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"That Hateful Prairie Wind": Violence and Ecophobia in Twentieth Century American Gothic

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“THAT *HATEFUL* PRAIRIE WIND”: VIOLENCE AND ECOPHOBIA IN TWENTIETH
CENTURY AMERICAN GOTHIC

By

Jessica Duncan

THESIS

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“That *Hateful* Prairie Wind”: Violence and Ecophobia in Twentieth Century American Gothic

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ABSTRACT

“THAT *HATEFUL* PRAIRIE WIND”: VIOLENCE AND ECOPHOBIA IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN GOTHIC

By

Jessica Duncan

As ecocriticism continues to grow and unfold, ecocritics must continue to determine its overall goals and boundaries. This paper tests the waters of some new ecocritical terminology, namely Simon Estok’s term, “ecophobia,” by examining the intersection of American Gothic and Ecocriticism. Ecophobia refers to fear and contempt of the natural world, as a way of understanding human relationships with the nonhuman world. This paper also examines ecophobic tendencies of characters in two twentieth century Gothic novels, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*. American Gothic novels often represent patterns of historical violence. Therefore, analyzing moments of ecophobia within these novels allows me to draw a connection between harmful constructs of nature and human oppression. Overall, this paper examines the intersections of American Gothic literature, ecophobia,

As ecocriticism continues to grow and unfold, ecocritics must continue to determine its overall goals and boundaries. This paper explores the boundaries of Simon Estok’s term, “ecophobia,” which refers to fear and contempt of the natural world. I argue that because humans are natural entities, ecophobia can also be defined as fear and contempt of other humans. In order to understand what human-directed ecophobia looks like, I turn to two

twentieth century Gothic novels, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1994) and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965). As Tom Hillard writes, in order to begin to understand ecophobia, we should first analyze texts that deal explicitly with fear. While these texts may seem disparate, I argue that they both contain characters of minority status who exhibit signs of ecophobia toward both the nonhuman natural world and toward themselves. This ecophobia is a product of the dark and haunting violence which looms under the surface of U.S. history. As Michele Satterlee writes, cultural trauma can often be tied to landscape. This paper explores how U.S. historical violence creates a cultural trauma among many minorities, and in turn, it is this cultural trauma (or memory) that influences the way characters in *In Cold Blood* and *The Bluest Eye* interact with the natural world. This paper explores the boundaries of ecophobia by unpacking the specific intersections of ecophobia, the Gothic, and landscapes of cultural trauma. It is at these intersections that I am able to highlight the connection between contempt of the natural world and systems of human oppression.

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JESSICA DUNCAN

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Sarah Helen Bates, who changed my life everyday before my second cup of coffee.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

In the Spring of 2009, Simon Estok wrote an article for *ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment)* that was meant to spark a resurgence of interest in ecocriticism, which had been losing some momentum. Estok writes that while some ecocritical works, such as Peter Singer's, are influential in movements against environmental degradation, many other ecocritics fail to establish the larger goals of this body of criticism. In his article, "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness," Estok coins the term *ecophobia*. Ecophobia, in its simplest definition, is "contempt for the natural world" (Estok 204). This contempt can take form in various actions against the natural environment, from factory farming to the fences we build around our backyards. It is Estok's belief that "control of the natural environment, understood as a god-given right in western culture, implies ecophobia, just as the use of African slaves implies racism" (Estok 207, 208). Just as racism is used to justify human slavery, ecophobia too becomes the justification for the harmful ways humans treat the nonhuman world. However, humans are also a part of nature, and the way we view the natural world often also influences the way we view other humans.

In his article, Estok urges ecocritics to understand that investigating literature from this critical perspective could have tremendous impacts on all of the natural world, both human and nonhuman. Further, ecocritics must approach this subject matter with urgency. As U.S. society in particular grapples with issues of social justice, it is important to realize that environmental issues are also social justice issues. This thesis will

contribute to the examination of ecophobia and the harmful consequences of viewing the natural world as an entity to be controlled, maintained, or even protected. In order to investigate the various forms of ecophobia, I look to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1994) and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), which I argue are both examples of twentieth century Gothic novels. Examining these texts with an ecocritical lens allows me to identify moments of ecophobia. Then, I am able to unpack these moments and examine how contempt of the natural world is related to human oppression.

Soon after Estok's call to activism, *ISLE* published an article by Tom Hillard titled "Deep Into That Darkness Peering," which deals with the specific intersection of ecophobia and the Gothic. In Hillard's response to Estok, he argues that as ecocritics investigate ecophobia, we should first begin with texts that deal explicitly with fear. Thus, "examining this darker side of nature writing, with its emphasis on fear, inevitably intersects with an examination of Gothic fiction and literature" (Hillard 688). In addition to Hillard's argument, it is my belief that Gothic writing, specifically in the United States, deals with a violent history of which US-Americans are still feeling the consequences. Thus, observation of American Gothic fiction and nonfiction has the capacity to incite the activism and praxis that Estok is so concerned with.

In both chapters, I investigate the history of violence in the U.S. and the ways in which American Gothic novels address that violence. In order to do this I first look back at early examples of the Gothic novel, namely Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as well as Maggie Kilgour's critical text, *Rise of the Gothic Novel*. However, because so much of the Gothic is reactionary to varying social anxieties, and the U.S. has its own set of fears, I

turn to Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy to understand the ways American Gothic novels rewrite and redefine traditional concepts of the European Gothic. Defining elements of American Gothic allows me to discover the similarities between two seemingly different novels, *In Cold Blood* and *The Bluest Eye*. Because characters in both of these novels exhibit signs of ecophobia, I am able to establish that American Gothic novels, both fiction and nonfiction, often reflect underlying contempt for the natural world. Further, this ideology is used repeatedly to justify violence and displacement among inhabitants of the U.S., specifically Native Americans and African Americans. In Capote's novel, this fear and contempt is often aimed at the Kansan agricultural landscape, whereas in Morrison's novel, ecophobia is directed at the human body. What these two novels share, however, is the arousal of fear and contempt in characters when they are faced with parts of the natural world that hold cultural and historical meaning.

In Capote's novel, a character feels an arousal of contempt as he realizes the symbolic meaning of a particular place within the North American landscape. According to Yi-Fu Tuan, place is subject to each individual's experience, and "if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place" (Tuan 6). Thus, there is a difference not only between space and place, but also location and place. Places leave opportunity for reflection and connective experience with landscape, architecture, and other people. Places hold meaning, even negative meaning. These definitions of place are particularly interesting in relation to U.S. history and the U.S. landscape. To some Native Americans, "landscape is personal and tribal history made visible. The native's identity—his place in

the total scheme of things—is not in doubt, because the myths that support it are as real as the rocks and waterhole he can see and touch” (Tuan 158). The use of landscape as identity-maker can be seen in many written texts by Native Americans. In some contemporary Native American texts, such as Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, places can hold the memory of cultural trauma, meaning “the suffering experienced by a group of people caused only by their affiliation with a certain racial or ethnic group” (Satterlee 74). Furthermore, in these novels, “individual trauma is rooted within a cultural context and tied to a specific landscape” (Satterlee 74). In other words, both places and landscapes can provide moments to pause and connect oneself to rest of the world. Keith H. Basso, a cultural and linguistic anthropologist, believes that “knowledge of places is closely linked to knowledge of the self, to grasping one’s position in the larger scheme of things, including one’s own community, and to securing a confident essence of who one is as a person” (Clark 2). Understanding the histories of where we are, geographically, socially, and culturally, is a crucial stage in self-awareness. Furthermore, recognizing that places themselves can hold cultural trauma is vital to understanding instances of ecophobia in both *The Bluest Eye* and *In Cold Blood*.

