## The Illumined Wastes: America's Forgotten Aesthetics

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The Illumined Wastes:
America’s Forgotten Aesthetics

A dissertation presented

by

Steven Collier Brown

to

The Committee on Higher Degrees in American Studies

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Abstract

What are today’s wastelands? The barrens of Ghana? The mega slums in Mumbai? The trash heaps of Rio de Janeiro? The frozen wilderness of Siberia? These are classic types of wasteland, featuring desolation on a large scale. But what such a scale misses is the daily encounter people have with miles of vacancy beneath power lines, the medians between highways, the capacious roofscapes of suburban shopping malls and emporiums, the narrow strips of dirt or grass between our yards and sidewalks, even defunct railroad corridors. Equal in importance to the question of what wastelands are is the question of who inhabits them—and not only who, but how they see possibilities beyond the wastes they occupy. And finally, how can those of us who live outside of the wastes replace the longstanding aesthetic and social stigmas that surround wasted places and the people who inhabit them?

This study reevaluates waste as a concept. The idea is to approach waste and wasteland from the bottom up, which is to say, from the perspective of those who, out of necessity, must also re-imagine their environments. Studies that focus on waste or wasteland aesthetics typically rely on traditional dichotomies of beauty and ugliness, appeal and disgust. This research complicates those binaries. It focuses instead on the issue of utility. Utility connects waste and wasteland conceptually, which is important to know when analyzing the use that the poor, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised make of the wastes.

The assumption made in this study is that the problem of waste and wastelands requires more than economic and political intervention. It requires a radical reconceptualization of social ideals. This study also argues that aesthetics of waste are not twenty-first century anomalies but
part of a much longer history of western literature. With that idea in mind, *The Illumined Wastes* looks backwards for precedent, starting with what the eighteenth-century English agrarian, Arthur Young, described as the “advantages” wastelands might provide the poor when threatened by enclosures and deprived of their commons. From Young, the study works its way forward into nineteenth-century American literature, history, and visual art. James Fenimore Cooper, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Henry David Thoreau are among the more well-known figures included. *The Illumined Wastes* pieces together a more cohesive and usable aesthetic past in the hopes of expanding current research to include the insider’s understanding of waste and wastelands rather than the outsider’s only. Modern analogies are made throughout the study in order to characterize aesthetics for which earlier writers had no language or context, only an intuition.
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Acknowledgments

I often think that even if I connected the dots that got me to this place, and this dissertation to its current state of legibility, the picture those dots would create would still make absolutely no sense. I can only express my endless gratitude to those who helped shape that chaos into little moments of cohesion.

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Introduction:
Waste-as-Aesthetic

This essay explores the *illumined* waste. I borrow the phrase from James Thomson’s *The Seasons* (1730), an eighteenth-century poem about the triumph of civilization over nature. In the poem, the narrator observes the surrounding cities as they “rise amid th’ illumin’d Waste.”¹ The odds, Thomson reflects, have been stacked against humankind’s survival from the start: so many deserts to trek, oceans to cross, mountains to climb, and forests to survive. All of these environments were considered wastelands by Thomson and his predecessors. They were nature’s vast, dangerous, unexplored edges—places patrolled on medieval maps by beasts or leviathan.² The wastes were also those lands yet to be colonized. Richard Hakluyt, in 1584, appealed to Queen Elizabeth to “staye the Spanishe Kinge from flowinge over all the face of that waste firme of America . . .”³ Even those for whom global colonization had no relevance—particularly the poor and dispossessed—understood the advantages of the wastes to personal freedom and self-sufficiency. “Where there being more Land than the Inhabitants possess and make use of,” said John Locke in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), “any one has liberty to make use of the


³ Richard Hakluyt, *A Particuler Discourse Consideringe the Greate Necessitie and Manifolde Commodityes That Are Like to Growe to This Realme of Englands by the Westerne Discoueries Lately Attempted, Written in the Yere 1584* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1993), 154.
“Use” is key. Thomson wrote *The Seasons* in imitation of Virgil’s *Georgics*, perhaps because pastoral poetry lauds the idyllic life of the shepherd. But *georgics* often acknowledge, not always in optimistic terms, the difficult work of subduing the wastes with mule and spade. In this one phrase, “illumin’d waste,” Thomson balances optimism with reality, the reality of the poor and marginalized—a key feature of the aesthetics depicted in this study.

The words “waste” and “wasteland” were used interchangeably before the twentieth century. Writers employed them to describe burdensome landscapes, landscapes impossible to navigate or cultivate, and landscapes brimming with the unknown. For a long time, America’s own forests, mountains, lakes, prairies, and deserts fit that description, hindering the progress of settlement in the frontiers and hiding indigenous peoples, strange new animals, and plants never before seen. When today’s reader sees the word “waste,” she thinks of trash: waste-as-object; or wasting time: waste-as-action; or being wasteful: waste-as-quality. “Getting wasted” might even spring to mind: waste-as-consequence. The semantics of waste are surprisingly malleable. But what tethers Thomson’s waste-as-land to the notion of material waste is the absence of utility in both concepts. Whether waste is used to describe a desert or an empty soda bottle, its essential declaration is that both X and Y fail to meet some standard notion of usefulness.

But this essay is neither a material nor a cultural history of uselessness in American landscapes—not directly, at least. My interests follow the strange and novel ways American writers and artists have expressed the usefulness of waste, be it wasteland or refuse of another kind, against their own or others’ ideologies. When Thomson evokes wastes, he doesn’t always treat them as civilization’s antithesis. He was inspired by Isaac Newton’s *Opticks* (1704), a book

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that changed the way people understood light. Until that time, light was thought to be colorless. The opposite, of course, was true. The discovery that something so commonplace, so outwardly simple, contained so much more than anyone had ever imagined, had an enormous impact on the way Thomson viewed nature and the nature of reality. Thomson even wrote an elegy for Newton in which he praised “the unifying laws, in optics and in physics, which lie behind the manifold appearance of things.”

The deception of appearances may be cliché, but it’s no less true for all that, especially in the wastes. “Even LIGHT ITSELF, which every thing displays,” wrote Thomson, “[s]hone undiscover’d” until someone came along and tested what he saw against received wisdom. Thomson embraced Newton’s empirical discoveries and used them to 

*illuminate*, as it were, the fullness that wastelands (apparently empty places) empirically possess.

But the strange harmonies in nature that Newton and Thomson evoke conflict, at times, with similar evocations of “balance” in environmental discourse. For the Slovenian social theorist Slavoj Žižek, the idea of an ecological balance between humans and their environment might be more problematic than helpful. Standing in a city dumpsite during an interview with film director, Astra Taylor, Žižek draws attention to the buttes of refuse in the background. “This is where we should start feeling at home,” he says, since “part of our daily reality” is to ignore

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the dumpsites, to overlook the hundreds of tons of waste produced in every city every day, to “disavow” the existence of the very excrement we flush: out of sight, out of mind.7

The problem with seeing ourselves as part of nature the way snails or seeds or oceans are part of nature, suggests Žižek, is that it gives the impression of a natural world that would escape catastrophe if only humans were no longer there. It is to ignore the disastrous side of nature that is just as “natural” as the budding of flowers in spring. What is oil, Žižek asks, if not the remainder of long term biological catastrophe on an unprecedented scale? Disaster is part of life’s idiom. To exclude it from nature’s cycle and from the discourse of environmental improvement is to reinforce the pastoral myth of reciprocal care between the good shepherd and the good earth when, in fact, the reality is much more aggressive.

To that end, Žižek makes a case for becoming more “artificial”—that is, more objectively detached in our appraisal of the planet’s ecological processes. The long evolutionary journey from Africa to all corners of the globe hasn’t been one of distance so much as one of artifice: *Homo habilis*, the “handy man,” reshaping in nature what doesn’t work to his advantage with a stone and an idea. Žižek sees potential here. If our inclination is to avert our eyes to waste because it challenges our sense of utility or offends our taste for beauty, then we should do what we do best, only better. We should make of the wastes a new abstraction, perhaps one that is purely mathematical or computational. The “difficulty,” Žižek says, is finding “poetry, spirituality, in this dimension.” The difficulty, in other words, is to illuminate the wastes in the aesthetic sense, as Thomson tried to do.

7 For all subsequent quotation and commentary on Žižek, see: Astra Taylor et al., *Examined Life* (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2009).
Odd as it may sound, artificial reconciliation of the useful and the useless could be of immense importance to the expansion of human empathy for that which is nonhuman in nature. To “love,” Žižek generalizes, is to accept the differences of others or the Other. It is the opposite of idealization. Thomson may have been thinking something similar when he called the “waste of music,” which is to say, the alien sounds of nature, “the voice of love.” To orient oneself to the world ecologically, then, one must “love” the wastes—abstractly, artificially. Whatever else this injunction means for politics and economics, which, admittedly, fall outside my field of expertise, it certainly extends our current environmental aesthetics into places we have not yet fully explored. Žižek encourages a paradigm shift in the way we see and read nature by putting before us a simple question: How does one see utility, even beauty, in waste? This is my question too.

The language of waste opens itself to fascinating syntheses of the beautiful and the ugly, the useful and the useless, the full and the empty. This too is what the illumination of waste means. To illuminate, in this study, is to defamiliarize, to reconceptualize, to reimagine. The objective is to free waste from an oversimplified dichotomy of good and evil. To do so, I draw the reader’s attention to several significant examples of the illumined wastes in early American literature. More importantly, I am searching for critical precedent for these aesthetics in the hopes of helping today’s reader of wastelands discover something other than hopelessness, degradation, and despair. Waste—its metaphors, descriptions, images, and symbols—have been read and interpreted too narrowly within the larger scope of its historical and aesthetic meaning.

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8 Thomson, "Spring," line 615, in The Seasons, 32.
This extended essay broadens that scope to include not just the past but the present and future reader.

II. The Territory of Waste

Waste is, at its core, a very simple idea. But it covers a lot of conceptual territory. The word “waste” derives from the Latin verb, *vastō*, which means “to empty.” Thus *vastitas* means the “empty place”—more commonly referred to as wasteland.⁹ Emptiness, or absence, is what gives “waste” its conceptual “malleability,” argues historian Vittoria Di Palma: “[I]t lies ready to include all those kinds of places that are defined in negative terms, identified primarily by what they are not.”¹⁰ The Italian novelist and semiotician Umberto Eco once said something similar about ugliness. After writing his popular history of beauty, Eco tired of the beautiful’s narrow protocols and prescriptions. Ugliness, on the other hand, defies boundaries. Eco writes:

> A beautiful nose shouldn’t be longer than that or shorter than that, on the contrary, an ugly nose can be as long as the one of Pinocchio, or as big as the trunk of an elephant, or like the beak of an eagle, and so ugliness is unpredictable, and offers an infinite range of possibility. Beauty is finite, ugliness is infinite like God.¹¹

The same could be said of wastelands. Wasteland is nature’s ugly side. It is everything the pastoral ideal is not. It is everything the garden is not. It evades naive aesthetic and ethical dichotomies, even when our concerns are for the welfare of our planet and our species.

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Historically, waste has been bound to terms like territory, property, demesne, and commons. Jill Fraley, in her article, “The Tragedy of the Wastes: Property and the Making of Nation-States in Eighteenth Century America,” describes “waste” as land or water originally designated as natural boundaries to someone’s property, be that property a home or an entire country. Modern land surveys did away with the need for waste-as-boundary. But, as I discuss in the second section of this essay, waste-as-boundary persists ideologically and often to the

Figure 1: Rag Pickers, ca. 1896. Photo by Alice Austen. Alice Austen House Collection.

detriment of marginalized communities. Our own thinking, in other words, is bounded by a kind of *vastitas*—an empty landscape—which is one of the primary reasons that the social semantics of waste have been so pliable. Historian Susan Strasser adds that waste-as-material (which is to say, waste as we now understand it) was historically overshadowed by the priority of “repair.” Before the twentieth century, waste rarely concerned people who, for the most part, made and mended their own commodities.

Repair ideas come more easily to people who make things. If you know how to knit or do carpentry, you also understand how to mend a torn sweater or repair a broken chair. You can appraise the materials and evaluate the labor of the original maker; . . . Even at the end of the nineteenth century, when factory production was already well established, many Americans possessed the skills and consciousness required for repairing. . . . Now making and repairing things have become hobbies, perhaps not yet exceptional but no longer typical.¹³

Waste economies were built around the bartering of goods in exchange for reclaimable items, especially rags, bones, and scrap metal. Used fabrics were salvaged for quilts, kids’ clothing, rugs, and other domestic necessities. Papermaking also depended heavily on rags. Consequently, Strasser explains, paper mills, bookmakers, and other paper-related businesses often established community “systems” for bartering. Money played a lesser role in these exchanges. Strasser gives as testimony this New York printer’s response to his creditor: “If any part of the bill we owe you is going to be paid in money (which by the way we did not expect) there is no other way that we think of but for you to sue for it. . . . We have little to do with banks. Our business will not warrant it in a country where 7/8 of the business is done by barter.”¹⁴ To the creditor, the rag was “empty” of value—waste, by definition.


Ironically, waste is always precisely that which is never empty. People live in wasted spaces and depend on wasted things, as Strasser’s example demonstrates. In the 2011 documentary, *Waste Land*, Brazilian artist Vik Muniz photographs the *catadores*, or “pickers,” in one of the world’s largest landfills. The *catadores*, who live in nearby favelas, or slums, spend their days and nights sifting through garbage for plastics and metals to sell back to recycling companies. For this crucial service to the city of Rio de Janeiro, they receive no federal compensation or protection. So the *catadores* organize and protect themselves. They treat the dump as a commons—a tract of land jointly used for the communal benefit of those who work and live there. One picker cooks food for the workers using salvaged meats and vegetables. Another picker keeps the books he finds to build a library for his fellow workers. And still another picker heads up a union to raise awareness of their struggle and their efforts. The list goes on. Though the documentary conveys these achievements in an imbalanced way—neglecting the real suffering endured by most pickers—the internal, and often innovative, economies created in the wastes are not uncommon, just unseen. As Jennifer Gabrys argues in her book, *Accumulation: The Material Politics of Waste* (2013) “The twentieth century had to develop a sort of blindness about the impacts of material consumption,” not just toward the environment but toward those who our material consumption makes invisible. “[T]his sort of ignorance,” she claims, “is a denial—a self-deception—that allows us to live in a fool’s paradise,” which begs the question of who, exactly, lives in the emptier place: those who inhabit our wastelands or those who do not see them?


