, "It's good to be wild. Our wildness, our ease with nature, is our strength. Our intelligence." Sandy took notes. We kept talking. Nobody had ever asked us what a movie about us should be like. (78-9)

After Tildy's assertion, the filmmakers change the plot to humanize the wild beasts, making them heroes rather than side-characters, and the residents of Canard are given roles in the film where they play the wild creatures and the aliens. Tildy's argument that the Appalachians-turned-animals should be humanized and that wildness is a positive trait is profound in the way it solidifies the residents of Canard County in the nature/rural/wild side of this retreat's rural/urban binary. Furthermore, not only are the filmmakers listening to the residents of a rural community, but they are also allowing them autonomy by sincerely regarding their suggestions and allowing them to be wild heroes. This stands in stark contrast to those tourists and local color writers who, as Algeo asserts, decidedly do not listen to the rural inhabitants of Appalachia, tourists and local color writers who impose a romanticized identity onto Appalachia as if it were an idealized Arcadia in a traditional pastoral retreat.

If ecology, as Morton asserts, is about relating to metaphysical aspects such as ghosts and aliens as much as it is about relating to nature, then the film crew, as participants of a post-pastoral retreat who listen to the rural inhabitants who just so happen to be acting as aliens, are exhibiting "ecological thought." They explore issues which are ravaging the environment by considering more than coal mining. They consider the lives of those impacted by coal mining and the drug industry, understanding, as so many ecocritics explored in this thesis from Gifford to Morton have asserted, that comprehending our environment–and ecological devastation in particular–requires a perception of nature and culture as intertwined.

While the "aliens" in this case are not exactly the sort of metaphysical idea Morton had in mind when discussing ecology "relating not to nature but to aliens and ghosts" (100), it is the same principle. The residents of Canard County acting as aliens in a film is hardly "nature" in the strictest sense of the nature/culture binary, but when analyzed through a post-pastoral lens, they contribute something to Morton's concept of the "ecological thought." Specifically, with Canard as the "rural" in this particular pastoral retreat, and with the film crew as the "retreaters" who, in a post-pastoral sense, listen to the "rural"–those residents playing aliens in their film–the novel emphasizes the importance of the culture side of the nature/culture binary in the ecological thought. Nature is represented by humans, who, in a traditional pastoral retreat, typically represent culture. What's more, this post-pastoral analysis also underlines the way in which the filmmakers are, in Terry Gifford's words, being "responsible planet stewards" (*Reconnecting* 7), as they respect the constructive criticism of the residents who are, in this pastoral retreat, representatives of nature, wildness, and the rural. Ultimately, analyzing the film crew's retreat to Canard as a pastoral one strengthens the

novels' themes of listening to nature on a pastoral retreat and allowing Appalachian locals to craft their own identities. And when we put it in conversation with the earlier retreat where Tildy uses what she might call her "wildness" to teach Nicolette about local ingredients, we can also pick up on an important lesson about the trilogy's approach to reclamation, an approach epitomized by Tildy's quote: "It's good to be wild. Our wildness, our ease with nature, is our strength. Our intelligence" (Gipe, *Pop* 79).

To listen to and contemplate nature, Tildy would argue, is to embrace the nature, the wildness, inherent in ourselves. In doing so, we can, like Nicolette, contemplate nature as an entity connected with humanity that exists for more than just human consumption, utilize all senses to comprehend nature as a creative *and* destructive force, and allow nature, the wilderness, and the "rural" to assist us in defending it–just as the rural residents of Canard assist the filmmakers in defending their identity.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

> If you found your way down here on the wings of a ghost owl, you have powers. Use them.
>
> **-Momma Groundhog, in Robert Gipe's *Pop*, p. 270**

Canard's Post-Pastoral Trajectory

When we analyze the many traditional pastoral retreats, anti-pastoral retreats, and post-pastoral practices present in Robert Gipe's Canard County Trilogy, a clear trajectory favoring the post-pastoral becomes evident. Protagonists who attempt to use nature as a form of escape are left ungratified, and it is only after recognizing nature as an entity that exists for more than just human consumption that they begin to feel solace. Protagonists like Nicolette, on the other hand, who engage in post-pastoral practices and retreats are able to explore not only the solace that the post-pastoral offers, but also its capabilities in the fight to reclaim things that have been exploited by extractive forces.