The two novels addressed in this thesis, at first, seem to be very different. Toni Morrison’s novel is considered fiction, although it takes place in her hometown of Lorain, Ohio. Conversely, Truman Capote identified his own work as the first nonfiction novel, despite also claiming to utilize elements of fiction in his writing. While these novels are seemingly very different, they in fact share several important similarities. First, both novels are examples of twentieth century American Gothic, which means that both novels

address the anxieties of U.S. society. Further, both novels investigate these anxieties through marginalized characters, one Native American and the other African American. Thus, although Capote's novel is labelled nonfiction and Morrison's is labelled fiction, both texts set out to expose the violent truths which are hidden in U.S. society. More specifically, both novels include characters whose ancestral histories influence their experience with the natural world, those experiences often being ecophobic.

However, what is most interesting about the ecophobic experiences of these characters is not their similarities, but their differences. For example, in Capote's novel, Perry Smith experiences ecophobia while looking upon a geographical landscape which simultaneously represents the violent histories of his ancestors and the economic success he has been denied throughout his life. In this small moment, Perry experiences such ecophobia that he commits murder. In this thesis, I also refer to landscape when discussing ecophobia in Toni Morrison's novel. However, this landscape is not geographical, but corporeal. Pecola Breedlove, one of the main characters of the novel, experiences ecophobia of her own body, specifically of her dark eyes and skin. Thus, in both novels, characters exhibit ecophobia when they are unable to reconcile their cultural traumas and secure their identities during their experiences with the natural world. This thesis seeks to unpack these nuanced ecophobic moments in order to understand the effects of ideologies which promote control and fear of the natural world.

CHAPTER ONE: ECOPHOBIA AND THE BODY IN TONI MORRISON'S
THE BLUEST EYE

Violence and American Gothic

While many critics have attempted to label Toni Morrison's novels as examples of American Gothic writing, Morrison herself does not prefer to be identified as a Gothic writer. She has stated in several interviews that she is a "black woman novelist" ("In Depth with Toni Morrison"), although some critics explain that this could be "a reaction to the 'gothic's typical association with the 'unreal' and the sensational'" (Wester 378). Morrison's work, however, does not so much deal with the unreal as with the unseen. Her writing gives voice to the perspective often assumed but rarely represented in the U.S. canon. For example, most slave narratives were either written by white men or under the control of white editors. Morrison herself explains this unseen presence in her essay, "Black Matters," in which she argues that "a real or fabricated Africanistic presence has been crucial to writers' sense of their Americanness. And it shows: through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, and the way their work is peopled with the signs and bodies of this presence" ("Black Matters"). In other words, even if African Americans were not explicitly present in U.S.-American literature, "coded language" and "purposeful restriction" signifies the nation's struggles with race relations ("Black Matters"). According to Morrison, it is this hidden but haunting reality which gives US-American literature its Gothic feel, even into the twentieth century.

What is particularly haunting about Morrison's work is, in fact, not what is unreal or supernatural, but quite the opposite. The very real anxieties of the African American

experience are much more frightening to the reader because of its closeness to reality. In this way, Morrison's fiction novels rewrite and expand the definition of the Gothic in order to bring to light hidden terrors of the "American" experience. In other words, "what *Beloved* and Morrison's other texts illustrate are the ways the Gothic may be deployed as a historical mode, using the disquieting and perplexing realities of African American existence, rather than imagined terrors, to sustain its aura of apprehension" (Wester 378). Therefore, even though novels like *Beloved* portray supernatural elements, such as ghosts, it is the dark reality of the United States' violent history which is truly terrifying. In the past, "it has been easier to read blackness in terms of demonology than of race" (Martin xi). But Morrison's novels make this symbolic reading of American literature inadequate. Her narratives demand a recognition of the historical horrors of the U.S. In this way, Morrison's Gothic is a rewriting of the traditional, "politically conservative" Gothic "that gives expression to the anxieties of a class threatened with violent dissolution" (Martin 130). Instead, her writing "can allow for the voice of the culturally repressed and hence act out a resistance to the dominant culture" (Martin 130). In other words, Morrison utilizes the Gothic in order to bring the once invisible Africanistic presence into focus and expose historically inadequate representations of African Americans.

However, Morrison is not only interested in portraying the realities of the African American experience, but also of investigating the psychology of those who could enact such violence, the oppressors. In her essay, "Black Matters," Morrison draws a direct correlation between many of the motivating ideals among U.S. settlers and colonialists

and the way those concepts play out in the enslavement of both Native Americans and African Americans:

“Autonomy—freedom—translates into the much championed and revered ‘individualism’; newness translates into ‘innocence’; distinctiveness becomes difference and strategies for maintaining it; authority becomes a romantic, conquering ‘heroism’ and ‘virility’ and raises the problematics of wielding absolute power over the lives of others. These four are made possible, finally, by the fifth: absolute power called forth and acted out against, upon, and within a natural and mental landscape conceived of as a ‘raw, half-savage world’” (“Black Matters”).

In this passage, Morrison illustrates how “American” ideologies about freedom and individualism are grounded ecophobic ideas about both the human and nonhuman Other. Colonialists strive to maintain difference between themselves and the “raw, half-savage world,” savage implying historical notions about both landscape and the Native American people, by controlling the Other with violence. This violence occurs in the relocation of Native Americans to reservations and the enslavement of Africans in early U.S. history. And because all humans are part of the natural world, these methods of control, contempt, and violence against other human beings exemplify ecophobia. Furthermore, studying ecophobic tendencies of American Gothic characters can help ecocritics to further understand the relationship between the human and nonhuman natural worlds.

Ecophobia and the Body

While the term ecophobia may, at first, suggest only fear and contempt of geographical landscapes and nonhuman animals, Toni Morrison’s novel calls attention to how ecophobia can be applied to the landscape of the human body. While *The Bluest Eye* is set around the 1940s, the type of ecophobia present in the novel is very much relevant

to issues of social justice in the U.S. today. In 2008, Charles Johnson, a novelist, criticized Toni Morrison's body of work, claiming that "slavery-era stories and segregation-era stories are stories about the past" (Ghansah). Four years after this comment, an African American teenager, Trayvon Martin, was shot by a white man in the name of self-defense. Two years after this incident, Michael Brown was killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, where his body lay in the street for hours afterward. In 2015, at least 102 unarmed black people were killed by police in the United States ("Unarmed Victims"). Thus, while slavery and segregation are illegal in the U.S., to imply that Morrison's work is any less relevant at this time in our nation is undoubtedly incorrect. In fact, Morrison's work becomes more urgent as our country continues to confront the violence enacted upon African Americans.

The terms race and racism have long been debated. Specifically in the United States, race seems most often to suggest certain physical characteristics of a person. However, "race is a complicated and far from obvious concept, even when—perhaps especially when—it appears most physically precise" (Fields 150). In other words, while throughout U.S. history a difference in race most often suggested a difference in skin color, the slavery and segregation of African Americans, in actuality, had little to do with skin color and more to do with justifying an ideology. For example, according to Barbara Fields, the construction of race was born from a society that needed a way to justify human slavery. She writes that the difference between races, particularly black and white races, "took time to become distinct" (Fields 152). In fact, it wasn't until "the very point in time when large numbers of men and women were beginning to question the moral

legitimacy of slavery' that the idea of race came into its own" (Fields 152). Thus, the "prime function" of race "is to make coherent—if never scientifically accurate—sense of the social world" (Fields 153). However, Fields also points out that this lack of scientific accuracy "does not mean that race is unreal: All ideologies are real, in that they are the embodiment in thought of real social relations" (Fields 151). Thus, while it is true that race is most often recognized in arbitrary and imprecise physical attributes of the human form, it is important to recognize these symptoms of an underlying ideological problem. Racism is cancerous, and to ignore its symptoms is to ignore the disease which eats away at our society. Thus, for the purposes of this chapter, race and racism will be terms referred to with the understanding that they are socially constructed ideas with very real and detrimental consequences. Understanding how ecophobia works can also help us to understand why arbitrary differences in the human body can lead to such devastating systems of hatred and oppression.