Anthropologist Vinay Gidwani offers some insight into how this happens. In his article, “Six Theses on Waste, Value, and Commons,” he traces the process by which groups like the *catadores* are “disciplined,” or denigrated as waste, in capitalist commodity systems. Borrowing the term “discipline” from Michel Foucault, Gidwani argues that the commons are seen by commodity systems as threats and treated correspondingly, often forced into states of “docility-utility.” In a commons, labor and surplus goods circulate in nonsubtractable ways, which is to say, the use of goods by one person, or group of people, does not prevent the equal use of those goods by others. A commodity system, on the other hand, values linear exchanges that exclude laborers from an equal share in goods and/or profits. When the commons prevent the commodity system from making as much money as it can, the system treats the commons as “waste,” but not just physically. Waste becomes “weighted down,” says Gidwani, by the “double pejorative, moral and economic”:

This antithetical aspect of waste, as a logic that stymies the accumulation of property qua capital, is mirrored in the various ways it comes to connote not only merely the uncultivated or untended but also the pointless, the misdirected, and the futile; the ineffecual, the foolish, and the worthless; the idle and the improvident; the excessive, prodigal, the improper, the inefficient. As history reveals: time, money, words, things, actions, and nature—all may be wasted, and are disciplined accordingly.\(^{18}\)


We get a sense, in Gidwani’s anthropological study of waste, not just of the origins of our fear and disgust toward non-commodified landscapes but, sadly, the social antipathy that results all too often toward those who labor and live in the wastes.

Nevertheless, Gidwani commends the wastes, for in it lies greater potential, ideologically if not materially, for alternatives to the commodity system as it now exists. What that kind of system fails to understand, argues Gidwani, is that “waste exceeds [even] the commons.” He sketches the situation in a diagram: $W \rightarrow (M \rightarrow C \rightarrow M') \rightarrow W'$. W(aste) is what exists before the market recognizes it as a M(aterial) resource. Once that recognition takes place, that M(aterial) is C(ommodified) and consumed. M'(aterial) is the C(ommodity) depleted of its use value, which is then tossed out as W'(aste) once more. In this diagram, waste has the commodity system surrounded. If the point is to produce and consume only what is deemed marketable, then the commodity system’s imagination is severely limited by its own definition of utility. Here is a good example of the ideological waste-as-border. All the people and all the material outside of capitalism’s definition of “usefulness” represent potential competition. Waste, in that sense, also represents a frontier that the commodity system can never fully colonize.\footnote{Gidwani, “Six Theses on Waste, Value, and Commons,” 773–83.}

From Gidwani, I’ve extracted certain principles in order to narrow the scope of my search for waste aesthetics. If I ask what metaphors and symbols, for instance, best identify aesthetics of waste, I am also asking what metaphors and symbols present the wastes as a threat to the commodification of land and marginalized peoples. Consequently, I see this project as the initiation of a field of inquiry—a series of questions upon which other scholars might build, not
only within American Studies but in any field concerned with waste and its connection to the social imagination.

III. Structure & Trajectory

Unlike Žižek, I start with the assumption that aesthetics of waste exist already and have been with us for quite some time, though western dichotomies of the beautiful and the ugly often obscure them. As far as literature is concerned, clear-cut evidence grows scantier the further back one reads from the twenty-first century. The language of the wastes intertwines with wilderness, the picturesque, the sublime, and the frontier. But what becomes clear is that these themes often function as subcategories of waste, as they each, in turn, try to explain our fascination for things not easily classifiable in terms of traditional notions of beauty or usefulness. They all, in other words, are categorically and ideologically “empty,” each in their own way. In American literature especially, writers like James Fenimore Cooper and Francis Parkman experience trouble reconciling European landscape aesthetics with America’s wastes, given how little emptiness they actually see once they begin to look carefully into northeastern forests and western plains. The picturesque and pastoral break down, interrupted by moments of disorientation and bewilderment. I opt for the word “confusion,” as it appears in Thomson’s poetry. But it appears elsewhere in similar contexts, in the poetry of Thomson’s predecessor, Alexander Pope, for example. In “Windsor-Forest” (1704-1713), Pope writes of a new Eden, a better England, “Not Chaos-like together crush’d and bruis’d, / But as the World, harmoniously confus’d: / Where Order in Variety we see, / And where, tho’ all things differ, all agree.” In a
world like the one Pope describes, “verdant Islas” adorn the “sable Waste.” The harmonious
confusion of chaos and order is not so easily processed when harmony and chaos have competed
with one another aesthetically for thousands of years. But in lines like these and in much of
America’s early literature, the wastes confound those age-old paradigms of beauty, which, in its
way, expands the paradigm.

We have yet to discover all that the wastes have to tell and show. Neither will the
discoveries ever end. As Brian Thill writes, “Waste is every object, plus time.” What do we call
empty today that may not, in fact, be empty? What do we call ugly? What do we call waste? The
aesthetic continuity that waste claims is the continuity of confusion that writers express in the
face of this not-empty emptiness. To that end, America’s early writers offer important proto-
aesthetics of waste that we can trace from their time into our own, following the trajectory into
the future.

I have tried when possible to maintain a chronological arch to the project, but the overall
framework is thematic. Even within each section (except for the first), I begin in the past and end
with a coda that emphasizes the relevance of the section’s theme on similar issues of waste
today. Unlike some recent studies of waste—Sophie Gee’s *Making Waste: Leftovers and the*

20 Alexander Pope, "Windsor-Forest," lines 13-16, 28, in *The Oxford Anthology of
English Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 2168–69; Critics of this poem
have denounced Pope’s vague illusions to Britain’s part in the slave trade as an endorsement of
the trade. But John Richardson argues that the poem demonstrates a “self-censorship” not
uncommon at the time due. My interest is not in Pope’s politics but the beauty of the “Waste”—
purple, sable, and crowned with trees—and its harmonious confusions, which may speak to
Pope’s own confused perception of those marginalized in the wastes. See: John Richardson,
“Alexander Pope’s Windsor Forest: Its Context and Attitudes toward Slavery,” *Eighteenth-

*Eighteenth-Century Imagination* (2010), for instance, and Vittoria di Palma’s *Wasteland: A History* (2014)—my reason for looking backwards is not to understand waste and wastelands in their historical context but to characterize an aesthetic category relevant to issues of waste today. I am interested in our ideological blind spots (to echo Gabrys) with regard to waste’s potential. Reading backwards into the literary history of waste may offer insight into the aesthetic consequences of those blind spots. The secondary claim in this study is that the illumined waste belongs to America’s long, prestigious history of protest literature, especially regarding the poor, the marginalized, and the dispossessed. To that end, some of the writers I examine will be familiar—Henry David Thoreau, no stranger to the art of civil disobedience, and Rebecca Harding Davis, a social reformer in her own right. But in the context of waste aesthetics, some of my figures beg renewed inquiry—especially quasi-historical characters like Johnny Appleseed.

Section I contextualizes aesthetics of waste historically by examining the life and writings of the first and only person, as far as I’ve found, who wrote about wastelands as places of “advantage” to the poor. This being the most important characteristic of waste aesthetics, I decided to make an exception in my initial decision to include only American authors. Arthur Young, an eighteenth century English agriculturalist and the most prolific chronicler of the period’s agricultural revolution, composed a forty-five volume commonplace book on the best methods for improving farming practices, not only in England but in many parts of western Europe and America. During Young’s time, England’s landed gentry enclosed much of the commons for private agricultural and economic gain. Young supported these enclosures. Like his privileged contemporaries, he believed enclosure would help England manage its uncultivated lands more efficiently and, in so doing, improve the nation’s economy. But having toured the countryside and met with farmers in person, Young came to sympathize with the struggles of the
poor working agrarian. His support of the enclosure acts, therefore, was not without serious reservation and criticism. Between 1772 and 1801, Young wrote three treatises on the “advantages and disadvantages” of the “wastes” for the poor. Young, whose professional training was largely economic, analyzed the enclosure acts, oftentimes cent by cent, and spoke candidly about the ill effects of such acts on the average laborer, despite whatever minor uptick in pay he might receive for his services on enclosed farms. By establishing what was at stake, Young proposed a new way of imagining this category of so-called useless landscape. It is his characterization of “advantage” that applies to every section of this essay. If I prefer the word “aesthetics” to “advantage” in the pages that follow the section on Young, it is because I want to emphasize the importance of the public imagination in its efforts to combat the same enclosures (both geographical and ideological) that Young addressed in his writings.

In section II, I turn to the stories of Cooper and Parkman. In a vast, untamed wilderness like America, enclosure posed no real threat to the laboring poor. But the borderlands beyond the settled coasts were cultural question marks to a public largely conditioned to fear what the King James Bible and Puritan founders called the “waste howling wilderness.” More pleasing were the landscape aesthetics of the pastoral, the picturesque, even the sublime (compared to the wastes). But the mountains, forests, and prairies that early American writers encountered oftentimes simply did not correspond to traditional landscape aesthetics. Beyond topographical boundaries, the frontiers of Ohio, Oregon, California, and Texas spread out in measureless terrain. Most important, however, were the psychological borders that prevented settlers from

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reconciling their own notions of civilization with the civilizations that existed, even predated, their own. This chapter considers the effects of such borders on two of America’s most important frontier writers. I avoid typical wilderness readings that characterize much of the scholarship on Cooper and Parkman over the past century by 1.) focusing on the characters’ confused responses to the wastes and 2.) by relocating America’s borderlands within the characters themselves. To bring the relevance of this study home to readers today, I close the chapter with a comparative study of Thomas King’s short story, “Borders,” a fictional (though no less true) account of a Blackfoot mother’s and her son’s difficulty crossing the border between Canada and the United States.

In section III, I attend to representations of people as “things,” and how aesthetics have been employed, both in American literature and in American society, to de-institutionalize this problem. The two figures I compare are Rebecca Harding Davis’s korl woman, from Davis’s novella Life in the Iron-Mills (1861), and a more recent example in the person of Judith Scott who was born deaf and mentally disabled and whose textiles remain a source of bewilderment and fascination in the realm of outsider art. This chapter employs theories by Bill Brown, Bruno Latour, and anthropologist Alfred Gell on the value of “things,” which is to say, the use of that which lacks social and economic context. Davis asks a seemingly straightforward question in her story: what differentiates a person like Hugh Wolfe, a poor Welsh laborer, from the upper classes? If money were the only issue, then the story might have ended on an economic note. But neither the narrator nor Davis seem convinced that money is the sole problem nor the sole solution. The korl woman that Wolfe sculpts from the wastes of the iron mill represents something beyond the scope of utility in the economic sense, as do Scott’s textiles. This chapter looks closely at the limitations, the “disability,” as it were, not of characters like Wolfe or people
like Judith Scott, but of the institutional forms of communication that they are forced to model and that, consequently, treat them as waste.

Section IV explores what the photographer Margaret Morton calls “transitory gardens” in the legends of Johnny Appleseed, the writings of Henry David Thoreau, and the inheritors of their itinerant acts of civil disobedience, today’s guerrilla gardeners. Aesthetics of waste are all about creating advantage where law and money have yet to determine who wins and who loses. Where and how does America’s Adamic mythology still avail itself to the dispossessed and disadvantaged? Where are the boundaries and how does one overcome them? This chapter argues for the historical (and ongoing) necessity for trespass as both a method of protest and economic perseverance in the face of systematized adversity. Sir William Blackstone, the famous eighteenth-century judge and jurist who wrote the indispensable Commentaries on the Laws of England (1765-1769), defined “trespass” simply as the “entry” into, and subsequent “damage” of, another man’s property. But Briony McDonagh and Carl Griffen argue that from Blackstone’s premise, the term was used more and more to “discipline those that passe beyond a limit, “a limit which may or may not have been visible on the ground,” a limit that that indicts that which is “out of place.”23 The stories of John Chapman, Thoreau’s essay “Walking,” and the actions of today’s guerrilla gardening movement translate wastelands (be they unsettled forests or urban properties left to ruin by absentee landlords) as sites in which “place” for the “out of place” becomes possible.

Because this project moves forward thematically rather than chronologically, a good deal of overlap occurs in each section. Borderlands in section II, for example, are caught up in issues of trespass in section IV. But they also deal explicitly with issues of property, poverty, and social mobility, which factor heavily into sections I and III. So the characteristics emphasized in one section may appear elsewhere but through a slightly different analytical lens. The purpose of this overlap is to underscore that which is fundamental to aesthetics of waste precisely because it emerges and reemerges in the literature, even when the context changes, so that the confusion experienced by settlers in America’s western wastelands in section II mirror, in important ways, the confusion prompted by Judith Scott’s textiles in section III. What people consider to be waste changes over time, but our ideological relationship to it tends to remain surprisingly constant. Aesthetics surrounding the idea of waste do the same.

IV. “Where is it one first heard the truth? The the”: Theorizing a Reading

In his book, *Rubbish Theory* (1979), anthropologist Michael Thompson claims that the “fundamental irreconcilability” of waste to “serious” sociological and anthropological study means that “the rubbish theorist has to deal in different forms of discourse simultaneously.”

I’ve found this to be true in my own approach to waste aesthetics. Waste eschews disciplinarity. It evades linear narratives and appears, typically, in the margins of history. Because the stakes are both aesthetic in nature and political in practice, research on this subject benefits from multiple perspectives. In the pages that follow, I draw from literature, visual art, anthropological and social theory, transatlantic history, environmental science, and sources of related interest.

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Since these disciplines “cannot be mixed,” at least not entirely, and not without significant generalization, says Thompson, “they must be juxtaposed.”25 Whatever merit this essay has rests entirely upon such juxtapositions.

Thompson positions waste along a continuum. An object might be “durable,” which means its value persists, while another object might be “transient,” and of value for a limited time. Between these extremes is an area of “flexibility.” To use Thompson’s example, an advertisement in the newspaper might describe a used object as either “antique” or “secondhand.” One adjective adds value, the other takes value away. There are, in other words, values “we cannot see” and values “we conspire to see.”26 In the aesthetics I’m proposing, this distinction means everything, for between the two extremes lies a middle state (to borrow a phrase from Leo Marx). And it’s this flexible, middle state that gives waste its potential for so much “[i]nnovation and creativity.”27

The illumined waste reflects those rare moments in history and literature when individuals see advantage in that which others deride as useless, unprofitable, or empty. The characters described in this study often are unable to improve their circumstances. But they hint at alternative paradigms of labor and progress through willful acts of defamiliarization. Waste aesthetics of this kind play a larger role in twenty-first century thinking, but the pastoral ideal still weighs heavy on our own public imagination. Wallace Stevens, perhaps more than any other modern poet, grappled with the persistence of pastoral ideals and ideologies. In a poem that gets

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 88.

