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A Field Guide to Place: Lessons on Home, Landscape, and Transformation

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A Field Guide to Place:

Lessons on Home, Landscape, and Transformation

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I recognize that Indigenous peoples were the original stewards of the land on which I write and live. In Denver, Colorado, this land is the traditional territory of the Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Ute nations. I recognize that my presence on this land is a part of a larger displacement and genocide of Native peoples, as well as an ongoing process of colonialism. Chelsea Vowel, a professor and activist of the Cree Nation, writes that land acknowledgments can serve as “sites of potential disruption,” as “transformative acts that to some extent undo Indigenous erasure” (Vowel). It is with this disruption and transformation that we must approach any work on land, the environment, and our place in the natural world.

Thank you, Dr. Palmer, for your endless feedback, encouragement, and wise words. This thesis and my education at Regis University would be incomplete without your support. I am endlessly grateful to have been able to share this process with you!

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Thank you, Deborah, for giving me the words for place, for teaching me to love writing, and most importantly, for giving me *The Meadow*.

Thank you to my parents, Michael and Susannah, for providing me with a life full of hiking, camping, exploring, and love. I am who I am because of our backpacking trips in Trap Park and our forays into the King’s Forest.

CHAPTER ONE: A Home Place

The real world goes like this: At the top of each peak I climb, I will claim to be in the center of the world. The Never Summer and Rawah mountain ranges web out from my home, resembling the ridges of my knuckles, intersecting, separating, building the map of all I know. The map I memorize will tell me that there are jagged borders between my favorite valleys, but I know the path to take from one to another, ducking under branches and stepping over decomposing logs. I keep the tree line in sight; the alpine tundra calls like a home, always knowing which direction to point. The rise and fall of the sun carves a path in the rock. The Neota Wilderness, the Rawahs, the Never Summers become indistinguishable from each other. They were never meant to be separated, or claimed.



The Rawah Wilderness

The real world goes like this: The Continental Divide is a guidepost. Or rather, a series of guideposts. It stretches from Tierra del Fuego to the Bering Strait, connecting different worlds and peoples, stopping in Colorado before quickly moving on. I watch as the glaciers drip from the top of the divide and I imagine the water droplets catching momentum as they move. The snow melt this year will be the water my grandmother drinks, beadlets sliding down the side of her glass before quickly moving on towards the Atlantic.

I've never been able to pronounce the true names of my favorite flowers – the ones like *Castilleja miniata* and *pulsatilla patens*. The phonetics are spelled in whispers of the wind and the crack of July thunderstorms. I give them nicknames instead, the ones I read in books or the names my mother told me as I pressed petals into her palms.

The real world lends me a fragment. I will renew it until the public library no longer permits, until it is another's turn to love.

Any attempt at writing this thesis would be inauthentic without marking a center in this place: Red Feather Lakes, my real world. The very core of my being has been shaped by the snowstorms and blistering sun that I've endured and by the sun that rose and set each day above my home. My hopes, plans, and convictions are formed in the image of my mountains, the syllables jagged like the rise and fall of the Continental Divide. My childhood is marked by exploring the alpine lakes in the Upper Poudre Canyon, hiking through the familiar Roosevelt National Forest, and creating worlds in between Juniper and Pine branches. I was raised without knowing anything different from the hills around me or the time I spent within them.

My primary school, Red Feather Lakes Elementary, was further into the canyon in the small mountain town in which we lived. Nicknamed "The Little School in the Pines," it is a tiny school house, barely expanded from the structure first built in the 1980s. The school holds no more than 50 students at any given time and our classes were spent navigating the woods behind the school. I spent these formative years romping through the dense forests behind the red brick school, the smell of pine becoming synonymous with school.

My education in the outdoors continued as I attended Polaris Expeditionary Learning School for middle and high school in Fort Collins, Colorado. Classes had an emphasis on civic engagement and community building through outdoor experiences. Several weeks each year were spent backpacking through the Buffalo Peaks



Backpacking in Buffalo Peaks in 2016

Wilderness, canoeing on the Colorado River that trickles from the tops of mountains to the sea, and exploring the nature areas around our small town of Fort Collins. My education at Polaris was entirely place-based and experiential. We would travel to the foothills to study fire restoration, coming to understand a community's role in recovering from a catastrophe such as a wildfire. We ventured to local gardens to tend to our tomato plants, having raised them from seeds in the windowsill of our classroom. I have only recently come to realize the significant privilege this type of education was and the incredible impact it has had on my commitment to the Earth and others.

I pursued time in the outdoors throughout my young adulthood, turning what once was a familial obligation into my singular focus and passion. The weekends of my childhood were spent guided by my parents on their favorite trails. The Elkhorn Creek that flowed behind our house turned into the baseline of our own cathedral tunes we heralded on those Sunday mornings. My mother, Susannah, is a woman who hails from the inlets of Rhode Island, brought West by the promise of open space, whereas my father, Michael, comes from the red hills of New Mexico adorned with adobe. They now laugh when they remember the child I once was, resistant to hiking to the point of dragging my feet in the dirt, now spending the last of my summer savings on new Danner trail work boots to replace the old ones rife with holes and fraying laces.



Hiking in the Poudre Canyon.

For nearly six years, I have spent each warm season working on trail crews. My summer months have long been devoted to building trails across the West in the Rocky Mountains, the Idaho high country, and the arid plains of Oregon. Over the summer, my grandmother, Susan,

asked me what I plan on doing after May 5th, after participating in whatever ceremony we may have here at Regis University under COVID-19 restrictions, after receiving the diploma that signifies four years of work, accomplishment, and accumulation of debt. I faltered in responding, realizing I don't have any plan beyond returning to these familiar trails, to the tiny mining town of Wallace, Idaho, or along the Creekside of the Columbia River Gorge, or in any other forest thus far unknown to me.

Undeniably, I feel most comfortable outdoors. This conviction is shaped by my original center in Red Feather, but also by the various places I have come to know as home in my mere 21 years on this planet. These experiences in the natural world have deeply influenced each aspect of who I am and the communities of which I am a part.

For now, my community is that of Regis University. As I approach the end of my time at Regis, I've been asked on more than one occasion what the most challenging aspect of my college experience has been. In response, I've paused and recounted the tribulations of my various courses: the meltdowns over Sartre and his affinity for existentialist philosophy, the tediousness of the Spenserian stanza, and the discussions of Ignatian obligation towards justice.

But each time, I've responded, "The location."

Although not without its ponds and lakes and various respites from the incessant buzz of urban sprawl, Northwest Denver has often taken on the qualities of a labyrinth. Each turn down a street leads me farther away from my mountains I long to return to. Yet, my Jesuit education at Regis University has encouraged me to find the truth and beauty in each experience, no matter the amount of concrete present. My education at Regis has taught me the importance of thinking critically about the world around me and about my own experiences, understanding the implications of my passions, beliefs, and convictions.

In high school, my mom gifted me a book, *Girl in the Woods* by Aspen Matis, that details the author's journey on the Pacific Crest Trail. Although it reads as a fairly elementary memoir, it launched me into the genre of nature literature. I was enamored with the transformative experience Matis had while hiking thousands of miles through desert and rain. Her illustrations of the PCT are whimsical, describing the woods as "soundless, dark...Perfect turquoise: glassy black. Mirror to nothing. The sky colorless but for a yellow and pale pink smudge at the western horizon, becoming fiery red, becoming coal" (Matis 285).

Soon, I was researching these forests that Matis describes, spending hours mapping each twist and turn of the John Muir Trail that carves its path through the most remote sections of the High Sierras. For the first time, the feelings I had experienced my entire life were being echoed in the books that I read. I made my rounds with classics from the outdoor literature canon; I read John Muir's *First Summer in the Sierra* as if it were my bible, pored over *Desert Solitaire*, and transported myself to Thoreau's pond through *Walden*. Muir's transcendentalist prose spoke to the beauty that I admired in my favorite places. Of his time spent in the Sierras, he writes, "In our best times everything turns into religion, all the world seems a church and the mountains altars" (Muir). Edward Abbey's words served to reinforce ideals of wilderness that these authors celebrated: "Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread" (Abbey). I imagined the untouched desert that Abbey described, nearly as picturesque as the "tonic of wildness" that Thoreau depicts in *Walden* (Thoreau).