Racism and ecophobia are related in their mutual contempt of the natural world. Racism is a type of ecophobia. It feeds on fear of other humans. Then, it demands that we control what we fear. Racist practices, specifically those which enslaved and killed millions of Africans in the U.S., began with the recognition of the black body as 'Other.' Toni Morrison has written much about the history of African Americans, both their inclusion as stereotypes and their erasure within the US literary canon. She also highlights the role of the African American body in slavery and oppression.

"These slaves, unlike many others in the world's history, were visible to a fault. And they had inherited, among other things, a long history of the 'meaning' of color. It was not simply that this slave population had a

distinctive color; it was that this color ‘meant’ something. This ‘meaning’ had been named and deployed by scholars from at least the moment, in the eighteenth century, when other and sometimes the same scholars investigated both the natural history and the inalienable rights of man—that is to say, human freedom” (“Black Matters”).

In this passage, Morrison describes how difference in skin color was used to justify the advocacy for inalienable rights with one hand and the enslavement of an African with the other. In other words, arbitrary characteristics of the African American body are what informed the possibility of slavery, even within a time when “freedom” was being championed by colonialists from Europe. According to Fields, this is possible because “in the era of the slave trade a social fact—that these people all came from the same exotic continent and that they were all destined for slavery—made the similarities among them more important, in principle, than the differences (Fields 145). From the eighteenth century on, the African American body, specifically darker skin colors, became the focal point of violence. Toni Morrison’s novel, *The Bluest Eye*, drags the consequences of this violence into the light.

In this novel, characters exhibit signs of ecophobia toward their own bodies, which is a consequence of life inside a racist and violent society. Simon Estok briefly mentions how humans are commonly ecophobic of our own bodies, although we usually do not recognize this behavior as harmful. He claims that this type of ecophobia “sustains the personal hygiene and cosmetics industries (which cite nature’s ‘flaws’ and ‘blemishes’ as objects of their work)” (Estok 208). In other words, even basic methods of hygiene could be considered ecophobic because they reflect an attempt to correct the naturally occurring form of the human body. This means that even the idea of cleanliness is rooted

in fear of the natural world. This description of ecophobia is very similar to an image described by Albert Memmi. Memmi describes the psychology behind the African American's attempt to change his or her physical characteristics to match that of the white colonizer:

“In order to free himself, at least so he believes, he agrees to destroy himself. This phenomenon is comparable to Negrophobia in a Negro, or anti-Semitism in a Jew. Negro women try desperately to uncurl their hair, which keeps curling back, and torture their skin to make it a little whiter” (Memmi 122).

The behavior described in this passage is ecophobic. These compulsions are a consequence of a society which tells African Americans that their natural appearances are inadequate and in need of maintenance. In Morrison's novel, characters describe the natural world and their relationships to their own bodies in a similarly ecophobic manner. The experiences of her characters allow ecocritics to understand the way race politics and ecocriticism are deeply intertwined. For example, Estok writes, “theorizing ecophobia... means looking at the constitutional moment in history that gives us the biblical imperative to control everything that lives. Control, of course, is the key word here” (Estok 208). Control of the African American body is both racist and ecophobic. To understand explicit examples of corporeal ecophobia, ecocritics should turn to characters in *The Bluest Eye*.

One facet of corporeal ecophobia is cleanliness. Consistently throughout the novel, Morrison's characters comment on the differences between cleanliness and dirtiness, specifically in relation to their bodies. For example from the beginning of the novel, the narrator describes the relationship between Pecola and the Earth. After the

reader discovers that Pecola is pregnant with her father's child, the narrator remarks that "Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt" (*The Bluest Eye* 6). Pecola is described as being equivalent to both dirt and "the unyielding earth" (*The Bluest Eye* 6), and she is not the only character to be described in this way. Oftentimes, it seems that bodily cleanliness is a state which is forced upon characters as a means of fitting into society. For example, Claudia describes her experience taking a bath on Christmas morning, where there was "no time to enjoy one's nakedness," but only "the dreadful and humiliating absence of dirt" (Morrison 22). Then, later in life, she learns to give in to this cleanliness, "knowing, even as [she] learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement" (Morrison 23). Claudia's initial resistance to cleanliness reflects the idea that it is a learned habit, which is rooted in the desire to fit into a certain mold. Claudia and Pecola both learn to admire cleanliness and despise the dirt.

Pecola also describes her experiences with filth and cleanliness, particularly in response to her own body. In one particular scene, Pecola describes her attempt to purchase some Mary Jane candy. After an awkward and shameful interaction with the owner of the candy store, in which he refused to touch Pecola's hand, she reflects on the candies themselves and what they represent. Pecola considers the difference between herself and the girl on the candy wrapper. She describes, "each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort" (Morrison 50). The image of Mary Jane on this candy wrapper is the ideal image of beauty to Pecola, whose biggest wish is to have blue eyes. Throughout the

novel, Pecola attempts to conform to the overwhelming message from society that her blackness and poverty are things to be ashamed of, while beauty resides in cleanliness and whiteness. From Pecola's perspective, the outside is dirty. Furthermore, because this dirtiness is not found in the ideal image of beauty on the Mary Jane candy wrapper, dirtiness is bad. This is, in fact, ecophobia at work. However, this type of ecophobia is driven by the messages being sent to Pecola from society, the image on the candy, "its sweetness is good" (Morrison 50). Thus, Pecola lives in a society that continually tells her that her blackness is bad and dirty, influencing her to feel ecophobic of her own body.

However, this fear extends even beyond the status of one's own body. Morrison's characters also exhibit fear of the location of their bodies within the nonhuman natural world. This fear can be noted in the oppositions that characters create between the concepts "inside" and "outside." It seems that the nearer a character is to the outside, the dirtier, and the lowlier, they consider themselves to be. In the world of the novel, being without a house is referred to as being "outdoors" (Morrison 17). And to some characters, like the Breedlove children, "outdoors...was the real terror of life...if you are outdoors, there is no place to go...outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing [their] metaphysical condition" (Morrison 17). In this passage, being without a home to separate oneself from the natural world represents your station in society. The nearer you are to the nonhuman natural world, the more shame you should feel about yourself. Thus, characters must take certain precautions in order to prevent this shame. One way of preventing the fall to "outdoors" is by focusing one's attention on ownership. Characters within Morrison's novel are obsessive about their

domestic territories. The Breedlove children claim, “knowing that there was such a thing as outdoors bred in us a hunger for property, ownership... The firm possession of a yard, a porch, a grape arbor. Propertied black people spent all their energies, all their love, on their nests” (Morrison 19). Thus, black characters, specifically those in the lower class, attempt to keep themselves from falling to the level of the natural world (outdoors) through landownership. The success of this ownership is illustrated in the character of Geraldine.

Geraldine’s character offers another example of the way ecophobic behavior is enacted in order to maintain control of one’s surroundings and station within society. The descriptions of Geraldine in contrast to the Breedlove family offer some of the most explicit examples of ecophobia. For example, the Breedlove family is described as being poor, black, and ugly (Morrison 38), while Geraldine is described as a black woman who has learned “how to behave” (Morrison 83). In the eyes of other characters, her goodness comes from her ability to control both her behavior and the natural aspects of her body. According to Claudia, these natural aspects are known as “funk,” (Morrison 83) and Geraldine has learned to minimize her funk.

“Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies... The laugh that is a little too loud; the enunciation a little too round; the gesture a little too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry, worry, about the edges of their hair” (Morrison 83).