27 Ibid., 8.
to the heart of my own project—“The Man on the Dump”—Stevens opens with a view of the sunset, as might be expected of a romantic poem. “Day creeps down. The moon is creeping up,” and the man on the dump (a stand-in for Žižek) notices that the “dump is full / Of images.” The line break is important. The dump is full and it is full of images. The dump, of course, is never “full” of anything other than that which is empty of value. But that’s exactly where Stevens wants his reader to begin. How full of empty images is our own imaginations? The dump, we quickly understand, is a metonym for the earth, in which “[d]ays pass like papers from a press” or a “wrapper on the can of pears” into the heap of used-up things—a description resonant with Brian Thill’s idea that waste is everything plus time.28

The problem the narrator notices is that we act as if those things dear to us—“the box / From Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea”—were imperishable, as if they will never end up in the dump, as if we will never end up in the dump. So we create stories of lasting beauty and repeat them, and believe them. “[H]ow many men have copied dew / For buttons, how many women have covered themselves / With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew” in order to stop time and preserve the glimmering riches of our youth and health and beauty. But there’s a point at which this denial of reality becomes too sentimental to bear, at least for Stevens. From this blindness is born a trite romanticism of “floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew”—a sentiment more nauseating than trash. “One grows to hate these things except in the dump” because in the dump the dew is dew, not the ideal of youth and beauty.29 Nature—its used and unused excesses—become beautiful on the dump for what they are. On the dump, “[o]ne rejects /


29 Ibid., lines 9-20, 185.
The trash,” which is just to say, one rejects the customary labels and clichés, the old ways of thinking, about trash. “Everything is shed” of its ideals on the dump. “[T]he moon comes up as the moon” and not a goddess. “You see the moon rise in the empty sky” that cannot be truly empty with a moon in it. The man on the dump “beats an old tin can” and makes his own music and asks himself30:

Is it peace,
Is it a philosopher’s honeymoon, one finds
On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,
Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur aptest eve:
Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say
Invisible priest; is it to eject, to pull
The day to pieces and cry stanza my stone?
Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.31

No benign nightingales here. The dump is no honeymoon, and few, I think, would ever describe an evening at a dumpsite as “apt.” The mangy birds picking over the debris are no priests. And, at least for now, there is no escape, no way to “eject” oneself from the mess, no way to hide behind stanzas of pretty words as if they were stone. This pastoral delusion of “floweriest flowers” and “dewiest dew,” this “truth” often ascribed to nature—what Stevens cleverly embodies with two definite articles (“The the”)—where does it come from? Fantasy, myth, a soft spot in the human heart for meadows and apple trees? Whatever the case may be, the dump is not the end of the world. It is, if one wants it to be, a place to create a new music, a new idea of the beautiful.

In a very abstract sense, to illuminate the waste is to attune oneself, in Stevensian fashion, to possibility where only the impossible seems to exist. It is about finding advantage where it is,

30 Ibid., lines 26-34, 185.

31 Ibid., lines 40-47, 185-186.
not where we would prefer it to be, as Simon Schama says in *Landscape and Memory* (1995). Aesthetics of waste are, like landscape itself, “a way of looking; of rediscovering what we already have, but which somehow eludes our recognition and our appreciation. Instead of being yet another explanation of what we have lost, it is an exploration of what we may yet find.”

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I. Waste-As-Advantage

For the eighteenth-century English agriculturalist Arthur Young, wastelands were places of potential “advantage” for the poor. Young was a prolific writer on innovations in farming technologies and practices during England’s agricultural revolution which, by his time, had been advancing for over a century. Young’s *Annals of Agriculture and Other Useful Arts* (1785-1809)—forty-five volumes on the traditions of western agriculture—endeared him to kings, politicos, abolitionists, and celebrated artists all over the world. He was sought out for his expertise in all-things-agrarian, even by George Washington. Much of the extant scholarship on Young attends to his affiliations with political celebrities and the accuracy of his economic calculus. But if one wanted to know more about the potential advantages of England’s wastelands at the time for the laboring poor, Young’s writings would be essential.

Wastelands, those landscapes considered empty of sufficient economic value, were used oftentimes by the poor as commons. They grazed cattle there and planted gardens to supplement their income. But neither the commons nor the wastes were completely “common,” insofar as that word implies either joint-ownership within a community or no ownership at all. The landed gentry had been enclosing the commons since the sixteenth century in order to “improve” properties by restricting access to them, which, in turn, increased demand, which, in turn, raised rent, which, in turn, strengthened the gentry. All of this was done in the name of England’s greater welfare, a sentiment that Arthur Young shared. But too often Young’s writings in support of enclosure oversimplify his political stance, when in fact he tirelessly criticized his peers in their tendency to throw the baby out with the bathwater, as it were, seeing as how enclosure, without fair compensation for the loss of the commons, ultimately harmed those who made the economy, and the gentry’s own property, strong.
In this section of the essay, I examine Young’s writings on the “advantage” of the wastes for the poor, the marginalized, and the dispossessed. Young called his proposals “visionary” both as a preemptive criticism of his own ideas but, more importantly, as a form of imaginative sympathy. The combination of wasteland, poverty, and sympathy adhere as the foundation of Young’s waste aesthetics. Waste is a difficult abstraction to theorize aesthetically, all the more so for its ideological mutability. But I argue in this section that Young develops a language with which to codify a useful theory.

Alleviation of poverty signifies half of the advantage discussed here. For the other half, I turn to the seventeenth-century Diggers, a community of radical Puritan agrarians who protested England’s enclosures by planting on the gentry’s land without permission. Both the example of the Diggers and the writings of Young show how wastelands threaten inveterate hierarchies, which other sections in this essay will illustrate as well. Ultimately, Young looked to the colonies in America for an example of wastelands used to the benefit not only of the working class but of an experiment in national democracy. The picture he pulled together from his correspondence with figures like Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison disappointed his expectations. Slavery and the programmatic genocide of America’s indigenous peoples were not at all what Young had in mind for a frontier economy that advantaged the lives of the poor. But the correspondence was not without its rewards. His study of America sharpened his thinking on the usefulness of wasteland in England. Improvement of wastelands alone would not be enough to advance the cause of national prosperity. The poor would have to be incentivized and empowered. And to do that, they would need their own share in England’s great estate. Young advocated for the gifting (or reduced sale) of wasteland to the poor—an absurd
notion to the minds of his target audience, the landed gentry, but an essential step in the welfare of the nation.

Young’s goals were never accomplished, though parliamentary acts were passed that favored Young’s ideas. Neither the success nor the failure of Young’s ideals concern me here. More important is the fact that Young theorizes the utility of wastelands in a radically different way than his contemporaries, finding possibility where only the impossible had been depicted and discussed. Young’s writings on the advantages of waste provide us with an analytical lens through which new spaces of political, economic, and aesthetic utility can be surveyed and studied, not only in the past but in the present.

I. Wastes and Protest

In 1650, an agrarian declaration was composed in Wellingborough, Northampton. “We,” the document begins, “have begun and give consent to dig up, manure and sow Corn upon the Common, and waste ground, called Bareshanke belonging to the Inhabitants of Wellinborrow, by those that have Subscribed and hundreds more that give Consent.” The first of the five declarations outlines their justification:

that God made the Earth for the use and comfort of all Mankind, and set him in to till and dresse it, and said, That in the sweat of his brows he should eat his bread; and also we find, that God never gave it to any sort of people, that they should have it all to themselves, and shut out all the rest. but he saith, The Earth hath he given to the children of men, which is every man.33

The declaration was written on behalf of the Diggers, or True Levellers, a band of dispossessed farmers and their families who, during the English Civil War (1642-1651) and the short-lived commonwealth that followed, took a public stance against enclosure of the commons. Enclosing involved the fencing, hedging, or ditching of widely shared, cultivatable land (commons) or land considered unusable (waste). Though the process began long before the Diggers arrived, it escalated during the seventeenth century and continued well into the nineteenth, inflating rents and reducing access to open, arable fields used by the poor for subsistence farming. Open fields had been cultivated for ages by local communities, and free entry to the commons and wastes were considered by many to be a natural right. The original levellers were known for actually levelling, or cutting down, the hedges of these enclosures as far back as the 1520s. The “true” levelers distinguished themselves from these previous levellers by their actions as well as their ideals. Though both groups aimed to even, or level, class disparity and promote popular sovereignty, the former believed in nonviolent protest and opposed the ownership of land, whereas the latter opted for violence, at times, and defended their right to privatize property. Enclosure, however, threatened communal and private interests alike.

Enclosures weren’t the only things expanding during this period. Innovations in farm technologies and adoption of better crop rotations drove the larger English economy to new heights and standards of living, at least for some. An unmistakable consequence of England’s productivity was its unequal distribution of income. For the most part, the rich got richer and the poor poorer. In fact, argues the historian Robert Allen, England experienced two agricultural

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revolutions at the time, not just the one we commonly recognize. The first Allen attributes to yeomen farmers increasing productivity in open fields. Open fields were managed by villages in rotating patterns: three planted, one fallow. Had yeoman methods not been stifled by enclosure, the distribution of wealth might not have been so devastating to the laboring classes, Allen claims.\textsuperscript{35} But such was not the case.

 Debates surrounding enclosure, during Young’s time and later, usually fall into two categories: Marxist and Tory. The Marxist critic concedes the value of enclosure for economic growth but notes the enclosure’s disenfranchisement of the laboring classes. The Tory argues that enclosure may affect agricultural employment, but not at a loss, since those unemployed are free to work in manufacturing jobs, further contributing to the ongoing economic benefit of themselves and their country. The Tory position will figure more in our discussion of Arthur Young momentarily, but the Diggers, though long preceding Marx, presaged certain aspects of the Marxist position. As their several declarations attest, they believed that the earth was to be worked cooperatively, and that it belonged to no single individual. Therefore, they sank their spades into the dirt in protest of enclosures.

 The Diggers were led primarily by a cloth merchant and protestant dissenter named Gerrard Winstanley whose rallying song, “Stand Up Now,” popularized the “digger” moniker. The ballad would become an anthem for many unions and organizers well into the twentieth century:

\begin{verbatim}
You noble Diggers all, stand up now, stand up now,
You noble Diggers all, stand up now,
The wast land to maintain, seeing Cavaliers by name
Your digging does disdaine, and persons all defame
\end{verbatim}

Stand up now, stand up now.\textsuperscript{36}

Winstanley also drafted declarations on behalf of the poor and dispossessed. Parliament had threatened to sell off the commons at Surrey in order to pay wartime debts. Winstanley cried foul. His pamphlets asserted independence from the tyranny of all landlords. “Every freeman,” he said, “shall have a freedom in the earth, to plant or build, to fetch from the store-houses anything he wants, and shall enjoy the fruits of his labours without restraint from any,” and most importantly, “he shall not pay rent to any landlord.”\textsuperscript{37}

But pamphleteering was only half the battle. When Surrey’s landlords overran St. George’s Hill with their sheep and cattle herds, preventing access to the commons, Winstanley organized a public dig. He hoped for peaceful resistance. In his “appeal to the House of Commons” for the “enjoyment of Commons and Waste Lands” (1649), Winstanley wrote:

we . . . that have been ever friends to the Parliament . . . have plowed and dig’d upon Georges Hill [the Diggers did not believe in saints] in Surrey, to sow corn for the succour of man, offering no offence to any, but do carry our selves in love and peace towards all, having no intent to meddle with any mans inclosures, or propriety, til it be freely given to us by themselves, but only to improve the Commons and waste Lands to our best advantage [my emphasis] . . .\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{36} Gerrard Winstanley, \textit{The Works of Gerrard Winstanley, with an Appendix of Documents Relating to the Digger Movement} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1941), 663.


\textsuperscript{38} Gerrard Winstanley, \textit{An Appeal to the House of Commons, Desiring Their Answer Whether the Common-People Shall Have the Quiet Enjoyment of the Commons and Waste Land; or Whether They Shall Be Under the Will of the Lords of Mannors Still: Occasioned by an Arrest, Made by Thomas Lord Wenman, Ralph Verry, Knight, and Richard Winwood, Esq., Upon the Author Hereof, for a Trespass in Digging Upon the Common-Land at Georges Hill in Surrey} (London, 1649), 4, http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebookbatch.MOME_batch:U100150029.
The action, at first, looked something like an agricultural sit-in but eventually grew into a small community. The lords of the surrounding estates harassed and filed suit against the Diggers. And when legal methods proved inadequate, they opted for more violent tactics. The Digger communities were burned and destroyed, their women and children beaten severely.\(^ {39} \)

I start with this abridged history of the Diggers because of that word “advantage” in Winstanley’s appeal to the House of Commons. Obviously, nonviolent protest did not work to the full advantage of the Digger’s cause. Physical and economic abuse of the poor continued in the wake of England’s enclosure of what eventually amounted to a fifth of its total area, some 6.8 million acres, with over 5,000 acts of enclosure passed by Parliament between 1604 and 1914.\(^ {40} \) But in appeals like Winstanley’s, the word “advantage” begins to distinguish itself politically from “improvement,” the other hallmark of the agricultural revolution. Both ideas show up frequently in the literature of enclosure. But improvement generally appropriates the language of agriculture to different ends. To improve the land meant to empower the state by cutting debt, expanding the gentry’s property holdings, and creating more surveillance over the lower classes.\(^ {41} \) In other words, improvement had less to do with land development than it did the state’s protection of its coffers, be they in private or administrative hands. But advantage in the


land, specifically wasteland, benefited those for whom the share of the state’s coffers ran desperately low. Advantage, as in the example of Surrey, meant neither security, nor wealth, nor authority. In any case, the chances of such outcomes were hardly realistic. The advantages that commons and wastelands could provide—because they had been providing them for centuries—had more to do with self-sufficiency, privacy, and at least a modicum of sovereignty in an otherwise prohibitive economy. These pleas align with the Diggers’ appeals and public actions. Important to note is that the ambition to reclaim the wastes to the advantage of the poor did not necessarily mean, as it did in the case of enclosure, that the wastes would be totally drained, cultivated, and improved for agriculture. Though it may have been one of many implications, as it was always the case that the lowlands were in need of draining and the rocks in need of breaking, free and easy access to the wastes meant much more at a personal and communal level. It is, then, this association between advantage and wasteland that underlies, more than anything else, Arthur Young’s writings.