Not until I reached Regis University did I learn how to appreciate these texts while simultaneously critiquing the myths they perpetuate. In his essay "Nature," Ralph Waldo Emerson proclaims that the truest manifestation of beauty is found in untouched wilderness. To find truth, we must detach from our daily distractions. He criticizes the common people for their

fascination with urban matters, for their way of “superficial seeing” (“Nature” Emerson). Emerson writes that he himself has found a reflection of human’s beauty, but only in the uncontained wilderness:

I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature. (“Nature” Emerson)

In the tradition of early transcendentalism, Emerson paints nature and wilderness as a tranquil, pure environment in which man (note the intentional use of ‘man’) can find veracity. Emerson would scoff at the contemporary emphasis on environmental education in urban environments.

He would likely find no value in my daily jogs to Berkeley Lake to watch the geese land on the surface of the muddied water. Yet in this my neighborhood near Regis, among the interstates and various lakes, I have found a place as salient, albeit different, as the one I have found in the Rawahs.



Berkeley Lake, Denver

These past four years, and my many visits to Berkeley Lake, have given me room to dissect the identity that I built within the mountains I grew up in, one steeped in a dualism between society and nature. Rather than flee to a cabin in the woods, I seek to better understand my own positionality on the land I so adore. My identities of a writer, a student, a white woman, a poet, and a settler on this land are the lenses through which I see, or am blind to, my place. The words I have written here are an attempt at reconciling these identities, all deeply rooted in the visceral ground.

Written Word as Finding Place: The Case of James Galvin's *The Meadow*

Literature of place is indivisible from the identities we hold, especially those built throughout the Western landscape. Wilderness, desert, and prairie serve as landscapes of transformation, of home, and of hardship. The place that I grew up in has been home to many writers seeking to find meaning within the sagebrush. My real world, rooted in the American West, is shared by many and known by various names. To James Galvin, it's *The Meadow*. Published in 1992, *The Meadow* is a celebrated work of Western prose.

My place and the real world Galvin writes of share a home within the region of Northern Colorado and Southern Wyoming, creeping across a border unknown to the inhabitants of the area. He writes of that particular land intimately, with a type of love and familiarity uniquely found in literature of place.

The Meadow, refers to the valley between the mountains of the Medicine Bow and Snowy Ranges, nestled between harsh ridges. A mere 30 miles from my home, the meadow is of the landscape that I know. Galvin's book unfolds as vignettes about the people that came to live at the meadow over a nearly one hundred year history. Each inhabitant's life was inextricably tied to the trickle of Sheep Creek through the meadow. At nearly 9,000 feet in elevation, all biological life in this region has hardened to adapt. Buried under snow for nearly six months out of the year, the lives, relationships, and endeavors of the inhabitants of the meadow are deeply influenced by the harsh landscape.

Galvin himself lived near the meadow for a period of his life, coming to know those that he writes of well, particularly Lyle Van Waning and Ray Worster. He writes vividly of these people, and while *The Meadow* is a work of nonfiction, the lyrical qualities of Galvin's words pull it towards poetry. By centering the book in a very particular valley, Galvin grasps the

complexities of a Western landscape and the people that call it home. Despite a very focused lens, his words elicit universal feelings of home, connection, and place. As the dust jacket on my now tattered and stained copy states, *The Meadow* “evokes a sense of place that can be achieved only by someone who knows it intimately” (Cover copy).

My first encounter with *The Meadow* took place in a high school American literature class in the fall of 2015. Deborah Warshaw, my English teacher, lovingly introduced me and my classmates to the pages we would soon lament reading, often joking that the book didn’t have a plot or a point. One of the first vignettes of the book depicts Lyle Van Waning sitting, eating his breakfast, and watching the meadow “the way people watch television while they eat...He’s hooked on the plot, doesn’t want to miss anything” (*The Meadow* 5). The book acts as the window frame that Lyle so lovingly looked out of each day, the plot never quite surpassing the pace at which coyotes crossed Lyle’s screen.

Although Galvin’s slow and intentional pace initially lacked the excitement required to peak a sixteen year-old’s attention, the book enveloped me in its descriptions of the valleys and peaks that I knew as a child. I began to feel akin to the characters, connected through Galvin’s vivid and personal description of the place I called home. The opening passage to *The Meadow* describes the meadow in the most vivid of terms:

The Neversummer Mountains like a jumble of broken glass. Snowfields weep slowly down. Chambers Lake, ringed by trees, gratefully catches the drip in its tin cup, and gives the mountains their own reflection in return. (3)

Galvin painstakingly paints a picture of the mountains I camped throughout and the lake I fished in with my father. The image of “broken glass” illustrates the harsh nature of the territory, while Galvin is still able to find solace in the valleys between the mountain peaks (3). To both Galvin

and me, the area North of Fort Collins and South of Laramie seems a world of its own, removed from both the bustle of the Front Range and the wind swept remoteness of Wyoming.

When she first introduced the book, Deborah spoke of the pages tenderly, akin to how we may refer to a close family member, distantly smiling. I quickly recognized the spine of the book she held, the weathered paper proclaiming a title so simple: *The Meadow*. Growing up, book shelves had covered three out of four walls in my family's living room. Reading the titles that collected dust on the wood shelves was one of my favorite pastimes, the author's names becoming omnipresent over the years. James Galvin was one familiar to my family. My mother had met him once in passing while he was doing a reading of the book at our hometown library in Red Feather.

Days of my childhood were spent weaving in and out of the stacks at that library, checking out the same books over and over again. Although the library is a small, wooden building, resembling more of a barn than a municipal building, it took on the form of a castle in my childhood. Virginia Woolf once inscribed in her diary, "I ransack public libraries and find them full of sunken treasure" (Woolf). Certainly this was true in that small wooden library. There, at 71 Firehouse Lane, I found treasure in the dusty rejects, the donated and over loved books.



Red Feather Lakes Community Library

My mom often tells me stories of the Red Feather Lakes Library, of the hours we would reliably spend there each weekend. When she attended Galvin's reading in that same library before she even married my father, she was in the process of finishing her Masters in English, focused on writing of Gretel Ehrlich, a nature writer also hailing from the plains of Wyoming. I

asked my mom about the day she sat between those dusty shelves and listened to James Galvin speak about her home.

She told me, “I was by far the youngest person there and the only literary type for sure. It was all old, retired Red Feather people who knew the meadow and the place itself and the characters in the story.”

She said that when Galvin opened it up for questions after the reading, the old ranchers started sharing memories of Lyle, Clara, and the hay equipment on the property. He was taken aback by the physicality and visceral nature of the meadow to the people in the audience. She had her copy signed, but was too nervous to ask many questions.

“*Finish your thesis, Sue—*,” he inscribed on the inside of her copy of the book, now a permanent fixture on the desk of my tiny room in Denver. This has become a mantra over the past year. *Finish your thesis. Finish your thesis.*

This past August, I returned from living at my parent’s house during a stretch of

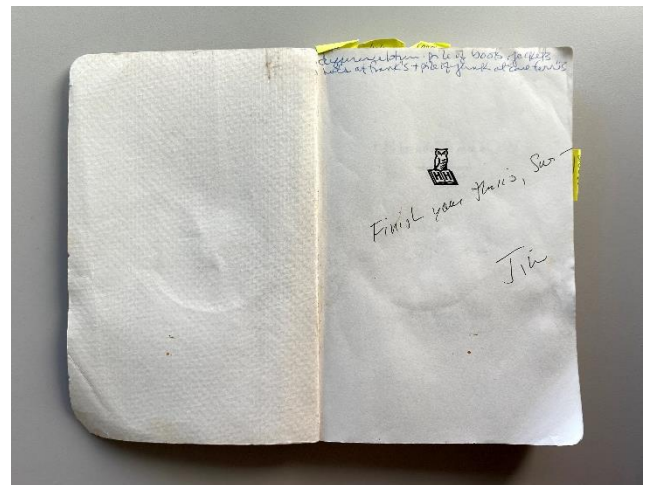


Figure 2: A gentle reminder.

unemployment to live on campus in Denver. I moved into DeSmet Hall under strict COVID guidelines to work as a Resident Assistant, feeling more closed in by the brick walls of my room than ever before. In the first weeks of school, I would sit down at the desk in my room, the vinyl cold and uninviting, to begin writing on my senior thesis. I had spent the summer dreaming of the creative nonfiction I would write and the research I would conduct on outdoor education. In my confining room with a window overlooking the pipes of an HVAC system, nothing felt more pointless than writing a thesis about the power of experiences in nature. I longed for the sunny

foothills of my home rather than the towering buildings west of campus, for the sound of howling wind instead of the hum of air conditioning. I would sit at my desk, wishing I had the ability of the writers that I love to conjure feelings of home, even when in a place so far from that. My thoughts returned to *The Meadow*.