This worry comes from the need to assert oneself as better than other black characters.

The more Geraldine and her family are able to maintain and groom their bodies, they will

be accepted as “colored people,” who were “neat and quiet,” while “niggers were dirty and loud” (Morrison 87). The measures Geraldine takes to separate herself from the natural world are ecophobic. Her need to dominate the natural world, even within herself and her child, reflects the expectations of class within the world of the novel. Furthermore, it reflects the feelings of an internalized inferiority of many African Americans.

Franz Fanon analyzes this internalized inferiority from a psychological standpoint. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon asserts that people of color often feel inferior to their white counterparts, and they become obsessed with making up for this feeling of inferiority. However, he also asserts that this inferiority is not felt because the black individual is, in fact, inferior but because he or she has been made to feel this way by external prejudices.

“If he is overwhelmed to such a degree by the wish to be white, it is because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race; to the identical degree to which that society creates difficulties for him, he will find himself thrust into a neurotic situation” (Fanon 74).

Within the novel, ecophobic behavior is a side effect of this neurotic situation. These characters attempt to control their own natural states as a way to conform to the ecophobic values of the society in which they live and in order to feel less inferior. The biggest example of this situation is Geraldine. Geraldine is perhaps the definition of neurotic. She is obsessed with being clean and nice. She insists that her son play only with “white kids; his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to

him the difference between colored people and niggers” (Morrison 87). According to Geraldine, “colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud...The line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant” (Morrison 87). In these passages, feelings of inferiority are staved off by ecophobic attitudes toward cleanliness and behavioral control. In the era of slavery, African Americans were considered to be sub-human, and thus were subject to control and violence. Centuries later, Geraldine attempts to resist this sub-human identity through the same patterns of control and ecophobia that were once directed toward African slaves. The difference is that Geraldine’s ecophobia is not directed toward a slave, but toward herself.

Geraldine’s behaviors also mimic the way white characters in the novel treat the natural world. For example, later in the novel, Claudia and her sister Frieda search for Pecola in a part of town where “black people were not allowed” (*The Bluest Eye* 105). Claudia observes that “the streets changed; houses looked more sturdy...set well back from the street, fronted by yards edged in shrubbery clipped into smooth cones and balls of velvet green. The lakefront houses were the loveliest” (*The Bluest Eye* 105). Claudia and Frieda’s fascination with more controlled landscapes reflects that they have been taught to value the correlation between beauty and control of natural entities. To them, the controlled nature of these lakefront houses represents something impressive or powerful. On the other hand, their observations of the natural environment surrounding their own land is ecophobic. For example, as spring approaches, a time of the year where life and color are blooming, Claudia describes only the violence she associates with the

forsythia bushes. She says, “Their delicate, showy hopefulness shooting from forsythia and lilac bushes meant only a change in whipping style...Even now spring for me is shot through with the remembered ache of switchings, and forsythia holds no cheer” (Morrison 97). Here, Morrison’s writing demonstrates how a history of violence and racism informs ecophobic constructs of nature. Gardens and trimmed bushes flourish in the white neighborhoods of this novel. They are coupled with clean linens, big houses, and bubbling blackberry pies. But this represents only one view of the natural world: that in order to be beautiful, it must be controlled. This is contrasted with Pecola and Claudia’s interpretations of the natural world among their own homes, which evoke only violence and dread. In this particular passage, Claudia’s ecophobia comes from a fear of the violence enacted upon the human body. This violence is reflective of the policing of African American bodies, first by slavery, then by segregation. While the whipping Claudia receives with the forsythia bushes is enacted upon her by her parents, this could be a symbolic reminder of this same sort of violence once enacted upon slaves by their masters. This type of symbolism can be seen in other American Gothic texts, where “a racial history of slavery...shifts the novel’s theme away from family guilt to national guilt or uses the family as a synecdoche of the nation” (Martin 130). Thus, the violence against Claudia and her siblings is an echo of the historical violence against African Americans. Furthermore, this cultural violence results in the perpetuation of ecophobic constructs of nature. The natural world now becomes a reminder of fear, and thus control of that natural world becomes justifiable.

Conclusion

As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, cultural trauma can often be observed in the individual's relationship to a particular landscape. In Toni Morrison's novel, characters show ecophobic relationships with both geographical and corporeal landscapes as a reflection of the violence and oppression they have received historically. As described by characters in this novel, land ownership is often a mode of social survival. That is, characters often prove themselves as separate from the natural world by controlling and manicuring even the smallest patch of land. Further, characters exhibit ecophobic behaviors with regard to their own bodies. These behaviors are described as ridding the body of "funk" or dirt, which also represents a separation of the human body from the natural world. This separation of human from the natural world is both informed by and influential to the perpetuation of ecophobia. Morrison's novel, then, illustrates the way inter-human relationships can often inform treatment of the nonhuman world.

CHAPTER TWO: PLACE AND ECOPHOBIC VIOLENCE IN TRUMAN CAPOTE'S *IN COLD BLOOD*

In the previous chapter, I examine instances of ecophobia as it relates to the body. In this chapter, I narrow in on a specific moment in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* in order to understand how places and landscapes hold cultural histories. Further, I argue that it is this historical meaning which informs instances of ecophobia in characters whose ancestors were subject to violence and oppression. For a brief moment in the novel, history and landscape intersect and a form of ecophobia manifests. This manifestation takes place Perry Smith.

In Holcomb, Kansas, 1959, four members of the Clutter family were murdered by two men looking for a nonexistent safe. These men were Richard Hickock and Perry Smith. In the years following the murders, Truman Capote, a New York writer from Alabama, worked diligently on writing a novel that would make sense of such extreme violence. As Capote spiraled into obsession, he found himself particularly drawn to Perry Smith. Smith, an ancestor of the Cherokee Native American tribe, became the main focus of Capote's nonfiction novel, which ultimately called into question Smith's guilt. Capote's novel offers insight into Smith's life, portraying him as an exile of 1950s U.S. society, not in order to relieve Smith of his guilt, but in order to understand why and how such violence could occur.

There's no shortage of criticism about Capote's nonfiction novel, from a number of brutal reviews that sprouted after its release, to Jack DeBellis' 1979 article, "Visions

and Revisions,” which analyzes the 5,000 revisions made by Capote from the New Yorker serialization to the Random House novel edition. Furthermore, his writing has been examined in relation to both queer and racial politics, although this criticism mostly involves his early work *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Capote was also known for having a cinematic writing style. Most of his published writing eventually became films, the most well-known being *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, starring Audrey Hepburn. There has even been a considerable amount of criticism conducted about how Capote fits into the Gothic. For example, Thomas Slayton observes Capote’s writing in this way by setting it beside the work of Carson McCullers in his book *Horror in the Mansion*. J. Perry explores *In Cold Blood* as structurally Gothic, exemplifying how it fits in among other American Gothic writers like Faulkner and Styron. But little has been written about the use of setting and landscape in his nonfiction novel. As I introduced in the previous chapter of this thesis, one way of examining Gothic texts and the social anxieties that they reveal is with an ecocritical lens. Furthermore, because Gothic texts deal with fear and terror, using the concept of ecophobia allows ecocritics to identify harmful tendencies humans have toward the nonhuman world. It also allows ecocritics to understand the consequences of these ecophobic tendencies. Truman Capote’s novel, *In Cold Blood*, is particularly complex because it reveals two very different ways that ecophobia can present itself, specifically within the twentieth century in the United States.