II. Arthur Young’s Sympathetic Education

Little about Arthur Young’s childhood suggests any future interest in wastelands. Young was born in London, 1741, to privileged circumstances. His father was a clergyman and chaplain to Speaker Arthur Onslow. Young’s mother, a woman of substantial means, brought to the marriage a small fortune. Throughout his life, Young admired power and benefited from the aristocratic patronage of his colleagues and peers. He had no real connection with the tenant farmers and freeholders to whom he dedicated his later writings. In fact, Young’s budding political ambitions leaned toward imperialism. In his first pamphlet (1758), published when he was an eager and egotistical seventeen-year-old, Young outlined what he thought to be the
proper treatment of labor and resources in the British colonies. “We should consider,” he said, “that the riches of the plantations, are our riches; their forces, our forces; and their shipping, our shipping; as they prosper, so will their mother country prosper of course; hither all their wealth flows in the end.”

Even after the popularity of his well-received *Farmers Letters* nine years later, Young spoke disparagingly not just of the laborers abroad but of the poor at home, though he felt certain that if the poor worked hard and remained sober, they would get by. It was hardly a radical opinion in the aristocratic company he kept, a point to which I will return momentarily.

In his *Autobiography* (1898), Young describes himself as a disinterested student. He was the youngest of his siblings and somewhat pampered. He enjoyed hunting and riding his pony and had trouble focusing in the classroom. Nevertheless, Young loved to read, and he read voraciously. Greek and Roman literature were among his childhood favorites. Through speeches, myths, and religious works, Young acquainted himself with an agrarian sentiment bordering on


the sacred. That impression would remain with him throughout his life and career.\footnote{Arthur Young, \textit{The Autobiography of Arthur Young} (New York, AM Kelley, 1967), 7.} Young’s father, on the other hand, disliked his son’s bookish inclinations and redirected his studies toward mathematics.\footnote{Ibid., 14.}

After apprenticing to his brother-in-law as an accountant (a contract he loathed),\footnote{Ibid.} Young floundered. He had no prospects and no money. His father had passed away and left the family in debt. Concerned about his future, Young’s mother offered her son a farm at their family home in Bradfield. Young accepted, though out of “desperation” rather than aspiration.\footnote{Gazley, \textit{The Life of Arthur Young, 1741-1820}, 13.} Not until he began farming do we see inklings of the indefatigable enthusiast he would become. Young prepared himself for this new endeavor by reading every agricultural tract and treatise he could get his hands on. He kept up with modern experiments and made it his mission to “try everything” while keeping copious and exhaustive notes. The economist in him calculated risk and consequence—a discipline that would later trademark his famous travels, tours, and annals and set him apart from the rest of his peers.

These were not just the skills of a professional. The enthusiasm with which Young experimented bordered on obsession, but one shared by many at the time. The agricultural revolution boasted some of the most well-known names in the annals of farming method and technology: Jethro Tull who invented the seed drill; Turnip Townsend who improved wastelands with marl and turnips; and Colk of Holkham who popularized the rotation of wheat, turnips,
barley, and clover—better known as the Norfolk system. Improving agriculture acre by acre meant changing the culture as well as the land. This involved deep, expansive infrastructural reform. The maximization of crop yields necessitated the enclosure of the commons. Soil drainage and soil enrichment required enormous capital investments. And farmers had to be persuaded to change the way they worked and lived. This last challenge proved the most difficult. Localized farming methods, many of them centuries old, were not so easily updated or abolished. Farmers were notoriously conservative and opposed to the kinds of experimentation in vogue with those who could afford the risks.\footnote{G.E. Mingay, \textit{The Agricultural Revolution: Changes in Agriculture, 1650-1880} (London: A&C Black, 1977), 11–27.}

Young himself ventured too much in his early years as a farmer. Even after much study and experiment, four years (1763-1767) at the plow failed to earn Young a living. And for that reason alone, many critics have denounced his authority on agriculture and stigmatized his prolific contribution to the field as slipshod and amateurish. But Young’s failures were not unlike those of wealthier landlords who invested much and gained nothing. Indeed many farmers who could not afford the fertilizers and various feed crops had little choice but to improve their lands or fail trying. The Seven Years War had damaged the economy. Pay was low, costs high. And the agricultural practices passed down for generations had devastated the soil. In response, Young put his books down and went straight to the source for guidance. “[T]he only real use which resulted from those four years [of his own farming experiments],” he said, was to visit and “view the farms of other men with an eye of more discrimination than I could possibly have done without that practice.”\footnote{Ibid., 30.} Young decided that he would submit himself to the expertise of
England’s hardworking farmers. He would observe, question, and record these experiences. And to that end, Young found in the art of travel writing a happy compromise between the authors he admired, the arithmetic he mastered, and the observations he prepared from his journeys all over England, Ireland, France, and Italy.

But travel writing plays an important role in the development of Young’s thinking about poverty and agriculture. As these topics often appear in waste aesthetics, Young’s biographical relationship to the travel writing genre tells us something both about the type of literature most suited to aesthetics of waste and, consequently, where a more detailed list of its characteristics might be found. Travel writing covers a great deal of intellectual and aesthetic terrain. It encompasses the voyages of Odysseus, the pilgrimages of Chaucer, the journals of Columbus, the tours of Defoe, the expeditions of Humboldt, the observations of Tocqueville—the list goes on and on. According to Charles Dellheim, the genre “sharpened the sense of place and orientation of native and stranger alike by creating elementary visual maps that structured perceptions of entire landscapes as well as of their individual features, whether medieval or modern.”50 One might say, as historian Peter Whitfield does, that travel literature “eludes final definition.” “A travel text,” he writes, “is obviously some species of memoir, tied to specific geographical locations, whose aim is to reflect or capture the character of that location and its people. It is tied to reality, but it will inevitably be reshaped in the memory and in the imagination.”51 It is important that Whitfield associates travel writing with reality but does not


51 Peter Whitfield, Travel: A Literary History (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2011), x.
bind it to reality. Fictionalized locations or people in travel literature (especially in utopian literature—also a form of travel writing) often provide a platform by which the writer may comment on the failures of his or her home country, state, or city without political retaliation. There is an element of participation to this definition of travel writing. The writer, even if only providing description, is both “spectator and actor,” “recording an experience” and “creating it.”

For Young, travel writing afforded an entryway into a world he had neither the skill to replicate (given how short-lived his own farming experiments were) nor the experience to picture clearly in his own mind. The aesthetic side of travel writing has much to do with imagination, in that sense. It expanded Young’s own understanding of what those leading agrarian lives could do, even with so little. The wastes in which the poor worked may not have been ideal, but neither were they without their own advantages.

This kind of fictive/nonfictive participation separates the literary, picturesque travel writer of the time—the writer interested mostly in painterly views of nature—from the travel writer who reports. The latter is often described as scientific or utilitarian and is subsequently ignored by most aesthetic treatments of the genre. But by divorcing the observational writings of agriculturalists like Young from the realm of aesthetics entirely, we dismiss what John Dewey would later describe as “art as experience”

That is, creation as/through encounter. This kind of participation goes beyond mimesis and the simple replication of hills and trees on canvas. It unveils dimensions of human engagement with the world unscripted by the romantic, pastoral

\[52\] Ibid., x.

tradition, just as the English poet George Crabbe scathingly took that tradition to task in his poem, “The Village” (1783):

What forms the real Picture of the Poor,  
Demand a song - the Muse can give no more.  
Fled are those times, when, in harmonious strains,  
The rustic poet praised his native plains:  
No Shepherds now, in smooth alternate verse,  
Their country’s beauty or their nymphs rehearse;  
Yet still for these we frame the tender strain,  
Still in our lays fond Corydons complain,  
And shepherds’ boys their amorous pains reveal,  
The only pains, alas! they never feel.54

The life of the agrarian was no pastoral existence. It was, as Thomas Hobbes famously said of all human life, “nasty, brutish, and short.” Pining over lost love would not have worried these shepherd boys. They plowed, they sowed, they perspired, and if, after all that, they were not too hungry, they slept. But the fortitude and strength it took to sustain oneself in these conditions seemed more worthy of poetry to writers like Crabbe than damsels and daffodils, especially given how little assistance the state supplied and how much more difficult enclosures made the situation for many poor farmers. Without wastelands, the decreasing availability of agricultural jobs would have devastated a far greater proportion of England’s working class than it already did. This too is what Young noticed in his tours of England’s countryside.

Hardships of this severity required sympathy—not the kind of pathos we think of when we hear or read the word “sympathy” today but sympathy as Adam Smith, Young’s contemporary, described it in The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759): “Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he

suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the
imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations." The sympathetic
imagination transports a part of Young (for which his politics cannot account) beyond economy,
reason, and utility.

But how to square this with the Arthur Young of such strong Tory association—the
Young who firmly believed that England stood to gain the most by investing the country’s
capital and resources into larger enclosed agricultural estates. Just as the agricultural revolution
can be divided, and subdivided, into various areas of progress (technological, scientific, cultural,
economic, etc.), so too does Young’s theoretical contribution to the political economy of
agriculture warrant a more nuanced evaluation. A Tory he most certainly was, but not a
fundamentalist. Ironically, some aspects of Young’s writing reflect the Marxist position I
mentioned earlier, even the kind of thinking promoted by later critics of enclosure like W.T.
Thornton and John Stuart Mill whose respective works, *Plea for Peasant Proprietors* (1843) and
*Principles of Political Economy* (1848) made the case for the greater efficiency of small yeoman
farms over large enclosed estates. If the laboring classes owned their own land, argued Thornton
and Mill, motivation would be higher and productivity greater, a notion for which there is a good
deal of evidence. Of the opposite view, historians like G.E. Mingay have argued that increased
production between 1700 and 1850 resulted from the vast expansion of farmland, not the
innovation of yeoman farmers on the commons and wastelands. But more recent examinations
raise objections to this theory. In Allen’s case studies of midland England in the seventeenth

55 Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 250th anniversary ed. (New York:

century, yeoman innovation, even when the fields were open, was a much better predictor of agricultural output, especially with newer methods of soil drainage like the hollow-pipe system. When yeoman farmers used hollow drainage on open fields, the land outperformed enclosed properties. Enclosure, it turns out, played a lesser role in the productivity of the land.\(^{57}\)

Young, however, was not opposed to “peasant proprietors,” as his political affiliation suggests. Far from it. Much of his writing argues for a fairer distribution of property among the laborers and landed gentry alike. Neither was he shy about criticizing his own party’s elitism. His views were complicated, on the one hand, by an indefatigable enthusiasm for agricultural innovation—an obsession that on more than one occasion nearly bankrupted him—and on the other hand, by his admiration for the farmer’s intuition and skill—neither of which he possessed. If we look only at Young’s economics, such as his *Political Arithmetic* (1774) wherein Young claims, in typical Tory fashion, that the labor freed from agriculture due to the lower demand of enclosed estates would meet the demands of manufacture elsewhere\(^{58}\)—in other words, if the assessment focuses mostly on Young’s math, then a picture of Young evolves that situates him too neatly on one side of the class divide. But when coupled with Young’s writings on the use of wastelands for the further subsistence of the poor, a less one-sided picture emerges. In 1770, Young published *A Six Months Tour Through the North of England* in which he raised certain


reservations about acts of enclosure that gave incontrovertible authority to the landed elite. The enclosure itself worried him less than those who abused their power over, and management of, said enclosure.

I am not here arguing against enclosures, the advantages arising from them are certainly very extensive; I am only saying, they are not so great as they are frequently imagined to be, and they do not always indemnify the present possessor from the great expense he is at in obtaining them, by the absurd and extravagant manner in which they are generally conducted.\(^\text{59}\)

“For this reason,” he writes, “it seems requisite, that the following clauses should be added to the acts for inclosure”:

I. That the small proprietors should have a share in the nomination of commissioners; either by a union of votes or otherwise, as might be determined.
II. That the attorney and commissioners should, before the passing of the act, agree upon their several rewards, and on no account whatever be suffered to pay themselves one shilling.
III. That the commissioners proceed immediately to the survey, distribution, and assignment, and the building or forming public works.
IV. That in case any man thinks himself injured, he may be at liberty (but totally at his own expense, in case he is in the wrong) to summons a jury immediately, to view and decide the affair.
V. That as soon as the abovementioned business is concluded, the commissioners do give in their account of all sums received and expended, in the most regular manner, and with all the vouchers for payment; and that they immediately publish their award.
VI. That an action at common law be had against the commissioners for false, or unvouched accounts, &c. &c.\(^\text{60}\)

The injustices that laborers experienced at the hands of the proprietors (their employers) were numerous, including rack rents and little recourse to judicial protections if harmed or taken


\(^{60}\) Ibid., 262–63.
advantage of by their employers. In Young’s clauses, civil protections are granted with the added check against proprietors paying themselves or their committees exorbitant bonuses from the money that ought to be invested in labor and infrastructure. This was Young’s way of protesting. He did not stand on a hill in Surrey, like Gerrard Winstanley, and cultivate the land at the risk of bodily harm. That not being the case, one might question the sincerity of his principles. One might even accuse him of purely academic interest. Or it may be the case that his convictions wavered at the thought of his own destitution. But these seem to me to be matters of opinion best left to the reader. It is enough, I think, that he went on to write essays of increasing attention to The Advantages and Disadvantages of Inclosing Waste Lands and Open Fields: Impartially Stated and Considered (1772), Observations on the Present State of the Waste Lands of Great Britain: Published on the Occasion of the Establishment of a New Colony on the Ohio (1773), and An Inquiry into the Propriety of Applying Wastes to the Better Maintenance and Support of the Poor (1801). Though enclosure, to be sure, remains a Tory predilection in these writings, Young’s sympathies (of which I will have more to say a little later in this study) shift ever closer to the plight of those underserved by landed interests.