In *Trampoline*, Dawn attempts several pastoral retreats with a mindset that we might expect to find in a work of traditional pastoral literature. Nevertheless, her final retreat in a helicopter to view Canard from a literal and figurative "higher perspective" can be classified as a post-pastoral one where she begins to understand that "Everything [is] of a piece" (Gipe, *Trampoline* 311). Gene, in *Weedeater*, comes to a similar conclusion about how a pastoral retreat can aid in the fight against extractive forces. At the start of the novel, Gene interferes with nature on anti-pastoral retreats to distract himself from his sorrows. However, as Gene learns to tamper with culture instead of nature to find peace, and once he begins to

understand the role that art, activism, and culture can play in the environment, the novel underscores the importance of the culture side of the nature/culture binary in the biosphere, a point that ecocritics have been making for decades. The post-pastoral route of the trilogy culminates in *Pop*, which explores several of the post-pastoral questions put forth by Terry Gifford, and especially the fourth post-pastoral question: "if nature is culture, is culture nature?" (*Reconnecting* 34). Utilizing Morton's "ecological thought" to broaden the scope of what can be considered an Arcadia reveals how the trilogy paints a relationship between post-pastoral practices and reclamation. Nicolette also contemplates nature's creative *and* destructive capacities and the humbling sense of awe that the woods can inspire on a retreat with Tildy. These practices in *Pop* all explore the importance of listening to nature to the post-pastoral mindset, a theme that is echoed in the film crew's decision to listen to Canard's residents.

The post-pastoral mindset in the Trilogy provides the protagonists with both instruction on how post-pastoral practices should be conducted as well as the benefits of the post-pastoral, namely that recognizing the wildness inherent in oneself can aid in reclaiming land, lives, and resources from extractive forces. More precisely, the post-pastoral practices in the trilogy assist in several acts of reclamation: reclaiming land from coal mining companies as Dawn surveys the land in her fight to save Blue Bear Mountain; lives and lifestyles from the pharmaceutical industry as Gene makes an artistic statement about the exploitative nature of coal mining and oxy; dietary habits as Nicolette contemplates all aspects of the Appalachian countryside to acquire local ingredients to make pop; and stories and self-identity as the film crew listens to the people of Canard, allowing them to tell their own stories and embrace their wildness.

While this thesis certainly shows how the Canard County Trilogy favors a post-pastoral mindset over the idealizing and exploitative nature of traditional and anti-pastoral retreats, there are several other conclusions that can be drawn from such an analysis as well.

Appalachian Youth and the Post-Pastoral Mindset

In *Trampoline*, the trilogy introduces the theme of youth leaving Appalachia as Aunt June reflects on her own departure: "I miss the racket people made when they got together. Everybody talking at once. Everybody jammed up together on the porch or in the front room, the kids all keyed up" (220). Dawn, with her original desire to reach "escape velocity" and retreat from Canard permanently without returning, is another character who comments on the trend that efforts like the STAY Project hopes to combat: "Central Appalachia faces an exodus of young people due in large part to the lack of economic and educational opportunities" ("What is STAY?"). When we look at the trilogy from a pastoral perspective, we can see how the connection between post-pastoral practices and reclamation provides an avenue through which to provide Appalachian youth with "opportunities to develop the skills and knowledge that would allow them to contribute to social change efforts" ("What is STAY?"). These opportunities, according to a pastoral reading of the trilogy, include post-pastoral practices.

Constructed Arcadias such as the Appalachian food festivals discussed in *Pop*, if we are to read them as artificial "rural" spaces that emphasize the nature in our culture, are post-pastoral retreats which provide youth with the means to reclaim exploited aspects of Appalachian culture such as dietary habits as Nicolette does. Nicolette and her friends, as representatives of the Appalachian youth in the twenty-first century, convey a sense of hope

that Appalachian youth have the resources necessary to fight back against extractive forces like coal mining companies and the drug industry that have exploited and continue to exploit Appalachian land and citizens. This optimism is furthered by Nicolette's willingness to engage Gifford's six post-pastoral questions and listen to her environment, a willingness that other protagonists like Dawn and Gene had to learn in the earlier novels. Ultimately, reading the Canard County Trilogy as having a post-pastoral trajectory not only shows the connection between listening to the environment and reclamation, but it also paints a hopeful picture that the youth of Appalachia, such as Nicolette, may stay in the region and work towards social change efforts through the reclaiming powers of the post-pastoral mindset. Considering Nicolette's role as a representative of the Appalachian youth, we may interpret the words of the groundhog from Nicolette's vision–"...you have powers. Use them" (Gipe, *Pop* 270)–as a call-to-action addressed to young folks in Appalachia and, by extension, the future of Appalachia.