A Gothic Connection

In mid-October of 1960, Truman Capote, his partner Jack Dunfry, and his bulldog Bunky made the trek from Playa de Aro, Spain to Verbier, Switzerland. It was there,

among the height and beauty of the Swiss Alps, that Truman Capote spent his winters writing his renowned novel, *In Cold Blood*. In a letter to Donald Windham, a writer and friend of Capote, he wrote, “all I have to say is Sir Edmund Hillary is looking for the Yeti in the wrong place: its’s here—and I’m it” (Clarke 303). Over the course of the next few years, Capote would return to Switzerland several times, always communicating to those back in the states through letters. For the most part, he seemed to do well in the snow and cold, “perched almost on the top of an Alpine peak” (Clarke 305). However, the weight of his project seemed to always be looming in the background of his mind, never allowing him to completely his time there. In another letter to Windham, he wrote, “I feel a great obligation to write [the novel], even though the material leaves me increasingly limp and numb and, well, horrified—I have such awful dreams every night. I don't know now how I could ever have felt so callous and ‘objective’—as I did in the beginning” (Clarke 301). While this mountainous region is well-known for inciting sublime notions among Romantic and Gothic artists, Truman Capote seemed to be much more overwhelmed by the sublimity of his own work. If *In Cold Blood* is a creation of sorts, then Truman Capote is its nervous creator, Victor Frankenstein. Capote might also be compared to Mary Shelley, whose Gothic novel is known for its experimentation with both form and content. In fact, Shelley very much considered her novel to be a creation just like the monster within the narrative. It’s also interesting to note that Shelley wrote her novel shortly after having traveled through the Alps, the same region where Truman Capote would live and grapple with his own monster over a century later.

Capote's text, with its proclaimed use of both journalistic and fiction elements, is pieced together just as Frankenstein's creature. Other forms of experimental narrative structures can be identified throughout the history of the Gothic. According to Maggie Kilgour in her collection, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, Gothic texts themselves can act as oddly created "monsters." She says, "Gothic creation thus suggests a view of the imagination not as an originating faculty that creates ex nihilo, but as a power of combination" (Kilgour 4). She then quotes Mary Shelley, who said in the introduction to *Frankenstein* that "'invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of a void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded; it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself'" (Kilgour 4). These ideas about Gothic texts in relation to creation and invention are important when considering Truman Capote's novel, *In Cold Blood*. Known to many as the first nonfiction novel, Capote invents a hybrid form using the narrative parts of both fiction and journalism, creating his own "Frankenstein" narrative. Thus, aside from the obvious Gothic motifs that Capote uses throughout his work, the construction of the text by using these differing forms is itself Gothic in nature. However, Capote's collaborative piece was not necessarily praised for its experimentation. According to Michael Wainwright, critics viewed Capote's nonfiction novel as unreliable and not at all documentary. Wainwright highlights that many readers of *In Cold Blood* "'have stated that the credibility of the narrative collapsed for them when they discovered that certain details had been invented or significantly changed to enhance the thematic patterning of the text'" (Wainwright). In Capote's novel, this enhancement may refer to the emotional

and historical motives that he gives to Perry Smith, the main murderer of the Clutter family and sympathetic character of the novel. Capote's attempt to give Perry complex emotions and motivations forces the reader to question morality, to question how we look at justice in America. Capote is not the only true crime writer to make this attempt, and according to critics of contemporary American crime stories, "if the ongoing assumption is that the killer is not what he seems...it shouldn't surprise us that writers about serial killers turn to a rearticulation of the nineteenth-century gothic" (Nixon 224). True crime writers often turn to the Gothic because it is "traditionally the genre best equipped for the representation of a collective fear in the seemingly incomprehensible or occultly ineffable" (Nixon 224). Because Perry is representation of a "collective fear," understanding why he feels ecophobic allows us to understand societal attitudes toward the natural world. Just as Toni Morrison's novel rewrites the Gothic by elaborating on the realities of the African American experience, Truman Capote's novel uses the history of violence to depict haunting and revengeful portrayals of nature. It seems that often, "Gothic novelists didn't know what to do with their own feelings of frustration and rebelliousness...Their fiction is both exploratory and fearful...[For they have] opened up new areas of awareness which complicate life enormously" (Kilgour 9). Perhaps Capote has opened up the history of place and environment through his fictitious constructions of Perry Smith's character. By highlighting Smith's Native American heritage and creating in him motivations connected to his displacement from his ancestral land and from the successful agriculture in the U.S., Capote draws attention to this particular society's fear of revenge from its violent past. Thus, Perry's character is another way Capote utilizes

the Gothic. However, in order to understand the significance of both Capote's depictions of nature and Perry Smith's experience with landscape, we must first understand the concepts of history and place within the novel.

Significance of Place and History

As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, place plays an important part in recovering from both cultural trauma and, subsequently, individual trauma. Also, individual trauma is often "rooted within a cultural context and tied to a specific landscape" (Satterlee 74). However, in Capote's novel, we see what can happen when a character faces that landscape, but is unable to reconcile his cultural and individual trauma. While understanding the historical context of a place often leads "to securing a confident essence of who one is as a person" (Clark 2), the main character of *In Cold Blood* experiences feelings of displacement and ecophobia.

The reader is introduced to Perry Smith as the son of a full-blooded Cherokee (Capote 16). The narrator describes that "his mother's donation was apparent; that of his father, a freckled, ginger-haired Irishman, was less so. It was as though the Indian blood had routed every trace of the Celtic strain" (Capote 16). However, Perry is given his father's last name, Smith, which is not of Native American origin. The emphasis on Perry's heritage seems purposeful, and it may be an invitation to reflect on the historical treatment of Native Americans, specifically near Holcomb. The Great Plains of the United States' landscape, while seemingly empty and flat, are filled with the violent histories of oppression and colonization. Both Kansas and Arkansas originally acted as part of the Indian Removal emigration policy of the 1800s. These territories hosted

reservations for the Chippewa, Delaware, Illini, Iowa, Kickapoo, Potawatomi, Sac and Fox, Seneca, Shawnee, Wyandottee, and Cherokee tribes. However, as the number of settlers increased on the east coast in 1854, the land was taken from these tribes and they were once again displaced (Kansas Historical Society). In this way, this landscape holds a particular significance to Perry Smith's lineage and the violence which has occurred there. According to Mintz and Kellogg, "after 1945, as the economy expanded, both people and businesses sought new spaces and places. Many members of the growing middle class scattered into sprawling suburbs and other outlying areas to find their ranch house and patch of lawn" (Mintz 183). In other words, many U.S. families were moving from city spaces to rural spaces, where they began to make incomes from farming and agriculture. This movement of the middle class becomes complicated when placed beside the relocation policies in action at this same time.

1950s United States was responsible for one of the largest relocation programs in Native American history, moving at least 30,000 American Indians from rural spaces to inner-city urban spaces (Burt 85). Because the Native Americans involved in this relocation program were not given adequate assistance once they arrived in these urban spaces, they were not able to succeed and often found themselves in even worse positions than before relocation. This program was criticized by Native Americans and liberals, such as Dorothy Van De Mark, who "described relocation as a policy motivated by the drive to remove Indians from their land so non-Indians could get it" (Burt 92). It seems, then, that the success of one family in the U.S. often came at the price of another's. The success of many middle class families in rural areas combined with the economic failings

of Native Americans who were relocated to urban spaces represents the power that comes with owning and exploiting land in the U.S. in the 1950s. Capote's novel ultimately asks what the consequences are of such programs and how the history of a physical place impacts the human world, even decades or centuries later.