In many of the era’s wasteland reclamation proposals, the poor are depicted as idle ne’er-do-wells. One proposal commissioned by Parliament in 1653 for the “waste land’s improvement” calls the “great circumferences of ground [that] do at this day lye wast and desolate” a “shame” to England’s reputation, mostly due to the “lazy” people who do nothing to develop them, and the inhabitants of the wastes who are the source of so many “robberies, thefts, burglaries, rapes and murders.” The wastelands, to this faction’s way of thinking, only reinforced the maleficent nature of the poor. The “vast, wild wide Forrests, which (by reason of their vastnesse and largenesse, their distance from Towns and houses, the paucity of passengers, &c.)
do administer liberty and opportunity unto villainous minds to perpetrate and commit their wicket and vicious actions.”

To that end, surveyors like John Norden, as early as 1607, insisted that enclosures would protect England against iniquity and “monasticall idleness.” Not only would they preserve England’s virtues, they would eliminate entirely that which “breeds . . . idle, vagrant, pilfering and pernicious persons,” and in its place, raise “cattle and other excellent fruits.” No word, on the contrary, could be more historically off base than “idle” when used to describe most poor farmers.

In point of fact, a new social mobility had resulted from foreclosures on Catholic properties during the expansion of protestant reform. Landowners had reason to horde however many acres they could against those who might begin working the newly available land as commons. The poor were hardly indifferent to this opportunity, and the gentry knew it. As Christopher Hill explains in his classic essay, “Protestanism and the Rise of Capitalism,” determined communalism and work ethic were outward manifestations of faith—a commodity

61 E.G., Wast Land’s Improvement, or Certain Proposals Made and Tendred to the Consideration of the Honorable Committee Appointed by Parliament for the Advance of Trade, and General Profits of the Commonwealth: Wherein Are Some Hints Touching the Best and Most Commodious Way of Improving the Forrests, Fenny-Grounds and Wast-Lands throughout England, Tending Very Much to the Enriching of the Common-Wealth in Generall, the Prevention of Robbery and Beggary, the Raising and Maintaining of a Publick-Stock for the Perpetuall Supply of Armies and Navies without Taxation and Excize, and Also a Way for Satisfaction for Part of the Nations Debts and Obligations (London, 1653), 1, 3.

62 John Norden, The Surveyors Dialogue: Divided into Fiuue Bookes: Very Profitable for All Men to Peruse, That Haue to Do with the Revenues of Land, or the Manurance, Vse, or Occupation Thereof, Both Lords and Tenants: As Also and Especially for Such as Indeavor to Be Seene in the Faculty of Surveying of Mannors, Lands, Tenements, &c. by I.N (London: Printed by Simon Stafford for Hugh Astley, dwelling at S. Magnus corner, 1607), 77.

63 E.G., Wast Land’s Improvement, 3.
not to be bought or sold by the rich. “The elect, Luther had said, must perform good works to help their neighbour, the community, the commonwealth, humanity; this prevents the doctrine of justification by faith giving ‘licence and free liberty to everyone to do what he will’. Men serve God in their callings, however vile, because they serve their neighbor.”64 A man may not know whether he has been elected by god, but he had better work as if he were one of the elect, if only to distract himself from the alternative.

Arguments for improvement of wasteland (of which many were written to various political and economical ends between the sixteenth and nineteenth century)65 often paid lip


65 The following is a selection of texts consulted on the improvement of wastelands published before Arthur Young's Six Month Tour of North England. There are many more, but most reflect what this list expresses in detail: Conrad Heresbach, Foure Bookes of Husbandry, 322 (London: Printed by Tho. Wight, 1601); John Smith, England’s Improvement Reviv’d: Digested into Six Books (In the Savoy: Printed by Tho. Newcomb for the author, 1670), http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebookbatch.EEBON_batch:ocm12621492e; Proposals for the Improvement of Common and Waste-Lands: And Also for Raising and Securing a Supply of Wood and Timber in This Kingdom. Together with Some Considerations on the Most Effectual Methods of Maintaining and Employing the Poor (London: printed for James Roberts, 1723), http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebookbatch.ECCO_batch:T171075; Ireland, An Act to Encourage the Improvement of Barren, And Waste Land, and Boggs, and Planting of Timber Trees and Orchards (Dublin: printed by Andrew Crooke, Printer to the King’s Most Excellent Majesty, at the King’s-Arms in Copper-Alley, 1731), http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebookbatch.ECCO_batch:T224441; Great Britain. Parliament, An Act for Inclosing Divers Parcels of Waste Grounds, Or Commons, in Ellell, in the County of Lancaster (London, 1756),
service to the needs of the poor and the marginalized. But the real reason for improving wasteland was always made quite clear. In the case of the proposal mentioned above, the wastes were to be rented to the poor so that the poor could do the hard work of enclosing the land, tilling soil, and in so doing, relieving the state of its epidemic idleness. Of course, the wastelands would no longer belong to the larger commons once these improvements had been carried out. They would be “States-lands,” and as such, they would provide a constant income through taxes and rent for the exorbitant upkeep of England’s army and navy while subsidizing various other national debts. I don’t want to mislead the reader here. Enclosure did improve land. But “improvement” in these texts were motivated more often by the need to alleviate the government’s financial burdens while, consequently, expanding the estates of the landed gentry.

Young, though not opposed to the growth of state power, found no incentive in these proposals for the poor to give up their access to the wastes. But he did believe that the right incentive could motivate any person to work more efficiently and to the betterment of the commonwealth. On these matters, Young appealed to his reader’s common sense:

Go to an alehouse kitchen of an old enclosed country, and there you will see the origin of poverty and poor rates. For whom are they to be sober? For whom are they to save? (Such are their questions.) For their parish? If I am diligent, shall I have leave to build a cottage? If I am sober, shall I have land for a cow? If I am frugal, shall I have half an acre of potatoes? You offer no motives; you have

nothing but a parish officer and a workhouse!—Bring me another pot—

Even if the landed elite were to spare an acre of wasteland—some woody, watery, rocky patch of soil—which, not being used anyway, could be given or sold cheaply to those with no property of their own, then perhaps, imagined Young, the poor could prove just how ill-considered the accusations against their work ethic had been. In that sense, Young risked much with his latter essays in terms of reputation. Some of these sympathies come through in Young’s aversion to violence. He deplored, for example, the tactics of dissident groups like the “White Boys.”

Passing through Woodstock, Ireland, Young fumes in his writings over the perturbations and turmoil instigated by this radical group.

They began in Tipperary, and were owing to some inclosures of commons, which they threw down, levelling the ditches; . . . The barbarities they committed were shocking. One of their usual punishments (and by no means the most severe) was taking people out of their beds, carrying them naked in winter, on horse-back, for some distance, and burying them up to their chin in a hole filled with briars, not forgetting to cut off one of their ears.

Though still supportive of enclosures, Young begins to show signs in his travel writing of “fellow-feeling,” to borrow a phrase from the philosopher and anthropologist, Max Scheler (1874-1928). Fellow-feeling is the “nature of sympathy,” according to Scheler, not simply pity or pure empathy (identifying entirely as the Other). There is an association of feeling involved, even one of participation, as it “presents itself in the very phenomenon as a re-action to the state


and value of the other’s feelings—as these are ‘visualized’ in vicarious feeling.” This visualized fellow-feeling is partly what I mean by imaginative sympathy. The other part is creative. Young’s observations of the poor inspired a reaction—literary, but a reaction nevertheless—of which so many of Young’s agricultural writings are an example.

Young used these sympathies to formulate his own theory of political association whereby the affluent might add to the wastelands whatever excess they could spare of their own resources to the advantage of the working poor. The title of Ralph Nader’s 2009 utopian novel, Only the Super Rich Can Save Us!, is a good summary of Young’s strategy. Young wanted to subscribe rich donors to the cause. If only a fraction of England’s wealthiest gentry would purchase a 100£ share with no cap on the number of shares one could purchase, then both the landless and the landed would come out ahead, to say nothing of the government’s overall welfare. For incentive, between four and seven percent interest would be awarded donors over the following decades. Already the parishes raised money to provide relief for the poor, Young reminded his readers. Why not put that money toward the acquisition of land for the poor?

The proportion of the land thus applied might be regulated by the amount of the rates (for instance that one fifth, one sixth, or what other proportion might be fixed on, should be annually thus employed) till a given proportion of the chargeable poor should be provided for in an allotment made to the parish for this purpose. Such allotment should not be applied to any other use, that no private interest might impede the progress of the plan.


70 Young, An Inquiry into the Propriety of Applying Wastes to the Better Maintenance and Support of the Poor, 27.
Young calculated that “two thirds or four fifths of one year's expenditure of the public would provide for all the poor in the kingdom”\textsuperscript{71} Young expected a difficult reception. “I do not write this without knowing that it will be esteemed wild and visionary,” he wrote. “[T]o those who have . . . seen the poor rates rapidly increasing while the measure not of the people's relief but of their misery, such ideas must be visionary, for they are in utter contradiction to the common practice.”\textsuperscript{72} Clarification of ideological misconceptions of the poor and wastelands alike is of great importance to waste aesthetics. Young’s commentary is, I argue, first and foremost an aesthetic act: “visionary” in its deliberate and imaginative but ultimately directed toward a more sympathetic engagement with a corner of reality frequently ignored or disavowed.

Young’s vision wasn’t of the Damascus variety. It happened gradually. In his early tours \textit{(A Six Weeks Tour though the Southern Counties of England, 1768; A Six Months Tour through the North of England, 1770; and The Farmer’s Tour through the East of England, 1771)}, Young looked into the country’s wastelands and saw everyday people persevering with their own hands. His \textit{Political Essays} (1772) mark a shift in anti-poor rhetoric. Young praised the liberties protected by the British parliament, but his travels had impressed upon him the “absurdity” of the accusations leveled by that same government, and its gentleman coterie, against the poor:

In conversation with gentlemen, I found they very generally laid the destruction of timber to the common people, who, they say, have an aversion to a tree; at the earliest age they steal it for a walking-stick; afterwards for a spade handle; later for a car shaft; and later still for a cabin rafter. That the poor do steal it is certain, but I am clear the gentlemen of the country may thank themselves. Is it the consumption of sticks and handles that has destroyed millions of acres? Absurdity! The profligate, prodigal, worthless landowner cuts down his acres, and leaves them unfenced against cattle, and then has the impudence to charge the

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 30.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 32.
scarcity of trees to the walking-sticks of the poor, goes into the House of Commons and votes for an Act, which lays a penalty of forty shillings on any poor man having a twig in his possession which he cannot account for.”

Young’s sympathies were becoming convictions: “They [farmers] are uncommon masters,” he said, “of the art of overcoming difficulties by patience and contrivance.” He had to push his views harder.

III. Advantage & Disadvantage

What Young had realized was what Keith Sutton meant when he wrote that “functionally,” wastelands “had a role in the semi-subsistence-level peasant economy providing open pasture, firewood, turf, peat and stable litter.” That marginal economy of shared land and resources proved an invaluable “reserve” for a class of people whose future prosperity seemed always dim. Communal use of wastelands “explained their [relationship to wasteland’s] perpetuation.”

Young resented history’s erasure of this particular story.

To a mind that has the least turn after philosophical enquiry, reading modern history is generally the most tormenting employment that a man can have: one is plagued with the actions of a detestable set of men, called conquerors, heroes, and great generals; and we wade through pages loaded with military details; but when you want to know the progress of agriculture, of commerce, and industry, their effect in different ages and nations of each other—the wealth that resulted—the division of that wealth—its employment—and the manners it produced—all is a blank!


74 Ibid., 32.


76 Arthur Young, *Travels During the Years 1787, 1788 and 1789: Undertaken More Particularly with a View of Ascertaining the Cultivation, Wealth, Resources and National Prosperity of the Kingdom of France*, Goldsmiths (London: Printed for W. Richardson, 1792),
A “blank”—not unlike popular depictions and ideological misconceptions of wastelands. If wastelands too were “a blank,” history had made them so. To remedy the problem, Young reconstructed the wastes and their relationship to people via thorough economic assessments of open and enclosed fields. It was his creative act: to paint the picture that had been blanked by history and, as a result, to expand the public’s perception of the wastes and their usefulness.

In 1772, Young wrote a short treatise titled, *The Advantages and Disadvantages of Inclosing Waste Lands and Open Fields, Impartially Stated and Considered*. He began by dividing England into four types of property: 1.) Unenclosed and Enclosed Fields, 2.) Arable Land, 3.) Common Pasture (still “rich” but “over-run by bushes,” etc.) and 4.) Common Pastures, Heaths, Forests (“commoned by bad sheep and over-run with rubbish”.) He associated small freeholders with the unenclosed lands and tenant farmers with the enclosed. For each type of property, he detailed the “produce, rent, and expenses” of those unenclosed and enclosed (after at least ten years) respectively. Furthermore, Young only addressed those agricultural methods used at the time. He knew, as stated earlier, that his plans might come across as “visionary”—today, we might use the word “utopian.” The language of “vision” and the “blank” of history warrant the association. Utopia translates from the Greek as “no place,” which is where Young’s


77 See chapter 2 for more on “virgin land” ideologies and literary confusions about what wastelands actually contain.


79 Ibid., 10.
arguments would get him so long as the poor were the benefactors of his scheme. He knew his plan would be received by most as impossible, especially the economics of it—a blank on the accountant’s balance sheet.

When we set by our firesides and ask how a poor labourer can afford to build a comfortable cottage, enclose some land, break up and cultivate a rough estate, acquire some live stock, and get many conveniences about him, we defy calculation; there must be some moving principle at work which figures will not count, for in such inquiry we see nothing but impossibilities.⁸⁰

The wealthy, however, fail to consider the incentive of human obligation, mutual care, and sympathy, Young maintained. When it comes to obtaining and keeping one's independence, we "call into life and vigour every principle of industry."⁸¹ Why should the same principle not pertain to the poor? Young also understood that his reputation as a social reformer and agricultural experimentalist might corrupt the value of his study, so he tried to remain objective insofar as that was possible (tirades against landlords often erupt in his Tours).

Young’s findings were both surprising and unsurprising. Freeholders on unenclosed lands earned more than they paid in rent. Be that as it may, Young noted certain problems with his assessment. He failed to consider the division of profit among the many who worked the unenclosed commons. And he did not calculate the tithe—a tax he deplored. While visiting the Benedictine abbey of St. Germain in France, Young recorded the abbot’s 300,000 livres per year, and in frustration remarked on how “consistent with the spirit of the tenth century” such conscious dispossession of the working class seemed, “but not with that of the eighteenth.”