I set about contacting Deborah, determined to remember the love and inspiration that I had once found in Galvin's words. I sent her email, dripping with sentimentality, thanking her for the book and what she taught me both in the classroom and amidst the trees of the Buffalo Peaks Wilderness. She soon replied, appreciative of the impact *The Meadow* had made on me, but confessing that my class was the last in which she taught Galvin's book. She wrote that it was often too difficult to bring his words alive for students.

I knew what she meant; for every effervescent description of Sheep Creek, there was a dull and monotonous passage to match it. Lyle's diary from 1974 details his daily tasks, the weather of January only changing slightly between the days.

1/2 Worked in shop—

1/4 Baked bread—

1/22 Same old thing—windy and warm.

1/23 Same old thing—windy as hell and snow flurries.

1/24 Same old thing—windy as hell. (The Meadow 150-151)

These entries go on for months, but in the span of one week, you get the point. Same old thing.

Despite the lackadaisical pace of the book, Lyle's stillness still feels intimate and universal to me. The familiarity with which he writes felt important the first time I read his words at sixteen, and it has remained with me in the years since.

In a Zoom meeting with my thesis advisor, Dr. Palmer, I confessed my desire to change the trajectory of my thesis to focus on Galvin's words I had first read so many years ago. I asked Dr. Palmer if he knew of James Galvin, doubtful. With a smile, he reached behind him and pulled from a shelf a book I recognized well.

The Meadow kept appearing. I couldn't shake the feeling that Galvin called it the real world for a reason. The real world I knew when I read Galvin's words for the first time, once separate and remote, has taken new form as I approach the end of college, after traveling, and after learning how to better understand my positionality in this real world. So I set about writing this thesis, the culmination of my college experience, about a book I read when I was sixteen.

More often than not during this time, I have asked myself what the value of that weathered old book is, why I'm seemingly so attached to the story of a man on a remote stretch of land in Wyoming. To me, as a writer, *The Meadow* serves as an exemplar of place-based creative nonfiction. I long to create the vivid literary manifestations of individual relationships with the land that Galvin does. Yet, this text also serves as an artifact to critique. It is necessary to complicate James Galvin's authorial creation of a place characterized by self-reliance and purity. In writing this thesis, I hope to work towards answering the question of how we ought to live with one another, with the Earth, and with ourselves.

When my mother was not much older than I am now, she was in the midst of finishing the last of her graduate thesis, living in the mountains and writing about the visceral nature of Gretel Ehrlich's prose of the Western landscape. Ehrlich's words so eloquently describe the necessity of widening our understanding of the places that we love. She writes that "To trace the history of a river or a raindrop, as John Muir would have done, is also to trace the history of the soul, the history of the mind descending and arising in the body" (Ehrlich 31). Without knowing

our place, we do not know ourselves. Without knowing who lived here first, we do not know these places.

In writing the words that appear in these pages, I attempted to understand what purpose place serves in our endeavors to live responsible and compassionate lives. We must not only be witness to places, but trace the deep and complicated histories of the places that we love. How do we understand the soul of places? What does it mean to feel so at home in a place, and what does place even mean?

Genius Loci

I'm not alone in asking these questions. For millennia, philosophers and thinkers have explored the value of place and home. The writers that I love and read come from a lineage of those interested in finding a place on this Earth. My attempts at answering these questions must begin with a lineage that spans centuries and continents¹. The most common and oldest consideration of 'place' that I've found is one rooted in spirituality and animism, perhaps best explained with a discussion of the *genius loci*.

Genius loci loosely translates from Latin to mean the 'guardian deity of a place.' Although first named in Roman times, the concept has been present in religion, architecture, and environmentalism in many cultures for centuries. My efforts to communicate the overwhelming feeling of place that I've felt in the alpine tundra of Colorado or the cobblestoned streets of Italy are clumsy attempts at giving words to the concept of genius loci. It's a feeling so human, yet so

¹ Indigenous people across the globe have historically had a close relationship with place and location. The authors and experts noted here come from a distinctly White, Euro-American tradition. In focusing on a lineage of writers in the American West, I aim to also acknowledge the erasure that this tradition has committed against BIPOC communities and authors.

hard to articulate. To fully understand the impact of genius loci on theories of place today, I begin my search in the crumbling expanse of the Roman Empire.

Classical Roman religion was deeply embedded with animism and polytheism. Roman animism believed that “spirits inhabited everything around them, people included” (Wasson). The natural world in particular held the spirits they worshipped, while their buildings and temples created shrines for the guardian inhabitants. The ruins of Ancient Rome tell us of the sacred places built for each god and goddess.

Marilena Vecco, a professor of cultural heritage in Dijon, France, writes of genius loci as a meta-concept, used to describe the “dwelling god” that is integral to the human experience of any particular place (Vecco 226). According to this Roman belief, geniuses existed everywhere from statues and iconography to churches and public spaces. Genius included the associations of a certain place that are accumulated over time, the uses of a space, and the heritage in that location. Regardless of origins in religion and deities, cities such as Rome are characterized by ancient and modern perceptions of a place. Vecco writes that genius persists through both development and dissolution, noting that as a meta-concept, it pervades through “memory at individual or collective level[s]” (Vecco 225). In her analysis, Vecco stresses the permutation of place through communal experience, meaning that social, cultural, and historical dynamics influence the memory of place. I can’t help but think of the farmers that surrounded my mother at Galvin’s reading that she attended. For them, the meadow was a visceral, tangible place, as well as a community of common place. With their leathered skin, patched clothes, and worn boots, the meadow was less of poetry and more of material and memory.

In the fall of 2019, as the air grew colder and the leaves fell from the trees, I found myself walking amidst these ruins, exploring the Seven Hills of Ancient Rome. The streets are now swarming with tourists and merchants trying to pawn off plastic keepsakes, but they were at one point holy places dedicated to each god. I spent hours each day weaving in and out of the crumbling remnants of their holy structures, trying to reconcile the centuries of history that once buried these structures that are now exposed to such a globalized public. The Roman streets now are home to ancient churches and shopping malls in the same block. I only visited Rome for a few days during the months I spent in Italy and I do not pretend that this constitutes any amount of a comprehensive understanding of Roman culture. Yet, like any traveler, I tell people of the visceral feeling I experienced in Italy and the *genius loci* I came to know while traversing the city on foot.



Exploring the ruins of the Pantheon in Rome.

As I wade through centuries of thought on this subject, I am struck by the intangibility that characterizes attempts at communicating the feeling of place. Each author or theory that I encounter only further complicates what I've come to understand so far. *Genius loci* describes exactly this unattainable definition of place. Vecco describes places as holding an emotional identity, as "having a soul" (227). "Our task," she writes, "is to discover it, just as we would get to know another human" (227). Perhaps that is the exact task that writers of place and the natural world set about doing. Many writers, certainly Galvin, attempt to understand the collective and individual perceptions of space and how our lives are formed by those perceptions. Vecco's

premise doesn't determine whether this 'soul' is innate to a place or is rather projected by humans. However, she does presuppose that regardless of origin, the intersection of society, culture, and the environment give rise to a value that deeply affects the human experience. For centuries, this very "intangible value of place" has been explored by writers from across the world (Vecco 225). One author in particular, Vernon Lee, so deftly communicates genius loci in her work.

Vernon Lee, born in France in 1856, was the pen name of the British author Violet Paget. I came to Lee through her book titled *Genius Loci: Notes on Places*. An absentminded search of a library catalog gave way to a development in my understanding of place. Although I sat in the stale air of the Dayton Memorial Library on Regis' campus, her work transported me back a year in time, to my own travels throughout Italy. Structured as different essays on Italian villas and country sides, *Genius Loci* poetically defines the ever present spirit in all locations. Lee advocated for and participated in the asceticism movement throughout her life, and it is evident in this book. Her essays entertain the effect of place on our psychology, rather than attempting to communicate a certain ideal or moral of that location (Kenny).

Lee's literary work ranged from horror and supernatural, to travel essays and criticism of art. She traveled often, living in France and Germany before residing in Italy for the greatest portion of her life. Lee was a committed follower of aestheticism, pioneered by Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. In her writing and life I hear echoes of my favorite authors, of women concerned with the beauty of creation, of women loving women and place and the world around them. Lee's poetic prose is as detail oriented as Galvin's, and her depiction of a creek side in Ravenna, Italy takes on the image of Sheep Creek in my mind.

Lee's work is, at its core, interested in the spirit, or rather, the soul of places. Throughout *Genius Loci*, Lee emphasizes the struggle to define the places that she visits, writing that she "can find no reverent and tender enough expression for them in our practical, personal language" (Lee 4). For Lee, places are imbued with intense emotion and "feelings of love and gratitude" (6). The divinity of place, present in the churches, terraces, and hills she visited, evokes an overwhelmingly romantic and sentimental appreciation. Yet, Lee also notes the "prosaic familiarity or wish for community of commonplace" that is endemic to place and location (6).