Perry's interaction with the Kansan landscape is one example of these consequences. The night of the Clutter murders, Perry has a very intense reaction as he looks upon the wheat fields of Kansas. Capote describes, "glaring at the landscape, flat and limitless under the sky's cold, lingering green—empty and lonesome except for the far-between flickering of farmhouse lights. He hated it, as he hated the Texas plains, the Nevada desert; spaces horizontal and sparsely inhabited had always induced in him a depression accompanied by agoraphobic sensations" (Capote 49). Here, the Kansas plains do not only make Perry feel unsettled or frightened or overwhelmed, but *agoraphobic*. Agoraphobia is a term to describe anxiety or panic disorder, *agora* being the Greek word for "place of assembly," "open space," or "marketplace" ("Agoraphobia"). Often, people who suffer from agoraphobia are fearful that "they may inadvertently enter into situations that they perceive to be beyond their control" ("Agoraphobia"). In contrast to the earlier definitions and examples of place, Perry observes this landscape not as a place where he is able to connect and heal, but as a place that is out of his control. While the Great Plains are not the native homeland of Perry's ancestral tribe, the Cherokee, the connection between agriculture and economic success may have incited Perry's ecophobic feelings in this passage. Furthermore, the lack of control he feels during his interaction with this landscape reflects his position in U.S.-American society.

The Gentry and the Exile

In a 1968 interview with *Playboy*, Capote acknowledges the stark contrast that his novel portrays between the Clutters and their murderers. He explains:

“Here you have the Clutter family on one hand—such a perfect prototype of the good, solid, landed American gentry, as you point out—and on the other hand you have Hickok and Smith, particularly Smith, representing the dangerous psychotic element, empty of compassion or conscience. And these two extremes mated in the act of murder...In a way; all this had to happen; there was a quality of inevitability about it. Given what Perry was, and what the Clutters represented, the only possible outcome of their convergence was death” (Inge 133, 134).

In Thomas Fahy’s book, *The Philosophy of Horror*, he investigates the differences between Perry Smith and Mr. Clutter using Thomas Hobbe’s theoretical work on the analysis of human nature and society. Fahy argues that Mr. Clutter is a representation of a stable, protective society. For example, Fahy notes that Mr. Clutter’s control over the actions of his family and employees “reflects not only his belief in the importance of society; it also demonstrates his essential place in it...Clutter’s ‘reign’ is associated with social stability” (Fahy 66). If we read *In Cold Blood* using only Fahy’s argument, Perry’s actions might represent the violent, power-hungry “nature” that resides in all of us as human beings. However, what Fahy fails to mention is the connection that Capote is creating between Mr. Clutter as agricultural royalty and Perry Smith as Native American savage. For example, while it is true that part of the fear invoked by Capote’s nonfictional novel and the Clutter murder itself is born of the fact that the murderers could have been any one of us, the key to the pleasure of this horror is

distance. In the case of this novel, the distance comes from the fact that Perry Smith was already an outcast of society before he committed these murders. As Fahy notes, Smith was someone “who represented what Capote could have become under different circumstances” (Fahy 69). Therefore, not only does Perry represent the “wounded, exiled animal” of society (Fahy 68), but it is also this society which has created him in this way. Furthermore, his feelings of contempt toward this landscape may be a reaction to the lack of control he has over this position.

One way in which Capote portrays Perry as an exile is by placing his Native American heritage beside the agricultural success of the Clutter family. One way of understanding this difference is through the descriptions of the Clutter family and their estate. The attention given to the Clutter house is significant because of its notoriety amongst the town of Holcomb. Everyone knows of the Clutter house, in part because in a small town like this everyone knows of everyone, but also because of what the Clutter house and its inhabitants represent at this point in U.S. culture. Mr. Clutter represents the overall success of many families during the postwar period of the 1950s in the United States. In Dwight Eisenhower’s 1960 State of the Union address, he “used the occasion to hail the ‘well-being’ of the American family. Since 1946, the president noted, the real income of every man, woman, and child in the country, corrected for inflation, had risen nearly 20 percent...And 31 million of the nation’s 44 million families now owned their own home” (Mintz 182). The Clutter house, constructed in 1948, was built in a time of budding economic success among many U.S. families, and it represented this

commonality. Capote writes that “the handsome white house, standing on an ample lawn of groomed Bermuda grass, impressed Holcomb; it was a place people pointed out” (Capote 9). And inside, the decorative scheme matched those of the Clutters’ “acquaintances, whose homes, by and large, were similarly furnished” (Capote 9). Thus, the house both represents the agricultural and economic success of the Clutters, but it also represents this same success among the majority of families in the U.S. Furthermore, Mr. Clutter himself is an embodiment of this success. He was “the community’s most widely known citizen... He was currently chairman of the Kansas Conference of Farm Organizations, and his name was everywhere respectfully recognized among Midwestern agriculturists... Always certain of what he wanted from the world, Mr. Clutter had in large measure obtained it” (Capote 6). It seems that Mr. Clutter is the perfect farmer. He takes care of his family and of his land. He is the epitome of the postwar economic boom. And while this portrait of the “American family” may have been the experience of many U.S. citizens, it was not the same experience for many minorities. For example, the description of Perry Smith’s experiences are in direct opposition to those of the Clutters’.

Much of Capote’s description of Perry is focused on Perry’s physical deformity and how that deformity has created Perry as an outcast of U.S. society. For example, in a letter written by Perry’s father to the Kansas State Parole Board, he mentions that “Perry knows he is not wanted now by Contractors, cripples can’t get jobs on heavy equipment [sic]” (Capote 129). Capote capitalizes on this detail, devoting much of Perry’s description to his physical abnormalities. He notes:

“Sitting, he had seemed a more than normal-sized man, a powerful man, with the shoulders, the arms, the thick, crouching torso of a weight lifter... But some sections of him were not in proportion to others. His tiny feet, encased in short black boots with steel buckles, would have neatly fitted into a delicate lady’s dancing slippers; when he stood up, he was no taller than a twelve-year-old child, and suddenly looked, strutting on stunted legs that seemed grotesquely inadequate to the grown-up bulk they supported, not like a well-built truck driver but like a retired jockey, overblown and muscle-bound (Capote 15).

In several passages such as this one, Capote illustrates Perry as both effeminate and grotesque. Furthermore, it is because of these characteristics that he has such difficulty achieving financial stability or success. In a small town where a man such as Mr. Clutter is the ideal, Perry Smith is the exiled monster. The connection between serial killer and exiled monster has been made before, specifically within the setting of “small-town America.” For example, Isabel Santaulària writes, “like other monsters in Gothic narratives, serial killers signify ‘something about culture’ and therefore, culture can be read through serial killers who become in Richard Davenport-Hines’ words, ‘emblems of the evil duality supposedly haunting every modern individual: they are the external embodiment of all the inner anxieties, interdictions and guilt of the age’” (Santaulària 61). In other words, Perry’s physical appearance, and the effect of that appearance on his success as worker in the United States, reinforces his status as outsider or exile.

Furthermore, just as the Gothic is preoccupied with the construct of the family, crime fiction presents the family as causal in the violence enacted by serial killers. For example, “in many serial killer narratives, childhood trauma and subsequent pathological development originate in defective family environments, which suggests that the ideal family unit based on love and mutual respect is an aspirational imagining rather than

fact” (Santaulària 61). In this novel, we see Capote the effects of the ideal U.S. family on those who do not fit its image.

It is because of Perry’s outsider status that Capote is able to portray his actions as exceptional and In Santaulària’s article, she applies Kilgour’s ideas about the Gothic novel to U.S.-American crime fiction. In the essay, she establishes that “in serial killer fiction, therefore, inwrought social ills in an ethos of institutional apathy and incompetence challenge the comforting notion that the community is essentially benevolent and crime exceptional” (Santaulària 60). However, even novels that present their killers or monsters as a threat to idea of the American Good Place, “work together to negotiate a conservative closure that overrides and ultimately prevents a destabilization of the social order” (Santaulària 63). But does Capote’s novel follow this same formula? Certainly Perry’s unpredicted and uncanny violence on the Clutter family and town of Holcomb were enough to rattle the small town’s security, but what does this novel challenge about U.S. society? Perry’s actions now are a reminder of America’s history with violence, but does Capote create a novel that eventually supports a conservative structure, similar to what Santaulària describes in her article about fictional serial killers?