What a noble farm would the fourth of this income establish! What turnips, what cabbages, what potatoes, what clover, what sheep, what wool! Are not these

⁸⁰ Young, An Inquiry into the Propriety of Applying Wastes to the Better Maintenance and Support of the Poor, 11–12.

⁸¹ Ibid., 12.
things better than a fat ecclesiastic? If an active English farmer was mounted behind this abbot, I think he would do more good to France with half the income than half the abbots of the kingdom with the whole of theirs.  

Young’s rhetoric partly satisfies the Tory proclivities of his target audience by emphasizing the economic stability and growth of the country through the care of the farmer and attention to the wastelands. The anti-Catholic diatribe, no doubt, endeared itself to protestant subscribers as well. But Young’s rhetoric was always strategic: entice the investors first, then execute the plan.

Young drew from this study two conclusions. The freeholder’s gain was so small that the advantage of his profit on enclosed land made switching from free agent to contracted laborer more attractive. Add to this the overall economic growth of towns and manufacturing jobs, and the benefits of enclosed wastelands outweighed the costs, at least as far as the numbers were concerned. What Young came to the conclusion also that England’s system of enclosure privileged a social hierarchy that produced immobility in the freeholding class and dependency for the laborers.

Young’s follow-up report made this system of disadvantage painstakingly clear. In 1773, he published his *Observations on the Present State of the Waste Lands of Great Britain: Published on the Occasion of the Establishment of a New Colony on the Ohio*. One purpose of this study was to describe the “connection” between emigration to America and England’s

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82 Young, *Travels During the Years 1787, 1788 and 1789*, 63; Henry Clifford Darby, “An Historical Geography of England: Twenty Years After,” *Geographical Journal* 126 (1960): 147–59. Darby notes the valuable info to be attained from tax, tithe, and census surveys. For scholars on this subject, the tithe records still could be a valuable resource on the use of wastelands by the poor.

misuse of its own wastelands. The other purpose was to shame the gentleman elite who thrived on such a system of disadvantage to the poor. Stories of Indian raids, starvation, and isolation were already common themes in the colonial narrative. Everyone knew that the risks only increased the further one removed oneself from the eastern coast of North American toward its interior. To assuage anxieties, Young stepped into the role that Richard Hakluyt once played as advertiser of the grand voyage and the great adventure. Young tried to stir up intrigue by demystifying America’s vast, unmapped frontier with evidence for its usefulness. “Another circumstance, which also occasions our wastes to be left in their present state,” he said, “is the idea general about them, that their soil is worthless, and will not answer to cultivate.” Why would tobacco farmers risk losing so valuable a trade if the Ohio colonies were not accessible to ocean commerce? Likewise, trade with Indians must have been to the farmer’s advantage and the threat of assault highly exaggerated. Rumors to the contrary were unfounded, he concluded. Ohio must be a “fertile, healthy, agreeable country” with access to the ocean and “security from the Indians.”

Clearly, Young had an ulterior motive. If he could discredit speculations about America’s wastelands, he might be able to recast England’s wastelands in a more favorable light. Did England and Scotland not have wastelands like America—places like Ohio, fertile and healthy with access to trade? “Do they not demand cultivation?” he asked. And, what’s more, were gentlemen “not capable” of the work? If wastelands were worthless in soil, climate, water, and wildlife, why were masses of people emigrating to America without a thought to the

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85 Ibid.
disadvantages? Asking whether “gentlemen” were not “capable” of improving wastelands at home may sound like schoolyard provocation. Maybe it was. But Young pushed further. He also aimed to agitate public opinion. Since “the gentlemen of Britain” were essentially supported by fixed incomes, Young argued, it was they alone who stood to lose the most from the prosperity of protestant ethic and the rise of merchant elites both at home and abroad. Just as the lingering feudal system prevented social mobility in the laboring class, so too were the gentry dependent on the laborers for their advantages. The gentry, Young said, could not compete with the kind of wealth generated by the rising merchant class; therefore, the average landlord, either now or later, risked losing his estates, to say nothing of the influence fostered by estates. What should be done? If the situation disturbed the gentleman class so much, why shouldn’t they emigrate to Ohio, responded Young, thus improving their own chances for success against the mercantilists while simultaneously eliminating the financial burden they put on both the English laborer and England’s overall economy?

Young certainly was not wrong about the problem of immobility. Nor was he off the mark in his assessment of the rising merchant class. But the proposition to relocate England’s gentry to the wastelands of Ohio was about as modest as Jonathan Swift’s famous proposal to feed Irish children to the rich to prevent further economic decline in Ireland. The point was to redirect public anxieties about emigration and its effect on England’s economy, an anxiety that G.E. Mingay argues was over-exaggerated anyway. But the aristocracy’s prevention of millions of acres of wasteland from being cultivated in Britain was no exaggeration. Who, asked Young, could possibly blame farmers for emigrating when so much land had been privatized?“I know

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid., 38–39.
not so melancholy a reflection, as the idea of such waste and uncultivated lands being so common in a kingdom that loudly complains of the want of bread,” said Young.

[A]nd our political writers dwell eternally on the causes of this scarcity—they talk of post-horses—dogs—commons—inclosures—large farms—jobbers and forestallers—bakers and rascals—but all to little purpose: and their schemes of improvement are as wild as the causes to which they attribute the evil. . . . Bring the waste lands of the kingdom into culture, cover them with turnips, corn, and clover, instead of ling, whins, and fern, and fear not but bread and beef will be plentiful. . . . [W]hy should not these emigrations be to the moors and heaths of Britain, instead of the swamps and forests of America?88

One reservation that may have been on the gentry’s mind was that the freeholders of America were at a clear advantage. Young continues:

It is natural to ask, when we hear of shiploads of people emigrating to America, why do they go there, when we have such plenty of wastes at home? The above observation answers it: we have the wastes, but they are too often in hands that either will not hear of improvements, or not offer proper encouragement to settlers. In America, a freehold is given: in Britain, perhaps a lease will be sold with difficulty. How can we wonder at their seeing clearly the immense difference!89

For the gentlemen landlords and leisure class, that advantage would mean sacrifice; it would mean change. In the literature of the agricultural revolution, farmers often get attacked for their resistance to change, but Young paints a different picture.

IV. American Wastelands

Over time, Young would come to see just how immense the difference was between uses of wasteland in American and England. The “advantage” of America’s wastelands seemed clear

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., 43.
on paper, but in the details, a whole list of serious problems became apparent. Young’s study of America clarified his own “visionary” ideas to himself, if only by learning how wastelands ought not to be improved.

In 1786, three years after his service in the Continental Army, George Washington began searching for an agricultural advisor to help him improve his Mount Vernon estate. It so happened that only two years prior Young began publishing what would become his magnum opus, the *Annals of Agriculture*, which catalogued agricultural expertise from all over the world (not an unsubstantial part from Young’s own contributions). Immensely influential both in England and abroad, the *Annals* foisted Young onto the international stage. Washington admired the work greatly. And though Washington enjoyed farming, too many strains on his time prevented him from devoting his full attention to it. So he wrote to Young in the late summer of that year, hoping to procure his expertise. “Agriculture has ever been amongst the most favourite amusements of my life,” Washington wrote, “though I never possessed much skill in the art; and nine years’ total inattention to it, has added nothing to a knowledge which is best understood from practice.”

Washington, at this point in his career, had had enough of the public spotlight. He wanted to secure a retirement in his land, fix an income, and establish a model for American

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90 George Washington and Arthur Young, *Letters from His Excellency General Washington, to Arthur Young ... Containing an Account of His Husbandry, with a Map of His Farm; His Opinions on Various Questions in Agriculture; and Many Particulars of the Rural Economy of the United States* (London: McMillan, Bow-Street, Govent-Garden, 1801), 2-3.

91 Ibid., 21. In 1788, Young asks Washington’s permission to publish their correspondence. Washington ultimately leaves it to Young’s discretion but makes it plain that he’d prefer not to be published, “For I wish most devoutly,” he says, "to glide silently and unnoticed through the remainder of life.” Young publishes his letters only after Washington passes away.
farmers. But he lamented the state of American farming in his correspondence with Young on several occasions: “The system of agriculture (if the epithet of system can be applied to it), is as unproductive to the practitioners as it is ruinous to the land-holders,” wrote Washington. “Yet it is pertinaciously adhered to. To forsake it; to pursue a course of husbandry which is altogether different and new to the gazing multitude, ever averse to novelty in matters of this sort, and much attached to their old customs, requires resolution.” Washington needed a guide, someone practical who knew farming and farmers, someone accessible and not “contradictory” or “bewildering.” “Your Annals,” he concluded, “shall be this guide.”

Young requested estimates of labor and production costs on as many regions of America as Washington could obtain. Obligingly, Washington sent several representative letters from surrounding states. But as to a rigorous and accurate comparison of agricultural systems, he could only deplore that America’s “modes—system we have none—are so different from yours, generally speaking, and our business being carried on so much within ourselves, so little by hiring, and still less by calculation, that I frankly confess to you, I am unable to solve your query.” What information he did provide, however, explained why the economics of farming practices in America was an imprecise art. In 1792, Richard Peters, Philadelphian jurist and politician, educated Young on the nature of this imprecision:

[I]n parts where there are no slaves, the farmer and his family do the greater portion of the work of their farmers within themselves. This is the reason why they can get forward and live well. If calculations were made of every thing being hired, few farms in Pennsylvania would clear a farthing. A man here saves money by a crop of 10 bushels, and in England he would perish under it. There he rents

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92 Ibid., 2–3.

93 Ibid., 83.
and hires—here, for the most part, the farm is his own, and he hires little, or none at all.\footnote{Ibid., 110.}

It wasn’t the welfare of the country that Pennsylvanian farmers were trying to improve. Families supported themselves, living as much as they could within their means, cutting down on the kind of overhead English farmers faced. Neither is government oversight what American farmers wanted. They looked to their own communities for support—a notion Young too had in mind when he put his case to England. Though he argued for “the assistance of parliament,” he understood that, failing such assistance, the country must rely on “a strong association of individuals.”\footnote{Young, \textit{Observations on the Present State of the Waste Lands of Great Britain}, 46.}

“Association,” however, is not the right word for America’s economy, and Peters’ assessment is less representative than it sounds, as “the land,” explained Washington, “is cultivated here wholly by slaves, and the price of labour in the towns is fluctuating, and governed altogether by circumstances.”\footnote{Washington and Young, \textit{Letters from His Excellency General Washington}, 14.} If Young’s Tory leanings disclose irreconcilable contradictions in his political social values, his views on the marginalization of people based on race or religious views were far less ambiguous. This was, after all, not the first time Young had encountered the effects of prejudice in his writings on the development of western agriculture. In his travels to Ireland, he met many innovative farmers who were persecuted by landlords or deprived the use of wastelands because of their Catholicism. Mr. Marly, for instance, was, according to Young, a great “improver in the neighbourhood,” but

\[\text{[i]t was with regret I heard that the rent of a man who had been so spirited an improver, should be raised so exceedingly. He merited for his life the returns of}\]
his industry. But the cruel laws against the Roman Catholics of this country, remain the marks of illiberal barbarism. Why should not the industrious man have a spur to his industry whatever be his religion; and what industry is to be expected from them in a country where leases for lives are universal, if they are secluded from terms common to every one else? What mischief could flow from letting them have leases for life? None; but much good in animating their industry. It is impossible that the prosperity of a nation should have its natural progress, where four fifths of the people are cut off from those advantages which are heaped upon the domineering aristocracy of the small remainder.97

Interesting to note in Young’s criticism is the issue of continuity. Even then, class disparity was nothing new. And though that disparity continued, what remained (and remains) equally fixed is the moral denigration of the poor that accompanies disparities of this kind. As Young recounts in his travels through Ireland, dispossession of the poor was often guised in anti-Catholic rhetoric. In America, the criteria for dispossession might favor skin color (though affiliation with the “wrong” religion or denomination could harm you as well). In both cases, the “commodity system,” to use Vinay Gidwani’s critical framework, depicts as morally inferior those whose lives depend on the wastes. It’s the first step in the larger economic and political subjugation of marginal and minority communities. Wasteland, and the commons that form around them, impede the growth of commodity systems, at least to the extent that the communities that survive (perhaps even thrive) there contribute very little to the commodity system. The system loses potential labor and capital by not subsuming the wastes. “This antithetical aspect of waste, as a logic that stymies the accumulation of property qua capital,” argues Gidwani, “is mirrored in the various ways it comes to connote not only merely the uncultivated or untended but also the pointless, the misdirected, and the futile; the ineffectual, the foolish, and the worthless; the idle and the improvident; the excessive, prodigal, the improper, the inefficient.” The rhetoric of

97 Young, Arthur Young’s Tour in Ireland (1776-1779), 59.
defamation has not changed that much, as Gidwani’s list clearly illustrates. As we’ve seen already, approval of wasteland only matters to the propertied elite if it can be “improved,” which, put into context, means subsumed by the commodity system. Otherwise, it becomes “weighted down by the double pejorative, moral and economic,”\(^98\) permitting those who value wasteland as potential property and labor to treat both as “an enemy to be engaged and beaten.”\(^99\)

To Young’s mind, there could be no accounting for slavery in any economy, just as there could be no accounting for the maltreatment of Catholic farmers. Neither did Young kowtow to America’s first president on the subject. Whenever possible, Young voiced his antipathies toward slavery, not with rhetoric but with arithmetic. A typical response to any attempt at justifying slavery looked something like this: The “labouring man in England” costs 8£ and his board 16£, 24£ total. Slave labor, Young wrote, is

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\text{cent. per cent. dearer than the labour of England.} \quad \text{—To the hirer of a negro man his hire will cost 9£ and his subsistence, clothing, and tools, 6£ making 15£ sterling, or, at the most, it may sometimes be 18£. To the owner of a negro his labour costs as follows: suppose a negro man, of 25 years of age, costs 75£ sterling; he has an equal chance to live 30 years, according to Buffon’s tables; so that you lose your principle in 30 years.}\(^{100}\)
\]

In sum: 1.) interest of 75£ annually = 3£ 15s.; 1/30 annually of the principle = 2£; and subsistence, clothes, &c. annually = 6£. The total comes to 12£ 5s. Young’s figures show that slave labor, per man, cost on average 51£ more than the labor of a hired Englishman. Arguing with numbers may not seem indicative of real sympathy toward the enslaved. None of the


\(^{100}\) Washington and Young, Letters from His Excellency General Washington, 86.
abolitionist’s “heart” comes through, just as the pragmatism of Young’s writings feel out-of-sync with the radical stance of writers like Gerrard Winstanley. But as I’ve tried to suggest, Young knew his audience. If he were to have any chance funding the reforms he had in mind, which were themselves radical in the context of wasteland improvement, the proposals had to be fiscally enticing to its benefactors. Between Winstanley and the abolitionists, Young casts an insignificant shadow. But important to remember too is that the larger public’s ideological aversion to wastelands translated into an historical “blank,” as Young reluctantly foresaw. Only some 250 years later would that subject, and Young’s writings in turn, be ripe for reconsideration.