For Lyle, the meadow invoked "prosaic familiarity" much more than it did "love and gratitude" (Lee 6). I imagine him sitting at his window each morning, simply watching the meadow as he drank his coffee and smoked his pipe. For a man steeped in a Western ideal of self-sufficiency, Lyle almost certainly would not claim gratefulness for the land. Galvin writes that Lyle was hardened by the landscape that he loved, that the years brought him emphysema, hernias, and exhaustion. Yet, his affinity for the meadow pervaded. Galvin writes that Lyle "could be happy snowed in and dying alone, if only the sun kept shining" (*The Meadow* 225). Of the men that lived on the meadow, Tredinnick writes that "their love for the place and their life within it is sometimes cryptically, even meanly, expressed, as though fondness were too vulnerable a thing to feel" (Tredinnick 219). The soul of the meadow is something that Lyle knew well, almost too well to express.

Defining Land: Useful Terms and their Complexities

Vernon Lee is a testament to the long history of writers recognizing and appreciating the genius around them, a lineage that both Galvin and I find our place in. Though there may not be language reverent enough to describe it, we continue to explore the longstanding identities and

souls to be found in our places. I find it difficult to define sweeping feelings of place only using the mere 26 letters of our alphabet. Nevertheless, we must attempt to ground our understanding in language and in useful terms. It is useful here to explore a couple key phrases prior to any in depth discussion of Galvin's writing. Thus far in this thesis, I have been using *place* and *landscape* fairly interchangeably. Although each term may have vastly different implications, we may arrive at a definition of one that serves the purpose of the other; let the prose be a symbiotic relationship itself.

Place

As I write this, I'm believing it to be quite impossible to be beholden to any one definition of place. Our lives are bookmarked by places of significance. We measure time in terms of the duration we live in a specific place, build communities based on proximity, and develop a connection to the Earth through our immediate landscape. Yet, the words we use are so entirely representative of the relationships we have built with our surroundings and with the natural world. Any attempt at reconciling these relationships must first understand the weight and the history behind terms such as place and land.

Place within the genre of nature writing tends to take on a homogenous definition, one that ascribes to romantic and transcendental notions of wilderness and appealing to outdoor recreators. However, place is a theory that is as applicable within an urban neighborhood as it is in the natural environment. Relph points us to the work of writer John Donat, in which he suggests that "places occur at all levels of identity," including "street, community, town, county, region, country and continent" (qtd. in Relph 29). While place arises from physical form, extended experience does not preclude attachment to one particular location. Rather, place is a

continuous relationship, everchanging and emerging. Place theorists commonly characterize this relationship through two facets: place attachment and place meaning. Place attachment refers to the emotional bonds that we create to a locale, while place meaning is the “descriptive, symbolic meaning that people ascribe to a place” (Raymond et al. 2). Place attachment is the feeling of home or contrary alienation in a certain landscape. Place meaning is the personal and collective narrative that characterizes it so.

Although necessarily related to the built and physical environment, place largely refers to the human relationships and culture within that space. Place inherently includes historical complexities of a location, in addition to recognizing the various relationships that can be held to one singular space. Although my own understanding of place has been formed in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, it doesn’t necessarily denote natural or outdoor elements. The essence of placeness is not lessened on a particular street corner than a meadow in the High Sierras; it simply indicates the human connections and sense of belonging to that place.

In his book *Place and Placelessness*, the Canadian geographer Edward Relph writes that “To be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know your place” (Relph 1). Relph dedicated his life to the study of place, a field he recognized as significant in its own right, but also as vital to an understanding of the human experience. He often writes that through places we build a relationship with the world as a whole, as well as learn how to maintain our current places and create new ones. The definition of place is not constricted by barriers of location, describing instead experiences and feelings that are deeply historical, generational, personal, and political.

Places connect us to the built environment, help us develop an impetus for stewardship, and give rise to community. Disciplines such as humanist and critical geography utilize a

comprehensive definition of place, incorporating social and cultural associations, how we interact with a space, and what is valued. Our sense of place has numerous implications, some theorists suggesting that place inspires “our respect for ecosystems and other species, how we perceive the affordances of a place, our desire to build more sustainable and just urban communities, and how we choose to improve cities” (Adams et. al).

Works like *The Meadow* are imbued with this complexity. For example, Lyle feels deep and lasting attachment to the place that simultaneously instigates so much hardship. Mark Tredinnick, an Australian poet and professor, points towards place in *The Meadow*. In his book, *The Land's Wild Music*, Tredinnick explores the writing of not only Galvin, but other writers of place, Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen, and Terry Tempest Williams. Tredinnick explores how these authors bring life to place through written word. He suggests that writers must understand “places as dynamic spaces, living and turbulent, never still and never finished becoming” (Tredinnick 15). Place and the natural world are so often characterized as static, though it is precisely this emergence that characterizes the essence of both.

Land and Landscape

Geographers, social theorists, and thinkers alike have found difficulty in defining such an amorphous term as ‘landscape.’ Much like any other concept, cultural and historical factors nuance a definition that may seem straightforward. However, Simon Swaffield, a landscape architect, writes that this “plurality and ambiguity can be seen as an opportunity” (Swaffield 14). In this plurality, I find working definitions of both *land* and *landscape*. In his work on contemporary landscape theory, Swaffield theorizes that there are multiple classifications of landscape, beginning with a sense of physicality. Physical landscape, refers to “the concrete

phenomenon of land” (22). Land is quite literally the face of the earth, a tangible material.

Swaffield’s definition of physical land thus includes an “aggregation of biophysical elements” (24). This includes ecological systems, working together to create the physical environment we can interact with corporeally.

Barry Lopez, an American author famous for works of nonfiction such as *Arctic Dreams* and *Horizon*, similarly defines land as “the local ecology” (qtd. in Tredinnick 7). Lopez writes that it is “the set of relationships between lifeforms and landforms that are alive in this particular ecosystem” (7). In Galvin’s writing, for example, land is used to refer to the arid prairie, to the meadow upon which Lyle lives out his days. To him, land is “the dry, rocky slopes he was used to, the sagey emptiness of home” (*The Meadow* 76).

Swaffield’s second and third definitions of landscape lean into the plurality he uses to characterize the term. The first, interactive, and the second, perceptual, both incorporate elements of human community in addition to the physical land. By combining these two definitions, we can understand landscape as an encompassing term, one built out of dynamism and emergence. Particularly in Australian literature, the word *country* can be used to bridge between land and landscape. Tredinnick writes that country refers to “geography, place, and human belonging” (Tredinnick 7), and that it “unambiguously includes human inhabitation and belonging” (8). Our definitions of country and landscape are formulated from collective meaning and history.

For example, Swaffield argues that interactive landscape is built when human forces are enacted on any particular area of land. Historian John Stilgoe contends that land transforms into landscape “when it is shaped and modified for permanent human occupation” (qtd. in Swaffield 25). Perceptual landscape, however, refers to the meaning we as human communities glean from

natural environments. Our definition of landscape, therefore, must include the history of and relationships to a particular area.

For instance, white Australian and Northern American writers like Galvin and Tredinnick contend with similar histories of European colonialism that deeply affect their definitions of landscape. European conceptions of the environment are rooted in ideals of control, arguably utilized to “express the ideals of a dominant class or culture” (Swaffield 30). In these cultures of settler colonialism, land expansion is one of the key tools used by the dominant group. At its essence, settler colonialism “functions through the replacement of indigenous populations with an invasive settler society” (Barker and Lowman). These cultures are characterized by the permanent presence of settlers, as well as the structure and systemic assertion of power over the land. Colonial efforts in Australia and the United States in particular rely on similar narratives of space and land, most notably *terra nullius*. Initially utilized by European colonial powers in the 17th century, *terra nullius* asserts that a land is empty before settler presence. Upon arrival, settler presence transforms the ‘no man’s land’ into a *landscape*, effectively taming the wild and turning land into property.

Nature writing that claims and romanticizes place in a landscape that was violently rid of its original inhabitants perpetuates a system of neocolonialism. Our efforts to understand radically redefine our relationships with place must grapple with this reality. Although Tredinnick’s landmark book, *The Land’s Wild Music*, focuses on four white authors, he outlines a framework from which to begin understanding their positionality in the genre of place-based literature. Frankly and honestly, he asks the reader,

How can one claim to belong in, or to hear, a place that was for so long the site of belonging of a people you have evicted? How can one claim kinship with a place one has

come to so freshly by means of such violent dispossession (enacted by one's forebears),
by means also of technological interventions that have caused the land such grief? (8)

Tredinnick asks how we can feel attachment to places with such violent histories. Settlers in the United States systematically redefined the landscape of the American West to serve in the pursuit of power and domination. Initially seen as a dark and separate force, wilderness became romanticized and monetized. This is a tradition that nature writers have long played into.