In order to answer these questions, we might look at the last scene of the novel. In this scene, Detective Alvin Dewey, the main Holcomb investigator of the Clutter case, and a young Holcomb resident talk in the cemetery. As they depart, Capote describes that “she disappeared down the path, a pretty girl in a hurry, her smooth hair swinging, shining—just such a young woman as Nancy might have been” (Capote 343). At first, it seems that Capote is returning to support the ideal U.S.-American narrative in these

ending lines, focusing on the hope and vitality of a young American, off to attend college and fall in love. However, as his language falls back on detective Dewey, the reader might interpret otherwise. He places us in the mind of Alvin Dewey, saying that “then, starting home, he walked toward the trees, and under them, leaving behind him the big sky, the whisper of wind voices in the wind-bent wheat” (Capote 343). In this eery final line, Capote draws attention to one of the vital forces of this novel: wind. The reader is left not with the glowing image of a youth and vitality, but of absent voices, of a chilling past that refuses to go unheard. The reader then carries this unsettling feeling even after they leave the novel, allowing the uncanny violence of the text to make them question their own surroundings.

These final lines do not, in fact, support a conservative narrative. In small town America, a place where bad things don't happen, lurks a history unheard, a history that reveals itself in the tragedy of the Clutter's "execution." In most Gothic novels, "...what seemed familiar and comfortable is threatened by the return of known but hidden fears, ideas and wishes, disclosing how much a sense of self depends on early development as well as a secure anchorage in social structures" (Botting 8). In Capote's Gothic novel, fear is not in the unknown, but in the hidden secrets—and America has many violent secrets. As the small town of Holcomb becomes comfortable in the prosperity of agriculture, the history of how this comfortability came to be comes violently back. It is an important detail, for example, that Perry Smith (one of the murderers), is largely of Cherokee ancestry. And Capote would not allow this detail to go unnoticed. Not only does Capote work to establish Smith's look as predominantly Native American, but he

also iterates the “return” and the “movement” of Cherokee blood as wiping out the European strand. Capote’s diction reveals the fear that a society that is built on the murder of Native Americans might have. The imagined return of Native Americans—specifically, a violent return—is significant. Although Capote focuses on Smith as Native American, he describes his actions in Holcomb as foreign. Smith, although his heritage establishes that America was once the land of his people, becomes the dangerous outsider.

“In the earliest hours of that morning in November, a Sunday morning, certain foreign sounds impinged on the normal nightly Holcomb noises—on the keening hysteria of coyotes, the dry scrape of scuttling tumbleweed. . . . But afterward the townspeople, theretofore sufficiently unfearful of each other to seldom trouble to lock their doors, found fantasy re-creating them over and again—those somber explosions that stimulated fires of mistrust in the glare of which many old neighbors viewed each other strangely, and as strangers” (Capote 5).

The violent return of Smith to Kansas, a place where he was legally forbidden to go, causes the inhabitants here to look suspiciously at one another. As Botting explains, particularly in Gothic novels, “returns of the past, in an opposing direction, involve the very characteristics—superstition, tyranny, violence—supposedly banished by the light of reason. In more psychological renderings, ghostly recurrences manifest an unease and instability in the imagined self, home or society, hauntings that suggest loss or guilt or threat” (Botting 3). Thus, the murders of the Clutter family, specifically in this place and specifically carried out by Perry Smith, reflect a society’s fears of a returning past that retaliates on those who profit from the exploitation of this landscape.

The Frontier and the Ecosublime

William Cronon describes nature as entirely constructed. What we think of as “wild” can only exist in opposition to “civilization.” In Cronon’s essay, he explains that the Western conservation movement sprang from many factors, but the two main concepts which drove this ecological movement were the sublime and the frontier (104). In Capote’s novel, specifically in his characters’ interactions with the natural world, the reader sees both of these concepts at work.

Edmund Burke is well-known for his exploration of the sublime in relation to nature and art in 1757. In his philosophical text, he explains that “The passion caused by the great and sublime is *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully is *Astonishment*; and astonishment is the state of the soul in which all its emotions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (Burke). Certainly, the argument could be made that what Perry experiences as he looks upon the Kansan landscape, filled with anxiety, is sublime. He feels overwhelmed and out of control. However, something seems to be missing in this interaction, which could be a sign of the changing definition of the sublime within a postindustrial society. Among each definition of the sublime, there seem to be three conventions. These include:

“apprehension, in which the individual subject encounters an object larger and greater than the self; second, awe, oppression, or even depression... and third, exaltation, in which the individual is conceptually or psychically enlarged as the greatness of the object is realized and the individual identifies with that greatness” (Rozelle 2, 3).

What is missing in Perry’s encounter of the sublime is the third stage, exaltation. While the U.S. landscape was once the home of his ancestors, Perry has been displaced from it.

This displacement denies him the ability to reconcile his status as outcast. He is unable to heal from this cultural trauma, as was mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. This inability to connect or identify with nature is defined using the term *ecosublime*. Rozelle expands on this term within the context of millennial ecocritical studies. She explains, “from the Greek *oikos*, *eco* (which roughly means “home”), joined with the word *sublime*, *ecosublime* can be defined as the awe and terror of a heightened awareness of the ecological home” (Rozelle 1). The U.S. landscape is the ecological home of Perry’s ancestors. However, just as his ancestors had be displaced from this landscape, Perry was also. Legally, Perry was banned from entering the state of Kansas as a condition of his parole status. Therefore, the combination of his heritage and parole guidelines makes him doubly displaced. Further, his inability to connect with this landscape is a reflection of the ecosublime, which “can thus be thought of as the awe and terror that occurs when literary figures experience the infinite complexity and contingency of place,” or the shift of “Who am I?” to “Where am I?” (Rozelle 1). Capote, then, has illustrated a landscape which is irreconcilable to Perry, causing Perry to have such extreme feelings that he would commit murder.

This particular way of placing nature as both present and active at the scene of such a violent crime reflects Lee Rozelle’s ideas about postindustrial literary landscapes. She writes, “as the possibility of reconstructing nature to its preindustrial stability becomes hopeless, the terror of nature’s displacement by a numbed humankind jerks literary figures and human subjects into the ecosublime with ominous clarity” (Rozelle 8). Thus, not only is Perry’s reaction to landscape reflective of ecophobia, but Capote’s

depiction of nature as an active force in the Clutter murder is also ecophobic. Simon Estok states that “representations of nature as an opponent that hurts, hinders, threatens, or kills us—regardless of philosophical value or disvalue of the ecosystemic functions of the dynamics being represented—are ecophobic” (Estok 209). While Capote’s Kansas landscape does not explicitly take part in the murder of the Clutter family, its effect on Perry is an arousal of fear, hate, and anxiety, which ends up having an implicit effect. In this way, Capote attempts to create motive for Perry’s seemingly abnormal actions by using ecophobic ideas of nature. Subsequently, Perry’s ecosublime moment as due to his ancestral displacement causes him to suffer from such intense ecophobia that he must commit the murders of the Clutter family, whose agricultural success is a reminder of Perry’s position as exile.