Broadening the Nature/Culture Binary in Post-Pastoral Analysis

In a traditional pastoral and anti-pastoral reading, while the nature/culture, wilderness/civilization, and rural/urban binaries are relative based on the retreat in question (i.e. viewing the rural as a place devoid of civilization or as an actual rural area with inhabitants), the binaries themselves are strictly demarcated. In other words, in a traditional retreat, characters must in some way move from the nature side of the binary to the culture side. Because of the history of pastoral literature, readers may be compelled to look for such strict binaries in post-pastoral retreats in literature as well. However, Gifford's fourth post-pastoral aspect, nature as culture and vice versa, justifies readings of post-pastoral literature

that break down these binaries. This thesis highlights the potential for reading post-pastoral literature in light of a fact that ecocritics from Turner to Morton, from Rueckert to Vernon, have been asserting for decades: art, culture, civilization, and culture can and should play a role in nature, the environment, environmentalism, ecology, and the biosphere. When we consider this, the definition of what constitutes an Arcadia broadens.

If Morton's assertion that "ecological thinking" should include all aspects of reality, from art to the metaphysical, is true, then a retreat to a cultural space, an art project, or even an urban area can allow those engaged in the retreat to listen to nature, contemplate ecology, and have an impact on the environment, and should thus be considered a potential post-pastoral Arcadia. This thesis not only proves such a notion, but it also underscores the benefits that may come from such analyses of constructed, artificial, and cultural Arcadias. Nicolette's retreats to Appalachian food festivals, for example, clearly aids her understanding of nature's role in cooking–natural ingredients–as evidenced by her later respect for the Appalachian wilderness' abundance of local herbs for her pop business, and this earlier retreat allows her to engage in post-pastoral practices that help her reclaim dietary habits from manufacturers of sugary drinks. Dismissing said Appalachian food festivals as a cultural, urban, or civilized place rather than a constructed Arcadia may result in such analyses falling short before revealing the full potential of the post-pastoral mindset in literature and the benefit it have in fictional places such as Canard County.

From Surviving to Thriving Through the Post-Pastoral Mindset

When analyzed through a pastoral lens, Robert Gipe's Canard County Trilogy reveals a clear post-pastoral trajectory which finds fault in the exploitative nature of traditional and

anti-pastoral retreats, an exploitative nature similarly found in the extractive forces in Appalachia that the series comments on. The post-pastoral practices in the Canard County Trilogy, like other works of post-pastoral literature, examine nature as a creative *and* destructive force that exists for more than just human consumption. The trilogy's post-pastoral practices also portray the importance of reconnecting with nature by listening to all of its interconnected and complex aspects. More than that, though, analyzing the trilogy through a pastoral lens reveals the potential role of the post-pastoral mindset in reclaiming Appalachian land, lives, and resources from coal mining companies, an exploitative drug industry, manufacturers of sugary foods, and the stereotypes and romanticization of popular media. Analyzing the Canard County Trilogy's post-pastoral trajectory, we can see how Appalachian youth like Nicolette can reclaim pastoral literature from idealization and exploitation and be "responsible planet stewards" (Gifford, *Reconnecting* 7), true, but we can also see how they can reclaim their own environments, their own Appalachia, from the exploitation of extractive forces; how, by listening to nature and embracing their "wildness," they cannot only survive, but also thrive.

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Vita

Kennedy “Alex” Alexander Sloop was born in Concord, North Carolina and grew up all over Stanly County and Cabarrus County. With the love and support of his parents and a host of wise and nurturing grandparents, he graduated as valedictorian from Stanly Early College at Stanly Community College, then continued his education at UNC Asheville, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Minor in Anthropology. In the Fall of 2021, he began work towards a Master of Arts in English at Appalachian State University, where he began teaching first- and second-year writing as a graduate teaching faculty member. As the assistant director of Black and Global Roots Concerts, he has assisted Dr. Cece Conway in applying for grants and hosting traditional Appalachian musicians for concerts at Appalachian State. He plans to continue teaching at Appalachian State University after graduation as an adjunct professor, furthering his research on Appalachian literature and folklore.

Kennedy Alexander Sloop’s diverse interests include Appalachian culture, folklore, poetry, Japanese literature and haiku, wabi-sabi, American literature, and the genre of fantasy. His academic and personal success would have been impossible if it weren’t for the support of his parents, Mark Sloop and Monica Kennedy, and an amazing trio of loving and inspiring grandmothers: Memaw Linda Scott, Nana Susan Thomas, and Granny Fran Kennedy.