However, Tredinnick urges white people to wade through this complexity, to face the history of our presence in this country head on rather than shy away. Tredinnick writes that white thought on place and the environment in cultures like Australia and the United States, both British settler colonial states, is necessarily 'subjunctive,' meaning that it doubts itself (Tredinnick 8). The concept of subjunctivity transforms our working definition of landscape. The subjunctive is a grammatical mood of language. Most known by the difficulty it poses when learning another language, the subjunctive mood is one that is characterized by unreality. It expresses desires, hopes, doubts, and the unknown. For example, I might begin a sentence by writing, "If I were to be in Wyoming..." This presents an immaterial reality, one of the future, but being contemplated in the present. By using subjunctivity to frame our definition of place, we can further our attempts to know place in its fullness, in its complexity of history and identity.

Galvin tells Tredinnick that he has "come to think that the landscape may be nothing but a bunch of points of view" (Tredinnick 232). To Galvin, the meadow is a culmination of the experiences of Lyle, Ray, himself, the coyotes that traverse it, and even the snow that blankets it each winter. This is subjunctivity—though it erases the stories beyond a well-honed western narrative. It is with an expanded subjunctive mood that we can begin to approach *The Meadow*.

CHAPTER TWO: Weather and Identity

*“The real world goes like this: The Neversummer Mountains like a jumble of broken glass. Snowfields weep slowly down. Chambers Lake, ringed by trees, gratefully catches the drip in its tin cup, and vies the mountains their own reflection in return. This is the real world, indifferent, unburdened.” (Galvin, *The Meadow* 3)*

In these opening paragraphs, and without any immediate discussion of the people that traverse or live at the meadow, Galvin has introduced the most important character of the story: the land itself. Rather than simply acting as a backdrop to a plot, the physical landscape of the meadow is vitally important to our understanding of the book. Here, Galvin writes of the meadow as a universe uniquely its own. His real world, like my own, is blissfully unaware of anything beyond the rimmed edges of the surrounding mountain ranges, separated like an “island” (*The Meadow* 3). Starting from this sweeping description of the Wyoming mountain prairie, Galvin begins his chronicle of his neighbors on the meadow near Sheep Creek.

Galvin is at his core a writer of his own home. Although born in Chicago in 1951, Galvin was raised in the mountains of Northern Colorado. His family owned a small property near Sheep Creek and he lived there for long periods of time each summer. In interviews, Galvin often speaks of the interminable stretches of solitude he endured at the meadow, save for the presence of Lyle Van Waning (Galvin, “Anxiety”). In the summers of Galvin’s youth, he was left by his father to work on the property, deeply influencing his experience of the place itself. In an interview with the Iowa Review, Galvin stated that “if you were a boy raised in post-World War II mountain Western America, all you were expected to do was hunt and ride horses and be tough” (Galvin, “Anxiety”). Galvin’s experience with the land at Sheep Creek began from this point, one of perseverance, reliance, and hardiness, certainly not reverence or tenderness.

The Meadow is complexly intertwined with Galvin's own experience of a Western landscape, just as it is indivisible from historic narratives of land, communities, and the environment. My loving attachment to Galvin's words about my home is similarly a product of these narratives. Using our understanding of landscape built from the work of Swaffield and Tredinnick, it is quite apparent that narratives of self-reliance on the land stem from colonial settlement and terra nullius. The genius of the meadow that Galvin cultivates through his writing is inextricably connected to this history in the West. Here is precisely where we must remember the subjunctive. The experience of the meadow by someone like Lyle Van Waning is rooted in his experience of the visceral land and weather and the community built from the landscape. Our understanding of this place built through Lyle is not yet full—blind to the histories of dispossession and western expansion.

Land Ownership

Writing the landscape as the main character of *The Meadow*, Galvin chronicles the weather that brutalizes its inhabitants. He describes the interminable winters that Northern Colorado so often experiences. These seasons are long, and for many of the winter months houses, driveways, and entire lives are buried under the snowbanks. Growing up, my family would have to park our cars at the end of our quarter mile long driveway for weeks during the winter, carrying our school bags and groceries through the drifts. Only on special occasions did a neighbor with a snowplow make a visit to our house, enabling us to drive up the small hill until the next storm hit. Despite the burdens it put forth, snow has retained magical, romantic qualities for much of my life. The first snow each fall seemed to ordain the landscape. I would awake in

the morning with a familiar excitement, paying no attention to the temperature gauge hovering below zero.

The first time I visited the meadow was during one such storm. In high school, we took a trip to Sheep Creek as a class, exploring the structures Lyle built throughout his life on the property. Meeting at school in the nearly dark hours of the early morning, we piled into cars to caravan several hours North. It was late October and we took winding backroads to avoid the windswept highway through the Wyoming plains, though we still encountered towering snowbanks on the road. More than once one of our cars needed to be dug out. Yet eventually, we arrived at the base of Lyle's old property, quickly recognizing the landmarks that Galvin describes. This was perhaps the most fitting time to visit the meadow. Instead of wildflowers and tall grass, it was covered in feet of snow. I remember huddling together against the cold wind with my classmates. Early in the season, this wasn't even the most intense storm of the year.

Galvin writes of the contradictory qualities of snow in a mountain landscape, understanding that to those dwelling at the meadow, snow is simultaneously welcomed and deadly. He writes that it possesses both "lethal whims" and "sublime beauty," properties that have long enchanted the people that live in snowy landscapes (Galvin, *The Meadow* 42). In one particular vignette, Galvin writes of the massive snowstorms at the meadow that often break fences and isolate folks from the outside world. He remembers an adage of Lyle's:

Lyle said, "If you want to know who really owns your land, don't pay the taxes for a while. Then if you want to know who owns it even more, just look out the window in a blizzard. That's the landlord's face looking in, snooping." (Galvin, *The Meadow* 42)

In the face of interminable weather, Lyle realized the complete powerlessness of humans on a landscape of that scale. Each year, he was at the whims of weather patterns. This passage

powerfully describes snow, or perhaps the natural world in general, as a holon. There is no possibility of landownership when the land belongs full heartedly to itself.

This presents a contradiction in the Western ideal of land ownership. During westward expansion, the United States government set the precedent of parceling land to individual owners, largely for profit and to fulfill an American ideal of proprietorship. Julian Brave NoiseCat, a journalist and activist, writes that private property was a notion created by colonizers, that still prevails today. It is a pervasive narrative that “hard work, land and a home are platform[s] for boundless opportunity” (NoiseCat). Galvin complicates this notion, creating characters that are more weathered and sculpted by the landscape, rather than the landscape is by their human influences.

By actively crafting the landscape into the main character of his work, Galvin subverts longstanding Western notions of domination and ownership. This literary technique is evident on nearly each page of the book. In the opening passage to the book, Galvin writes that to essentially know the meadow is to know “a litany of loosely patterned weather” (3). The meadow takes the forefront, “with the people more or less blowing through” (Galvin, “On the Land”). Galvin describes the land as more permanent and present than its inhabitants, contrary to the more common dominion laden perspective.

Poet and author Chris Dombrowski writes that this ascribes to a long tradition of granting personhood to the physical world that surrounds us. He alludes to Anton Chekhov’s famous principles of writing. In a letter to his brother proclaiming these often quotes principles, Chekhov states that in writing about the natural world, the landscape should take place as the most prominent character (Dombrowski). In Galvin’s work, this character is strong and formidable,

shaping the people that may live upon that land for a short period of time. Galvin writes that we must “let it [the natural world] inhabit it until it turns us inside out” (Galvin “On the Land”).

Another inhabitant of the area, App Worster, came to the meadow during a pack trip with his father. They traversed the surrounding hills while hunting and camped overlooking Sheep Creek one night. This is where App’s affinity for the meadow began, swearing that one day he would come to live on that land. Galvin writes that as App looked over the meadow, it was as if “The prairie’s mother was unresisted wind that worked all winter to keep her child’s ears and elbows clean” (79). In this sense, the prairie is a child to which the wind is a mother, personifying and characterizing the natural elements. By granting the meadow personhood, challenging notions of land ownership, and crafting the landscape into the focus of his work, Galvin invokes a particularly interesting subjunctive mood. Reading his words pushes us beyond a comfortable understanding of land and ecology, decentering our own experience with place.