The advantage of Young’s math, however, was that it was often incontrovertible, which meant that Young’s opposition had little choice but to admit to, and rest his case on, prejudice alone. To return to Young’s correspondence with Washington, among the persons to whom Washington circulated the letters were Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson argued that Young did not take into account the quality of work and the subsequent disparity between a black and white man, nor did Young consider the inequality of intelligence. This being not only inadequate but tantamount to no response at all, Young took Jefferson to task for hyperbole in his estimate of production in Virginia. Jefferson, who condemned Young for writing “merely for money,” responded in kind with an explanation that revealed how

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102 Washington and Young, *Letters from His Excellency General Washington*, 86.

103 Ibid., 93–94.
America’s resources were consumed as if they were unlimited. Jefferson sometimes did not bother rotating his crops but simply used up the land and moved on because he could. He admitted this wasn’t exactly ideal, but it was what was done.

Lots of things were done in America that made advantages for the poor difficult to assess in its wastelands. One responder to Young’s request for intel on American agriculture attacked Young’s ignorance of America’s relationship to taxation and monarchies which, to the responder’s mind, made a great difference in one’s analysis of the American farmer’s successes and failures. Most of what the responder said missed Young’s point entirely (the letter never names Young’s correspondent). But his evasions are enlightening, as something far more distressing than mismanagement of resources surfaces in the letters. Young understood that agriculture was at the heart of all social activity; therefore, the costs of war also required serious attention, as had been the case in his calculations of England’s economy. How much profit from enclosure, for instance, did the government reroute toward the maintenance and debts accrued by its naval and armed forces? But debts such as these could be quantified. Much more difficult to calculate would be the costs of regular frontier skirmishes and domestic campaigns against Native Americans, especially given the social imperative that had been instilled in the minds of so many settlers. “Our wars with the savages,” explained the responder, account for a significant drain on the country’s resources.

[T]hey are, for the time, embarrassing, locally distressing, and, generally, expensive; but are not nationally formidable, or dangerous. Disputes with them must gradually diminish, and, at no distant period, end. Though the reflection be painful to humanity, it is justified, in point of fact, by experience, that the nations in contact with the whites, always have been, and ever will be, exterminated. The approaches of our settlements, always banish the Indians.104

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104 Ibid., 144.
How much land was stolen? How many prisoners were enslaved? And how to account for genocide as a method for “improvement” to one’s property and country? With what budget could Washington satisfy Young on the advantages of America’s wastes when so much of that advantage was paid for in blood?

Even the earlier letter from Richard Peters revealed details about American farming that did not square with the kind of social reform Young had in mind. Evaluating the costs of agriculture, according to Peters, was not necessary in America because unlike England, the “wealth of a great part of the American farmers grows with the additions to their families. The children assist in the labour of the old farm, or in the establishment of the new one. This supersedes the necessity of calculating on hired labourers, the work being chiefly done within themselves: they are paid by the increased value of the common stock [Peters’ emphasis].”

“Common stock” is a chilling indicator of labor value, especially considering the children to which Peters referred, they being an extension of the family, neither bought nor indentured. Child labor, of course, was not foreign to England. But it certainly capped an already deplorable situation and revived in Young a determination to reform his own country.

Shortly after Washington died in 1799, Young published another treatise on the usefulness of wastelands in England. This time, however, he made his position clear. The “improvement” of wastelands did not simply mean the improvement of farming practices or the nation’s economy. It meant the improvement of social inequality, immobility, and specifically, the lives of poor working families. He titled the work with his full thesis: An Inquiry into the Propriety of Applying Wastes to the Better Maintenance and Support of the Poor with Instances

105 Ibid., 146.
of the Great Effects which Have Attended Their Acquisition of Property, in Keeping Them from the Parish Even in the Present Scarcity (1801). “Inquiry into” was really shorthand for “declaration on” social change. The time for inquiries had passed.

Critics had addressed the symptoms but not the cause. Young concluded, after his travels abroad, that “of all the methods of improving waste land, none are so important or so profitable as applying them to the support of the labouring poor.”106 Already parishes were raising money for relief funds. Why not put that money toward the acquisition of land for the poor? “And the proportion of the land thus applied might be regulated by the amount of the rates . . . till a given proportion of the chargeable poor should be provided for in an allotment made to the parish for this purpose.”107 Give the poor the wasteland you do not use. Give it to them—not as leased farms but as property. The premise was as simple as that. Young had done his math. As mentioned earlier, but worth repeating here, “two thirds or four fifths of one year's expenditure of the public,” Young argued, “would provide for all the poor in the kingdom.”108 All the poor, not just the freeholders and laborers.

This is often a point of some confusion for those interested in the history of commons and property, especially in today’s economic climate where many activist groups look back to Winstanley’s Diggers as precedent for the rightful reclamation of common land from the clutches of the propertied elite, when in fact the commons and wastes were never entirely free and open to public use without permission. Briony McDonagh and Carl Griffin, in their

106 Young, An Inquiry into the Propriety of Applying Wastes to the Better Maintenance and Support of the Poor, 2.

107 Ibid., 27.

108 Ibid., 30.
geographical history of protest and occupation in the commons, point out that in our current
“new enclosure” discourse, we should know that “the land never belonged to the people.”\footnote{109} It
was Crown land, the gentry’s land, the Church’s land. What made the land common was the
customary use of the land and the subsequent regulations of that use in the legal language of
“commons.”\footnote{110} In eighteenth-century England, tenants risked legal retaliation for any alteration
to the land: building fences, pollarding the trees and shrubs, or simply collecting deadwood.
There were two types of actionable “waste” (used here not in terms of land or aesthetics, as I’ve
been referring to it, but as violations of the law). The two types were voluntary and permissive.
Voluntary waste consisted of a.) felling/destroying fruit trees, b.) felling/destroying timber for
fuel, c.) felling more wood than is necessary for fuel, d.) felling any wood from one’s estate:
even if one sells the wood and purchases more to replace it, and e.) felling timber to erect new
houses. Permissive waste referred to the decay of houses, buildings, fences, etc., as a
consequence of natural forces, like storms. One had to repair these types of damages within a
specific timeframe. Permissive waste also pertained to the toleration of trespass on one’s estate.

\footnote{109} Mcdonagh and Griffin, “Occupy! Historical Geographies of Property, Protest and the
Commons, 1500–1850,” 2.

\footnote{110} For more on the history of the commons and their legal use, see Robert C. Allen,
Enclosure and the Yeoman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); J.M. Neeson, Commoners:
Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in Common-Field England, 1700-1820 (New
York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); David J. Seipp, “The Concept of Property in the Early
English Political Thought," in G.J. Schochet, P.E. Tatspaugh and C. Brobeck, eds., Religion,
Resistance, and Civil War: Papers Presented at the Folger Institute Seminar “Political Thought
in Early Modern England, 1600- 1660” (Washington, D.C.: The Folger Shakespeare Library,
1990), 259-75; G.E. Aylmer, “The Meaning and Definition of ‘Property’ in Seventeenth-Century
Conceptions of Property (New York: Routledge, 1995).
Trespass, even if allowed, set a precedent for trespass on other estates and, therefore, required regulation.¹¹¹

Britons did have rights to wastelands. But as the specificity of the prohibitions listed suggest, those rights were heavily monitored by the King’s foresters and verderers. Waste rights were known as estovers, from the Old French estoyer, “to be necessary,” and from the Latin est opus, “there is need.” The need, in this case, equates to subsistence for the poor and the resources necessary to supplement what, in many cases, were very meager livings. These estovers were of four kinds: a.) estoverium aedificandi: the right to waste in order to repair, b.) estoverium ardendi: the right to waste in order to burn, c.) estoverium arandi: the right to waste in order to farm (felling trees to build instruments of husbandry, etc.), d.) estoverium claudendi (haybote): the right to waste in order to turn arable land into grassland for grazing cattle and horses. However, massive enclosures reduced those rights over time and restricted access to commons and wastelands.¹¹² We might think of these laws as the legal architecture of wastelands and their use, but implicit in this architecture is always the lord of the manor. Even Winstanley, in published declarations such as, A Watch-Word to the City of London, and the Army (1649), debated with manorial lords about this issue and how “the commons ought to be free to all,” since they were not, despite the use of them, a heavily regulated use, being granted by the gentry.¹¹³ Young, in that sense, was fighting an uphill battle against both law and custom.


¹¹² Ibid., 180.

Some objections to Young’s proposals were predictable, others unprecedented. Look at the poor’s gardens, some said. See how “slovenly” they are. Why give land to those who cannot appreciate what little they have? We do not know if Young recognized in these prejudices his own condemnations of the poor only three decades earlier. But the later Young, as in all matters of opinion, demanded evidence. If the objection, in this instance, was that the poor did not prioritize appearances when what little they had barely provided enough to survive, why should critics assume that the poor would not care for property large enough to provide not only a living but a sense of security and equality? Other objections resonate disturbingly with those still raised today when debating socialized healthcare. Familiar words like “idle,” “worthless,” “pilfering,” “poaching vagabonds” saturated the discourse. Critics predicted that fathers would leave their families and families would defraud their parishes. “[A]ll parishes are at present liable to this fraud,” Young responded. But even if that were not the case, what makes people think that strangers would suddenly be allowed to purchase property in a parish without notice? “What is to be done with the cottage or land when the father of the family dies?” others asked. So long as the conditions of ownership are met, why should there be a problem passing the land down to the wife or son, Young responded. Many adversaries also claimed that the poor would not be able to maintain their farms, having had no previous training or experience outside of hired labor. They might argue that “[t]he choice on theory which poor men may declare when such a proposal is mentioned to them, is not a proof that they would succeed; they are ignorant of the situation, not having experienced it.” But Young reminded his critics that everyone can tend a garden with greater and lesser skill. And all have the incentive to learn and improve their methods for the

114 Young, *An Inquiry into the Propriety of Applying Wastes to the Better Maintenance and Support of the Poor*, 34.
sake of their own well-being. Besides this, each person would have time to consider the proposition before settling the property. And in that time, they might consult whomever they choose on the question of maintenance or husbandry. The critics went further: “Wastes are as much property as my house. Will a farmer give up his right of commonage?” Look to the facts, Young says. The fact is that “nineteen enclosure bills in twenty” injure the poor. “If enclosures were beneficial to the poor, rates would not rise in other parishes after an act to enclose.” And anyway, why does Parliament take the cow from a poor family once the commons have been enclosed?115 Young dismissed all of these objections as unfounded generalizations.

What sort of reasoning is it that admits sobriety, industry, and frugality, in order to get a cottage and a cow, and then supposes that such possession is to convert such qualities into profligacy and vagabondage? Is it admissible in common sense? But grant even this to be the fact, what has the system proposed to do with commons? I contend for enclosures. Spread these commons with cultivation, and give every cottager land enough to feed his cow in winter as well as summer. Take from him the temptation to steal. Every evil you can possibly complain of is the result, not of the system of property, but the want of a sufficiency. The common is a very bad support, give him a better. He is able and willing to pay as high for it as any farmer in the country.116

Young didn’t just assail fallacious reasoning and casuistry, he also provided counterevidence in case study after case study, many of which appear in the Inquiry itself, and no shortage of others are to be found in the thousands of pages that compose the bulk of his travels, tours, and annals.

V. Disappointment (?)

Young, whose career and skills uniquely qualified him to assess the usefulness of England’s wastelands, turned to the example of America’s wastes in the hopes of finding

115 Ibid., 38–42.

116 Ibid., 45–46.
precedent for his vision. And to some extent, those hopes were fulfilled. The survival of the English who uprooted and crossed the Atlantic depended on quick and steady harvesting of trees for shelter, warmth, arms, tools, and ships. Historian Morton J. Horwitz marks this as a moment of ideological, as well as legal, transition: “an economy dependent on clearing land for economic development could not enforce a rule of maintaining the existing condition of land”\textsuperscript{117} as had been the case in England (see “waste” regulations above). North America’s vast wilderness necessitated not only violations of former common laws and wasteland customs but new standards by which to judge the value of such spaces.

The important question concerning Young and America is not how little or how much he changed America use of wastelands. Though, as detailed earlier, Young corresponded with a number of influential Americans about improvements to agriculture, “it was Young’s position as a writer,” argues the historian Rodney Loehr, “that determined his influence on American agriculture.”\textsuperscript{118} Because of Young’s writings, as well as his position as secretary for England’s Board of Agriculture, agricultural societies sprang up in towns all over America, many of which counted Young as an honorary member. The problem with measuring the impact of these societies on the improvement of the wastes is that they were composed primarily of “book-farmers” like himself.\textsuperscript{119}


\textsuperscript{119}Ibid., 55. Actual farmers had little time to mull over the latest French scientific advancement in fertilizers and in many cases could not read anyway.
Young’s propositions were debated vigorously even after his death. In 1819 and 1831, two acts were passed to distribute land to the poor. Mingay argues that the acts, ultimately, had little effect. “Opposition from farmers . . . together with the levying of high rents and the unsuitability of some of the land used for allotments, limited the usefulness of these schemes.”

Here again we find the valuation of wasteland on the basis of “usefulness”—but not “usefulness” from the perspective of the working poor. Young’s arguments for enclosure for the sake of the poor were considered “extreme” by many of his contemporaries. In the early twentieth century, Young’s reputation suffered a further decline among economic and agricultural scholars who regarded Young as one whose “enthusiasms [ran] away with him.” But Young’s “extreme” position on “leases, tithes, enclosures and open fields” is precisely what makes his perspective on wastelands noteworthy. By relying on logistics and calculations—what Žižek describes as the “artificial,” but necessary, way to find usefulness and beauty in wastelands—Young may not have earned a place by the side of Wordsworth or Coleridge in his observations, but his writings begin the difficult work of disentangling ideological wastelands from their real world counterparts. Despite the misuse of the wastes and the abuse of many who labored in them in America, Young lauded the democratic experiment as one in which wastelands still could be used to great advantage for the poor.