For Mr. Clutter, a wheat farmer, the success and survival of his family depended completely on his interaction with the land. For example, Capote describes that “Mr. Clutter often remarked, ‘an inch more of rain and this country would be paradise—Eden on earth.’ The little collection of fruitbearers growing by the river was his attempt to contrive, rain or no, a patch of the paradise, the green, apple-scented Eden, he envisioned” (Capote 12, 13). Furthermore, “his wife once said, ‘My husband cares more for those trees than he does for his children’” (Capote 13). This passage illustrates Mr. Clutter’s desire to control and maintain this landscape in order to be fruitful, both spiritually and economically. This desire reflects what Cronon calls “frontier nostalgia” (108). He explains:

“Frontier nostalgia became an important vehicle for expressing a peculiarly bourgeois form of anti modernism...If the frontier was passing, then men who had the means to do so should preserve for themselves some remnant of its wild landscape so that they might enjoy the regeneration and renewal that came from sleeping under the stars, participating in blood sports, and living off of the land. The frontier might be gone, but the frontier experience could still be had if only wilderness were preserved” (Cronon 108).

In other words, Mr. Clutter maintains such control over this landscape out of a fear of a disappearing wilderness. Cronon approaches the devastating consequences of this fear when he says “if we set too high a stock on wilderness, too many other corners of the earth become less than natural and too many other people become less than human, thereby giving us permission not to care much about their suffering or their fate” (Cronon 113). This was certainly the case in the days of the frontier, when Native American lives were violently taken and/or relocated to reservations. Mr. Clutter’s commitment to agriculture is a manifestation of these original frontier days.

However, what is interesting about the application of Cronon’s wilderness theory to Capote’s novel, is that the landscape in which the novel takes place is not what society would usually identify as “wilderness.” Near the end of his essay, Cronon makes a call to action, asking readers to reconsider the idea of wilderness. He says, “if the core problem of wilderness is that it distances us too much from the very things it teaches us to value, then the question we must ask is what it can tell us about *home*, the place where we actually live” (Cronon 115). The Clutters do not live in a national park. They do not live at the peak of Yosemite or among the Swiss Alps, so it is interesting that Perry would have such a sublime experience among this landscape. To Cronon, the wheat plains of

Kansas would be described as a place much closer to home, or the place where one “will *use* the nature we find in it” (Cronon 116). In other words, Cronon asks us to consider that “the tree in the garden is in reality no less other, no less worthy of our wonder and respect, than the tree in an ancient forest that has never known an ax or saw,” and it seems that Capote’s novel is already attempting this through these two main characters: Perry Smith and Mr. Clutter. Both Smith’s sublime moment as he looks out among the plains and Mr. Clutter’s agricultural aspirations are inspired by the same landscape, one which is not commonly thought to invoke such extreme emotions. According to Cronon, “less sublime landscapes simply did not appear worthy of such protection; not until the 1940s, for instance, would the first swamp be honored, in Everglades National Park, and to this day there is no national park in the grasslands” (105). However, Cronon also informs us that society often idealizes landscapes which are distant, remote, or pristine (114). And to someone like Perry, Kansas was distant. He was an outlaw. His ancestors had been relocated, not from the Kansas landscape specifically, but from elsewhere in the United States. In fact, the relocation of Native Americans “would be largely responsible for inducing at least 30,000 Indians to move in the 1950s and almost three times that number during the 1960s and 1970s” (Burt 1). During this time, Native Americans were largely being moved to urban areas of the country, displacing them from natural landscapes to cityscapes, while agriculture (especially in Holcomb) began to thrive. Therefore, Capote’s construction of Perry’s character seems to consider the effects of this relocation. Cronon iterates that “once set aside within the fixed and carefully policed boundaries of the modern bureaucratic state, the wilderness lost its savage image and

became safe: a place more of reverie than of revulsion or fear. Meanwhile, its original inhabitants were kept out by dint of force, their earlier uses of the land redefined as inappropriate or even illegal (109). While Perry, in actuality, was not heavily involved with his Native American heritage, Capote may have capitalized on this aspect of Perry in order to comment on both the Native American relocation policies that were active during this time as well as the consequences of these actions. The consequences, in this case, are the murders of the Clutter family, committed by Perry Smith within a landscape.

With this idea in mind, the descriptions of nature and landscape carry a particular weight. Capote is not interested in painting a landscape that is pastoral or picturesque, but threatening and violent. Further, it seems Capote wanted to depict nature in this way in order to bring to light questions of morality associated with land use and development. Holcomb was, at its center, a town built around the exploitation of land, of land with history. In the 1950s it seemed that the agricultural business was booming, much like everywhere else. Capote writes that “money has been made not from farming alone but also from the exploitation of plentiful natural-gas resources, and its acquisition is reflected in the new school, the comfortable interiors of the farmhouses, the steep and swollen grain elevators” (Capote 5). But history persists here. America is built on exploitation, on dispossession, which may be why many scholars point out that American fiction is inherently Gothic. Furthermore, Capote seems to comment on the consequences of this dispossession through his descriptions of U.S. landscape.

Conclusion

From the very beginning, Capote sets the scene of the novel as “out there.” He describes the difficulty of farming here, of controlling this landscape. But it also seems that Capote depicts nature as having played a part in the murder of the Clutter family, nature as active. For example, Capote interviews one of the neighbors of the Clutter family, who says he did not hear any of the gunshots from the murder because “for one thing, the wind. A west wind, like it was, would carry the sound t’other way. Another thing, there’s that big milo barn ‘tween this house and our’n. That old barn ‘ud soak up a lotta racket ‘fore it reached us” (Capote (78). The wind is recalled again later in the novel by a Mrs. Archibald. She describes that this landscape is “noisier than a bomb raid. *Train* whistles. Coyotes. Monsters howling the bloody night long. A horrid racket...And after dark, when the wind commences, that *hateful* prairie wind, one hears the most appalling moans” (Capote 115). In both of these descriptions by townspeople, wind, and subsequently nature, is seen as playing a very active role. The wind *carries* the sound of violence away from neighbors. The wind is *hateful*. Further, Perry’s interaction with the Kansan landscape as a provocation of fear and violence echoes the violent beginnings of the United States’ history. The elements of nature he chooses to highlight in this narrative invoke fear in a particular part of U.S. society—those benefitting from the agricultural endeavor. In this way, Capote’s novel might not illustrate the particular fears that *he* has, but is able to capture the fears of a small rural place within the U.S. landscape. Furthermore, by paying particular attention to the roles of both nature and farming, Capote is able to depict the Clutter murders as a sort of revenge narrative, with nature and

history coming back to haunt those who have benefitted from America's violent past.

Therefore, Capote may be attempting to challenge the ways his readers think about the natural world and human intervention into that world.

CONCLUSION

At the start of this project, I found myself at the foot of an enormous task. I was compelled to write about two texts which seemed, on the surface, quite different from one another. And while Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* may seem to be disparate texts, in actuality they both provide productive platforms for understanding types of ecophobia. The term ecophobia, as it is still relatively new in the world of theory, has the enormous potential to be expanded and complicated. And ultimately, that is what I have attempted to do with this project. However, I also wanted to approach this subject with urgency. In essence, I wanted to write something that mattered. Thus, I found myself returning to the same question: *so what?* What does this discussion of ecophobia mean for the praxis Simon Estok set out to inspire? Why is this important *right now?*

The conclusion I have drawn from working on this project is that, as humans, we often forget that we are part of the natural world. In a society where it is necessary to reiterate that black lives matter or that Native Americans are not mascots for sporting events, it becomes clear to me that studying ecophobia, in all its forms, allows us to resist common systems of oppression. As Estok claims, “when progressive political movements fails to recognize the intersections of oppression, we lose political power.” The goal here is activist intervention” (“Ecocriticism in an Age of Terror” 5). With this thesis, I hope to have uncovered some of the ways humans exhibit ecophobic behavior as a product of their own oppression and displacement. This, in turn, creates a society that is

unable to empathize with the nonhuman natural world, as they are unable to empathize even with other humans. I also hope that this thesis provides the opportunity for other critics to continue this conversation, to continue challenging human relationships with the natural world.

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