Weathered Lives

In the same sense that Galvin characterizes and personifies the natural world, he inversely ‘weatherizes’ his human characters. Galvin portrays Lyle, App, Ray, and even Lyle’s sister Clara as having internalized the constraints and struggles of their environment. For those that live on the meadow, Galvin states “that vast, Western, mountain, big sky country is interior as well; it is a soul that people carry around with them” (Galvin, “Anxiety”). Galvin’s writing nods to Vernon Lee’s invocation of the soul in place by painting a portrait of the interior soul constructed by the big sky country of Southern Wyoming. In his discussion of Galvin’s work, Tredinnick notes that nature writing manifests “the lives of men and women as though they were shaped by the landscape and weathers” (Tredinnick 23). Even further, nature writing like Galvin’s acts “as

though politics and love affairs and tragedies and wars...were aspects of the natural history of the world” (23). Just as Lyle is shaped by the landscape, his life becomes as central to the story of the meadow as the regular patterns of weather.

Galvin’s characters take on the likeness of the weather they live through, demonstrating a particular sense of attachment to the place that they live. One of the initial depictions of Lyle describes his hair as “the color of last year’s grass next spring, fresh from under the long snow” (*The Meadow* 8). It is as if neither Galvin or Lyle know much beyond what they observe and experience at the meadow, as Lyle’s appearance is illustrated using the colors of that particular landscape. Though Galvin resists a romanticized image of Lyle here. Rather, he is hardened by the environment so much so that he takes it on himself. Later in his life, Lyle begins to experience severe emphysema. Galvin writes that “there was too much empty space inside just like there was too much empty space outside” (*The Meadow* 56). I’m struck by the multiplicity Galvin illustrates in the meadow here. He writes it as vast and beautiful, but simultaneously stifling and overwhelming. Lyle, and even his lungs, take on the subjunctive that Galvin inscribes in the grass, sky, and land of the meadow.

The Myth of Self-Reliance

Long have the dwellers of the American West endured a dramatic and violent climate, resulting in the weathered and leathery characters often portrayed in the Western canon. Galvin notes that the Western landscape and climate inspires an “understatement and a stoicism” in both the culture of that landscape and in his own work (Galvin “Anxiety”). While Galvin’s depiction of Lyle Van Waning seems to portray a classic Western man, demonstrating a deep stoicism, he also challenges many assumptions of what it means to be self-reliant.

Out of the four people to have held the deed to the meadow, Galvin describes Lyle as the only one to successfully create a life there. He lives in harmony with the land and its animal inhabitants, peacefully enduring intense economic and environmental hardship. Galvin's descriptions of Lyle's stoicism transform him from a simple farmer into a pioneer, symbolic of wildness and individualism. As a character, Lyle adheres to the trope of a self-made and voraciously independent man, although the hardship he endures challenges the idea of a romanticized West.

Early in the book, Galvin paints a vignette of Lyle farming on the meadow in a several times repaired tractor. As he mows his fields, Lyle watches a coyote bounce throughout the grass. He notes the deep admiration that Lyle has for coyotes, largely due to their "toughness and uncompromising independence" (13). Of the animals on the meadow, they are the most fiercely independent, therefore gaining Lyle's respect despite the nuisances they cause. Much like Lyle, coyotes operate from a sense of "defiance" (13). Galvin muses that Lyle has also gained the respect of the coyote, that he "has somehow raised his consciousness almost up to coyote level" (14). Similar to Lyle's beliefs about land ownership, he refuses to extend an assertion of dominion over nature to the animals that traverse the meadow. Unlike some of his neighbors, Lyle sees and grants value to life outside of his own.

Lyle's stoicism and self-reliance adheres to a narrative of rugged individualism that is pervasive to the American West. Stories of pioneers claiming a stake in a pristine, newly discovered land perpetuate notions of domination and colonialism that originate centuries ago. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner delivered a speech at a meeting of the American Historical Association that would forever mark contemporary perceptions of the environment (Slatta 83). Infamously, Turner argued that the American identity was created by the abundance of free land

and the advancement of settlers onto that land. According to his theory of ‘frontierism,’ our political, social, and literary characters have been molded by settlement. Turner wrote that values of “restless, nervous energy” and “dominant individualism” are essential to our society, claiming our origins in settlement and colonization. (qtd. in Slatta 89).

Though problematic in nature, Turner’s sentiments were correct; the trait of rugged individualism, prominent in westward expansion, has prevailed for nearly a century and a half. Images of the frontier have been commodified by nearly every genre of media, infiltrating film and literature, as well as education. In an analysis of Western culture, American writer Richard Slatta argues that the myths of American exceptionalism, individualism, and frontier violence have been essential in binding together a cohesive American identity (Slatta 82). Not only have these values infiltrated politics and culture, but contemporary environmentalism largely relies on a myth of dominant individualism as well.

Stories that seek to celebrate and romanticize the environment often fall victim to false and harmful conceptions of landscape and individualism. Quests and adventures into the natural world are glorified; those who take up these adventures are deified as ‘eco-heroes’ (Korteweg and Oakley 131). We celebrate individuals that cast aside social responsibility to rely on the land that is assumed to be pristine wilderness. In an analysis of two pieces of popular media, authors Korteweg and Oakley argue that through the lens of the eco-here, both affirm a settler colonial narrative. The films *Grizzly Man* and *Into the Wild* both utilize a stunning backdrop of Alaskan wilderness as “a place full of sunlight, pristine nature, and a new promise (132). Conveniently, these narratives fail to acknowledge long standing legacies of colonization, rendering them effectively “cleansed of human tragedy and historical contamination” (132). The wilderness into which they embark is untouched, seemingly waiting for their forays of self-reliance.

If we let him, Lyle could fall easily into this genre. Archetypes of eco-heroism rely on pervasive characteristics of the ‘self-made man.’ Without his invocation of the subjunctive, Galvin’s depictions of Lyle would adhere to these same characteristics. He lives independently and alone at the meadow, relying solely on his own capabilities. He long used the same tractor, a rusting Farmall from 1923, and he fixed himself each time it broke, “even if he had to forge a part himself” (*The Meadow* 16). Galvin places Lyle in this longstanding American tradition self-reliance on the Western frontier. Instead of a literary character shaped by the Western canon, Lyle is a real man, deeply embedded in the farming and frontiating communities in Northern Colorado.

Though *The Meadow* is a work of nonfiction, it is a testament to the American identity built from colonialist ideals of wilderness and self-reliance. By understanding the context in which this piece of literature falls, we can better interrogate the assumptions that it perpetuates. These narratives have given rise to much of our understanding of place in the American West, particularly how place intersects with dominant and subjugated identities. I find Tredinnick’s notion of the subjunctive particularly relevant here. Tredinnick argues that we can feel connected to and love places that have also been sites of systemic violence and dispossession. Our work, though, must grapple with these historic and present dynamics of place, invoking what we may call the subjunctive. My understandings of the places I love, of the Snowy Range, of the Neversummer mountains, and of my home, are furthered and complicated by notions of land ownership and self-reliance.

CHAPTER THREE: Wildfire and Transformation

When I began writing a very different version of this thesis in August, I was eager to incorporate my own place-based writing. I wanted to travel to the meadow and write from that exact place. Soon, however, the meadow was surrounded by fires that clouded our skies even in Denver for months. The Cameron Peak fire was busy burning the Arapahoe and Roosevelt National Forests North of Fort Collins, while the Mullen Fire descended from the Medicine Bow Mountains. The Cameron Peak fire grew quickly, gaining acreage until it was deemed the largest wildfire in Colorado history.

It burned the forest and canyons that I grew up traversing, even surpassing my old home up the Boy Scout Road. Yet, these two fires left the meadow unburned. Galvin's island remains unscathed.

This winter, I drove up Highway 14 for the first time in months, following the curves of the road along the contours of the Poudre Canyon. Although it is normally a road I traverse each weekend, the Cameron Peak Fire that ignited in early August, combined with school and work in Denver, kept me distanced from the trails in the Poudre Canyon that I know well. I felt as if I held my breath the entirety of the drive, anticipating the burnt remnants of my favorite forests. I had left the house early in the morning to ski Cameron Pass, not thinking of the newly burned areas I would have to go through to get there. The further the road climbs, the more contrast there was between fresh snow dusting tree branches and the charred ground beneath. I remember passing by a lone chimney rising from the snowbanks, surrounded by fallen logs.

I attempted to count each plywood sign that I passed that proclaimed gratitude for the wildland firefighters that worked up there for weeks, though I soon lost count. Each mailbox in the canyon has similar signs nailed to their posts. Some are written in child's handwriting—"Thank You Firefighters." The paint is often worn away by snow and weather, but the message remains distinct. Some of the signs are years old, relics from the High Park fire of 2013, and some are new this fall.



Sign in the Poudre Canyon

This community is no stranger to being at the whims of wildfire.

For my entire life, the Poudre Canyon has been split into two parts. The first marks your escape from Fort Collins. Campgrounds, hiking trails, restaurants, and bars mar the sides of the road, twisting and turning through the blasted out canyon walls. On a typical Sunday, the sides of the canyon road are lined with cars.

The second section of Highway 14 begins when you pass through the old town of Rustic. It doesn't contain much, a gas station, a restaurant, the remains of a resort that burned down when I was a kid. Beyond this gateway is the upper Poudre, unsuspectingly high in elevation and remote in location. Soon, you're winding into the nebulous mountains that span Northern Colorado.

Right before you pass through Rustic, however, a dirt road snakes off to the right, beginning the ascent to Red Feather Lakes. Not even ten miles up that road is the cabin I spent my first few years in, the ranch and land well known to my parents.

As I passed that turn off onto the Boy Scout Road this winter, I watched as the hillside turned from sage brush to a seared landscape. The trees were blackened and cut at the stumps, barely recognizable.

I'm lucky to never have lost my home to a wildfire. My family was evacuated for a period of time during the High Park fire in 2013, but our house was untouched, although our neighbors were not as lucky. After it was contained, I drove through our neighborhood with my childhood best friend, Jessi, and her mom. We followed the dirt roads far back into the subdivision we shared as kids and found her home in ashes. The log house I had watched her parents build from the ground up was gone, vanished. The mailbox out front stood intact, the last reminder of the family and memories that once filled that space.

Although my heart didn't drop in that moment in the same way that Jessi's did, the feeling of powerlessness in the face of the natural environment is something I know well. For those of us well acquainted with the American West, wildfires have become increasingly pervasive in recent years. Decades, centuries even, of deforestation, soil degradation, and increasing global temperatures are just some of the factors giving rise to the number of wildfires we see each year. Policies of fire management in the United States have long contributed to this destruction. The fires that ravaged Colorado this year are not a freak occurrence. Each season, fire conditions in the West experiences worsen.

European settlement in the United States saw to the commodification of each available natural resource throughout the continent. Industry ranged from lumber, furs, coal, and agriculture. Westward expansion quickly monetized the grand new expanses of forest and wilderness. Organizations such as the National Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management were formed for the very purpose of *managing* the forests, largely for lumber and

timber reserves. Modern fire control in the United States began when the U.S. Cavalry troops arrived in the newly formed Yellowstone National Park, only to find wildfires ravaging the park. The troops took it upon themselves to extinguish the blazes, creating paramilitary-esque fire control squadrons to protect the natural resources on which our economy depended (Pyne 8).

This precedent largely dominated the policies of agencies such as the Forest Service until the very recent past. Serving from 1933-1939 as Forest Service fire chief, F. A. Silcox is just one of the many in the position to execute a program of total fire suppression. Forest History Today cites Silcox as one of the most influential figures in fire policy within the past century. In a publication for the Department of Agriculture in 1910, Silcox asserted that “If the crop is to be harvested it must be protected from fire during the time of its growth” (Silcox 413). The portrayal of forests as a crop depreciated the value to that of economic losses, gauged in terms of wages and timber. At this point in time, few agencies understood the important role of fire in regeneration of forests, even speaking out against the “practice of light burning” (“Suppression” Forest History Society). These policies have continued until the very recent past.

Each September while growing up, my small village of Red Feather held an Annual Fire Days celebration. The fire department would parade down the single dirt street, the two or three fire trucks on full display for the tourists and kids of the town. Firefighters, decked out in uniform even in the sweltering heat of late summer, threw candy out their windows as we scrambled to pick out the best pieces. Dust kicked up from their tires and obscured the crowds in the afternoon sun. And reliably each year, the unmistakable and towering Smokey Bear walked alongside the trucks. Dawned each year by some six foot tall member of our tiny community, the mascot costume represented much more than the final days of summer. Even in the early 2000’s,

Smokey Bear signified an era of fire suppression that has deeply influenced our Western landscape.

Smokey Bear was invented in 1944 as a vehicle for fire prevention education, eventually becoming a wildly successful campaign (Dods 476). As a child, I received a multitude of bookmarks and paraphernalia from school and the library that touted Smokey Bear's message. They always repeated the same mantra with an Uncle Sam type authority: *Only YOU can prevent forest fires*. This campaign effectively framed both forest fire as entirely negative and prevention as an individual responsibility. Anthropologist Roberta Robin Dods writes that this campaign inscribed "fire as ecodisaster" in the Western narrative, something we have yet to remedy (476).

This prevailing paradigm is profoundly representative of our relationship to the natural world as a whole. We are exceedingly separated from natural processes, evident by our compulsive need to overpower and mechanize. Environmental historian Stephen Pyne writes of this shift in thinking:

We are the one species that can start and, within limits, stop fires...Not until the industrial revolution put fire into machines and reordered our relationship to the natural world did people assume that free-burning fire could be suppressed and, if necessary, eradicated. (Pyne 9)

The near eradication of small, free burning fires in the American West is one of the largest alterations of our landscape since colonization, and quite possibly the most destructive. It is precisely the 'reordering' of positionality in relation to the natural world that has led to such marring of the landscape. Unlike Galvin and Lyle, we have neglected to grant land, animals, or ecological systems personhood or value.

In Colorado, this issue is increasingly evident. I've spent my life playing amongst and exploring our mountain forests and tundra, an ecosystem that consists largely of forests that are reliant on regular fire to renew the succession cycle. Lodgepole pines reproduce using serotinous cones, meaning that they only open when under high temperatures produced by forest fires. As our urban settlements along the Front Range and throughout the Rocky Mountains expand into the forests, less fires have been allowed to burn, resulting in irreparable damage to the ecosystems and various species.

For weeks this fall, I awoke to find layers of ash on the concrete outside my dorm in Denver, originating from the Cameron Peak fire miles and miles away. The smoke clouded our skies and painted our sunsets a disturbing and uneasy red. Over Labor Day weekend, I went backpacking in the James Peak Wilderness above Winter Park, Colorado with my mom. We hiked high into the backcountry late one night, determined to reach a campsite above tree line. We set up our tents overlooking the Winter Park valley, the streetlights twinkling like stars.



Backpacking in the James Peak Wilderness, amidst wildfire haze

The next day, we dropped into a valley lush with alpine lakes and rainbow trout. It was a world apart from the crowded Front Range we had come from, a welcomed respite from the smoke that had congealed in our lungs for weeks. Yet, that day, we watched as a plume of smoke arose on the horizon. The Cameron Peak fire had blown up significantly, sending a mushroom cloud hundreds of feet up in the air. I watched helplessly from far away as my home was encased in an apocalyptic scene. That day, the Cameron Peak fire became the largest ever recorded in Colorado history.

The 2020 fire season as a whole quickly turned into one of the largest and most devastating in our state's history. The Pine Gulch, Grizzly Creek, East Troublesome, Cameron Peak, and numerous other fires came together to burn over 625,000 acres throughout the state (Carodine). Countless homes and livelihoods were burned. The hills and forests I once knew now stand charred, bearing the scars of both natural succession and human failure. This season has been a wakeup call for researchers, forest managers, and lovers of the natural world alike. Mark Finney, a forester with the Forest Service, tells us that "Clearly, what we're doing is not sustainable. We are not engaging in managing fire in a proactive fashion. We wait until they start and then we run around to try and put them out...and that doesn't work" (qtd. in Carodine). Finney goes on to suggest a radical transformation of our fire prevention and management policies, calling for more prescribed burns in particular.

The type of fire management that Finney calls for is neither new nor innovative. In fact, it is one of the oldest and most storied practices on the land we now call North America. For thousands of years prior to colonization of the continent, Native Americans implemented intentional burning to manage their land. Ron Goode, the chairman of the North Fork Mono Tribe in the Sierra Nevada Range of California, is an active proponent of prescribed burning. Goode writes that being a part of a web of interrelationships means proactively working with the land, not overpowering natural phenomenon. To Goode, practices of intentional burning are a part of a "relationship not just to the land but with all the species that exists on these lands including those that will come to visit or pass through" (Goode 4).

When looking at human development on the North American continent as a whole, not focused on European colonization, it is quite evident that the large scale, severe burning wildfires did not occur at the rate that they did now. For hundreds of years, numerous North American

tribes implemented a tactic of broadcast burns to help clear ground debris and restore forest health (Lane et. al). The location of these burns was intentional, and even cycled each year. Tangible effects of this practice include limiting the spread of large burns, increasing groundwater retention, and reducing the catastrophic damage of fire on watersheds (Lane et. al). This practice creates a mosaic pattern in the forest, a symbiotic relationship between ecosystem and human, and a respect for, rather than dominion over, the natural world. It built “an inextricable link which made the forests dependent on human interaction, enabling a healthy balance and existence between humans and forests” (Lane et. al).

Ron Goode told researchers at San Jose State University that his tribe still lights fires each fall on their land to burn the abundance of grass meadows. This prescribed burning helps the environment to thrive. Goode notes that “All the plants that belong there will flourish when the water returns and the openness returns and the sunlight returns and they are no longer competing for space and moisture or light” (qtd. in Lane et. al). Goode’s tribe has cultivated a viscerally beautiful mosaic, both physically and metaphorically. Fire has entered the ecosystem and cleared out old timber, allowing the younger growth to prosper. They have nurtured the symbiotic relationship and link between people and the land, so contrary to the domineering Eurocentric paradigm.

I feel an impetus to return to Gretel Ehrlich here, gently pushed along by thoughts of my mother writing about the now scorched landscape of Northern Colorado. In much of Ehrlich’s work, she grapples with the legacy of colonialism on our relationships with land and place. She writes of our longstanding national obsession with fire suppression, noting that it is indicative of “our racism intact and our obsession with what is new” (Ehrlich 54). “How confused we’ve become,” she later writes, “Being human we’re a part of nature as well as being culture makers.

Yet the messy, living, vital interconnections elude us still” (Ehrlich 54). We have become so alienated from our places, our homes, and our forests.

We forsake our place in a biological ecosystem, as indicated by our determination to eradicate the natural occurrence that is fire. It is evident that there is work to be done, especially in our fire management practices. Though implementing prescribed burning is a proactive and necessary start, there is practice also sustained, endemic, and deeply personal transformation that must occur within our relationships to place and the natural world. Using the subjunctive means stepping outside of the dominant paradigm we have viewed the natural world through for so long, instead seeking to understand alternative practices and perspectives.

Galvin writes of a complicated relationship dwellers of the meadow have with wildfire. He writes that “Almost every summer there’s a major forest fire somewhere near,” and that “Every year we don’t disappear in fire we pray our thanks” (*The Meadow* 148). Wildfires in the region deeply affected the lives and properties of farmers like Lyle. Yet, Galvin complicates this, writing that in years of major forest fires, they “saw more wildlife than ever before” (223). He notes a “sublime indifference” of the flames that pass over his home (148); the weather and fire “brutalized” the land, while simultaneously giving rise to new growth and beauty (223). Though Lyle and Galvin know their properties are at risk of burning, they also understand the necessity of wildfire to renewing the landscape that they love.

I observe the way that fire moves through landscapes and am envious of its ability to transform, to ignite passionately, and then to simply move on. I take lessons in how to be from the dance that the flames play over the trees I climbed as a child. The mosaic of fire is so entirely representative of what I’ve come to understand as place. In a healthy and flourishing meadow, we are not competing for space. We have found our place amongst a mosaic of trees, land,

animals, and people. The landscape is everchanging, and fire may burn through, allowing room for new growth. Like the forests of the North Fork Mono Tribe in the Sierra Nevada mountain range, sunlight will always return.

CHAPTER FOUR: Conclusion—Complicating Place

As I approach the end of this thesis, I feel as if I have more blind spots than points of clarity. Any theories of place I encounter are deeply influenced by the long history of domination and injustice in the United States. Experiences of the natural world and place are largely dependent on historic relationships with land and labor. This history must have monumental considerations in place-based education, literature, or any related work.

In my time at Regis University, I had the opportunity to be a part of a phenomenal cohort of students in the Community Food Systems minor program. Alongside working at Sister Gardens, the farm mere blocks from campus, we learned about community and radical social change through the lens of agricultural and creating connections to the land. In my first class for the program with Dr. Damien Thompson, we read the work of bell hooks to begin understanding the intersections between race, class, gender, and place.

Using the penname bell hooks, Gloria Jean Watkins is a professor, author, and activist with familial roots in rural Kentucky. As I struggled to come to terms with the blind spots in my understanding of place, I returned to her book, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. In this work, hooks ponders what it means to be at home, to experience a place, and to strive towards harmony between humans and the natural world. She posits that the “past and present domination and subjugation of black people” is indivisible from our attempts to create communion between all people and the land (hooks 180). Hooks complicates a single notion or story of any specific

place. She writes that Kentucky is “on one hand a lush green landscape of fast horses, natural waterfalls, tobacco crops, and red birds and, on the other hand, a world of greedy exploitation of big homes and little shacks, a world of fear and domination, of man over nature, of white over black, of top and bottom” (222).

Place is inherently subjective and dependent on identity, history, and politics of land. Hooks demonstrates the duality that a single place can embody. Or rather, the *subjunctivity* that a place can hold. Bell hooks’ work underscores the concept of the subjunctive, urging us to consider the violence of white supremacy and racism deeply ingrained in the land that we celebrate and love.

Rarely did we get through a Community Food Systems class without mentioning the work of farmer, thinker, and teacher Wendell Berry. Published in 1977 but endlessly timeless, his book *The Unsettling of America* discusses the industrialization of agriculture and food, a process that he argues results from colonialism, capitalism, and a collective estrangement from the land and natural world. On our relationship with place, Berry writes:

The concept of country, homeland, dwelling place becomes simplified as "the environment"—that is, what surrounds us, we have already made a profound division between it and ourselves. We have given up the understanding...that we and our country create one another, depend on one another, are literally part of one another; that our land passes in and out of our bodies just as our bodies pass in and out of our land. (Berry)

Culture, place, identity, and history are all indivisible from one another. Berry proffers an understanding of place that is neither separate nor alien from humans, rather deeply embedded in our cultures and identities. To live in harmony with the world around us, we must begin to heal the division between our ‘dwelling places’ and ourselves.

I'm reminded here of the final vignette of *The Meadow*. In my first reading of Galvin's book, his final pages struck me as odd, out of place, and inconclusive. Galvin chronicles Lyle's last days, marred by illness during a particularly brutal winter on the meadow. The final vignette returns to a memory not long before Lyle's death, in which Ray Worster, Galvin, and Lyle find a log cabin that had floated down Sheep Creek into the reservoir. It remained in the water for several weeks before floating ashore. Ray "chained it and locked it to a tree so it couldn't get away" (Galvin, *The Meadow* 230). I still struggle with this ending to *The Meadow*. To end a book that contains such monumental and vast prose of the meadows, mountains, and creeks of Northern Colorado with a cabin chained to the shores of Worster Reservoir feels incomplete. Yet, I'd like to think of this as representative of what place *is not*. Whether or not Galvin intended it do so, this image encapsulates the dangers of staying rooted in one narrative of place. Lyle, although he built a reciprocal and deep relationship with his landscape, was isolated and hardened by his surroundings.

I've learned that in our lives, as well as in education, conservation, and environmental work, there is a resolution to be made between creating deep and lasting relationships with our places, while also understanding places as ever changing and not static. We must understand the diverse history and narratives of place, as well as the various experiences of a single place based on identity and positionality. When we think of place as static, it is harder to stomach a changing landscape, and harder to imagine the transient relationships we have with land. In the devastating aftermath of the Cameron Peak fire last summer, the places that were burned less severely were those that are a part of a mosaic of forest succession, previously burned in the High Park Fire or in controlled burns.

As graduation approaches, I have no plan other than to return to the damp forests of Oregon, this time as the leader for a trail crew of teenagers, like the one I was a part of the summer before my first year at Regis. I'll be returning to weeks spent drying out my socks, to the mornings spent picking slugs off my tent walls, and to the hours spent loitering in laundromats washing my clothes with a few quarters scrounged together. This type of work is a perfect example of a place-based education, one that acknowledges our presence in social and ecological processes. In the future, I hope to pursue a graduate program for place-based education. Pedagogy of place can be utilized in environmental, social, and justice education, allowing students to make connections between their communities, history, and the natural world. If we are to learn how we ought to live alongside our communities and the natural environment, perhaps we can start by appreciating and building connections with place.

I do not pretend to know exactly what place is, or what it really means to know a place deeply. But I do know that I experience the world by writing about the places I love, and that I want to share that with others.

All I know is that the real world goes a little something like this.

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