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122 See introduction.

123 For an excellent study of America’s potential as a vast system of competing indigenous and colonial commons, see Allan Greer, “Commons and Enclosure in the Colonization of North America,” *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 2 (2012): 365–86,
More important is the model Young provides the twenty-first century for locating in history other theories or representations of wasteland attached to similar political and aesthetic values. The advantages of wasteland as characterized by Young fall into two categories. The first and most important advantage is the amelioration, if not the alleviation, of poverty. Since the wealthy rarely use bogs, mountain land, or wilderness for anything more than natural borders, landlords should sell it off cheaply or distribute what isn’t used to the poor, argues Young. Drain it, lime it, seed it, and the work will pay dividends. And the second advantage naturally follows the first. Property nurtures a sense of self-sufficiency in those who need it.

Young lamented the indifference and spite shown his work on wastelands. Two passages from his Autobiography (1898) reflect the disappointment Young felt about what he considered to be his best and most important idea. In 1801, he wrote:

Tomorrow will be published in the ‘Annals’ the first parts of my essay on applying waste lands to the better support of the poor. I prepared it some time ago for the Board, as it was collected in my last summer’s journey; I read it to a committee—Lord Carrington, Sir C. Willoughby and Mr. Millington—who condemned it, and, after waiting a month, Lord C. told me I might do what I pleased with it for myself, but not print it as a work for the Board; so I altered the expressions which referred to the body, and sent it to the ‘Annals’. I prayed earnestly to God on and since the journey for His blessing on my endeavours to serve the poor, and to influence the minds of people to accept it; but for the wisest reasons certainly He has thought proper not to do this, and for the same reasons probably it will be printed without effect.¹²⁴

And again in 1806:

I have been reading over my ‘Inquiry into the Propriety of applying Wastes to the better Maintenance of the Poor’. I had almost forgotten it, but of all the essays and papers I have produced, none I think so pardonable as this, so convincing by facts,

and so satisfactory to any candid reader. Thank God I wrote it, for though it never had the smallest effect except in exciting opposition and ridicule, it will, I trust, remain a proof of what ought to have been done; and had it been executed, would have diffused more comfort among the poor than any proposition that ever was made.\footnote{iid., 433.}

Though objected to, for the most part, on grounds of feasibility, to say nothing of class, another problem might have been Young’s means of communication. Though greatly in vogue during the Enlightenment, the travelogue was primarily a vessel for reporting information. Young needed something more culturally embedded, something that inspired the imagination, a hero of the wastelands, perhaps. If, for instance, the heroes of kingdoms conquer other kingdoms as a sign of their strength, their courage, and their virtue, then the hero of the wastes might be one who has nothing to do with kingdoms and wanders with a spade instead of a sword. If the classic hero fights for dominion, then then hero of the waste might protect the dominated. Though such a hero rarely ever appears in western literature, early American writers like James Fenimore Cooper and Francis Parkman struggled to develop heroic narratives better suited to the “empty” frontiers than what existed. They did their best to look backward into the “blank” of history to find a better way of seeing one’s way through the wastes.
II. Waste-As-Border

Borders mean safety for some and confinement for others. They are fixed and they shift. They reveal and conceal. In early American literature, borders are part of the regular discourse of frontier settlement and exploration, but they imply so much more than a division between one space and another. They are gateways to vast territories, both physical and ideological. The expansion of America meant the widening of borders and the corralling not only of indigenous peoples but indigenous ways of seeing usefulness (or something more than emptiness) in the wastes west of so-called civilization. In this study, I use the term “borderlands” to suggest that larger ideological territory implied by the making, or crossing, of these real and imagined borders.

Borderland is a category of wasteland, not just a synonym. In early American literature, it corresponds to the edges between (white) settled spaces and the frontier. These strange, uncharted lands fascinated writers like James Fenimore Cooper and Francis Parkman whose characters or narrators sought to know more intimately the “out of place” spaces “beyond the limit” of western experience and imagination. What remains mostly lost to today’s reader of Cooper and Parkman is the borderland as perceived by their indigenous contemporaries. Read through the lens of Native American writers, however, borderlands provide a crucial political and aesthetic education against the border ideology presented in early American literature, to say

nothing of the border ideologies that persist. To that end, Thomas King’s twentieth-century short story “Borders” provides a coda to this section, whereby today’s reader can get a better sense of the long-term implications of borderlands from the perspective of those who still know them intimately.

In the stories of Cooper and Parkman, the wilderness ideal diminishes the further west it moves. The settlers in Cooper’s The Pioneers (1823), the first book in a pentalogy about frontier life in America called The Leatherstocking Tales (1823-1841), are at the mercy of the wilderness beyond the colonial borders. Natty Bumppo, Cooper’s backwoods hero, cautions the newcomers about the borderlands but preaches its virtues as well. He sees potential for a peaceful coexistence between certain tribes (not all) and nature where others fail to see it, not because he is better equipped for the wastes (though in most cases he is), and not because he lacks biases and prejudices, such as his belief in white, Christian supremacy over other races and faiths. But compared to his contemporaries, Natty is far more investigative in his worldviews. And throughout the series, we see him struggle against his own intolerance as he educates the settlers about their own ideological borders. This is only possible because Natty embraces the frontier for what it actually is: beautiful and ugly, peaceful and dangerous, useful and useless. But despite these contradictions, the borderlands, for Natty, are never really “out of place.”

America, with its Puritan influence, was tasked with the “responsibility,” argues Perry Miller, of being “deliberately, vigorously, and consistently intolerant.” But Natty has seen and experienced difference, and through his encounters with difference, has deliberately, vigorously, and consistently redefined that “responsibility.” For Parkman, the wilderness hero is himself,

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masked as Byronic knight errant. He is the intolerant who seeks tolerance, if only from a place of
fascination rather than morality. But neither Natty nor the narrator of The Oregon Trail
(serialized 1847-49) ever fully escape the psychological challenges of their historical moment.
The full range of each story’s misunderstandings are representative, in that way, of the real world
and its prevalent ideologies. I take Leslie A. Fiedler’s remarks on this matter as political context.
In O Brave New World: American Literature from 1600 to 1840 (1968), Fiedler says:

On the deepest level of dream and fantasy, Americans are bound together, as we
have already noted, by the archetypal stories that they may not even know they
share and of whose meanings they remain blissfully unaware. Indeed, those
meanings are so implicated with our blackest guilts and our most difficult social
and psychological problems—and the solutions they demand are so costly and
outrageous, by the standards of most pious Americans so blasphemous—that such
Americans must continue to be unconscious of them.128

Though much has been done to correct these problems over the years, the work falls ever anew
to the latest generation of readers.

My task is less anthropological and more literary. Nevertheless, there is an
anthropological underpinning to these readings. Patricia Spyer, in her introduction to Border
Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces (1998), talks about the “confusion [my
emphasis] of the religious and the economic or . . . the denial of the proper boundaries between
things” in borderlands.129 In particular, Spyer has in mind the fetish—that strange category of
objects precious to noncapitalist societies which for them possess a magical quality that is at
once aesthetic, erotic, political, sacred, and economic. The wastes, which is to say, the

128 Leslie A Fiedler and Arthur Zeiger, O Brave New World: American Literature from
1600 to 1840 (New York: Laurel Editions, 1968), 81.

129 Patricia Spyer, Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces (New York:
borderlands themselves, share this quality with their fetish counterparts. The wilderness adventurer in the stories of Cooper and Parkman stem from a dialectic between the wastes and their own well-defined ideologies (aesthetic, sacred, economic, and so on). It’s the confused, and often incoherent, responses these characters have to the wastes that defines the borders of the public imagination. This is where America’s waste aesthetics begin.

I. The Picturesque & Sublime

This section on waste-as-border comes closest in ambition to Blake Nevius’s essay, *Cooper’s Landscapes* (1976) in that my reading of the American wilderness is a reading drawn from a small, but significant, selection of Cooper’s and Parkman’s substantial body of work, especially in Cooper’s case. Another feature this section shares with Nevius’s essay, for better or worse, is the minimal use of political context. What intrigues me is the aesthetic merit of their frontier tropes for today’s conscientious reader of wastelands, or as these nineteenth century romance writers often refer to them in the examples below, “wastes.”

Critics of Cooper’s novels—especially his painterly evocations of forests, prairies, and lakes—typically, and rightfully, concern themselves with his influences in the visual arts, citing the tremendous impact that Cooper’s seven-year excursion to Europe had on his thinking about landscape painting. Nevius, in the spirit of such criticism, follows in prestigious footsteps. Howard Mumford Jones, James F. Beard, Donald A. Ringe, and James T. Callow were all early, but indispensable, appraisers of Cooper’s picturesque style.¹³⁰

Picturesque may be, as numerous scholars by now have argued, the best way to characterize the romantic landscapes of *The Leatherstocking Tales*. If, as William Gilpin described it in his essays on this subject, the picturesque is that in nature which is “capable of being illustrated in painting” and beyond that, that which is indicative of nature’s “roughness,” as in the outline of a tree’s bark or the “rude summit, and craggy sides of a mountain,” then the forests and prairies of Cooper’s *Tales* set the standard.\(^{131}\) But roughness and painterly evocation are not enough. The writer often insists on an element of imperfection. For instance, Gilpin says, think about a Venetian-style building—a capitol, perhaps, with pillars and dome and pediment: “The proportion of its parts . . . and the symmetry of the whole, may be highly pleasing,” but in order to be seen as picturesque, “we must use the mallet, instead of the chisel: we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps.”\(^{132}\) The picturesque anticipates waste aesthetics. It makes way for Wallace Stevens’s “Man on the Dump” who, like his aesthetic forebear, John Bunyan, made his own way to the mountaintop only to encounter the wasteland. With Cooper, America’s pilgrim begins his progress toward that summit.

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Gilpin’s “heaps” and the synonymous “ruins” of Wordsworth’s poetry and the paintings of Hudson Valley artists like Frederic Edwin Church were the first clue. But Thomas Cole, America’s proselytizer of picturesque ideas and art, revealed something peculiar about the American mind. It could appreciate the tenets of the picturesque but not the sublime. The sublime, according to the classic treatise by Longinus, may have been considered, originally, as a condition more than an aesthetic technique, a state of emotional exhilaration brought on by great thoughts, noble feelings, lofty figures of speech or diction, but Edmund Burke took the idea a step further by distinguishing between the finite nature of beauty and the infinite nature of the sublime. The finite mind can’t sustain the infinite. The sublime exceeds reason, and because of that, Burke notes an uncertainty in a person’s experience of the aesthetic. It can be uncomfortable, even painful. Appropriate subjects for the sublime might be mountains, storms, ruins, and gothic architecture. “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”

For writers like John Dennis, whose *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) had a substantial impact on scholarly treatment of the subject before Burke, the sublime had a supernatural quality. Among the many sources of the

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sublime’s psychological terrors were demons, miracles, witchcraft, thunder, torrents, earthquakes, fierce seas, volcanoes, monsters, lions, fire, and war.\textsuperscript{135}

In the American tradition, the distinction between the religious and romantic treatment of the sublime is important. As Marjorie Hope Nicolson explains in her classic study of western “aesthetics of the infinite,” \textit{Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory} (1959), a dramatic shift occurred in popular perceptions of mountains and oceans between the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Mountains were considered monstrous, even grotesque, to pre-Enlightenment Europe and were to be avoided. But changes in science made a different perspective possible—a perspective founded in a sense of greater understanding and awe. By the nineteenth century, writers like Wordsworth and Coleridge had elevated that understanding to a more ecstatic state of spiritual reverence. Nature’s incomprehensible features no longer inspired repulsion but fearful veneration.\textsuperscript{136} In my early studies of the sublime, I was tempted to equate aesthetics of waste with this changed attitude toward nature. After all, both exemplify a new appreciation of what previously had been considered unsightly and loathsome. The wastes and the sublime also both court the useless, as Burke insists, “whenever strength is only useful . . . then it is never sublime.”\textsuperscript{137} But the sublime, ultimately, evades direct experience. Monique Allewaert, in her article on America’s “swamp sublime,” explains that in “eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, the subject of sublime experience was required to remain distinct from sublime objects. Theories of


\textsuperscript{137} Burke, \textit{A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and Beautiful}, 109.
the sublime thus confirmed the basic assumption of Enlightenment naturalism: that the subject stands apart from the object world that he or she would master.”

“[W]hen danger . . . press[es] too nearly,” the sublime is “incapable of giving any delight,” says Burke. At that point, the veneration devolves into terror. At the end of the day, one can walk away from the sublime mountains and storms and raging seas unharmed. The sublime, like the picturesque in a different way, becomes an aesthetic obfuscation of one’s direct experience of nature, whereas the advantage of waste’s aesthetics is that they require contact with that which has been obscured in order to acknowledge the beautiful and the terrible in the same, real space.

In American literature, the sublime was often characterized by nobility and grandeur, harkening back to the idea’s roots in Longinus. But the demonic ferocity of nature, as John Dennis described it in his version of the sublime, was not so easily reconciled to aesthetic pleasure in a country mastered by religious superstition. From Washington Irving to Nathaniel Hawthorne, the dark reaches of the American wilderness doubled as satanic corridors. The picturesque might be commended to art but the sublime, in its European extreme, trespassed too emphatically on protestant ideals. Nevius chalks the situation up to America’s “failure . . . to cope with the new face of nature presented by the vast and unspoiled wilderness.”

Robert Doak, in his study of the “natural sublime” and American nationalism pushes further, noting that “[i]n addition to unfavorable moral implications, Americans of the early nineteenth century . . .

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140 Nevius, *Cooper’s Landscapes*, 7.
were still too close to the wilderness to overlook its threat.” The odds of survival, even for the sturdy frontiersman, were never great. How were people to reconcile such danger with a “benevolent deity whom they could not associate with the chaotic forces of the natural sublime” along with “their distinctive fear of political anarchy in the fledgling republic”? The job of American writers, then, was to sanctify and discipline the sublime. Thomas Cole did both in his “Essay on American Scenery” (1836), translating the gloomy mountain trope into Old Testament typology and forging religious purpose in the “pathless” places:

It was on Mount Horeb that Elijah witnessed the mighty wind, the earthquake, and the fire; and heard the “still small voice”—that voice is YET heard among the mountains! St. John preached in the desert;—the wilderness is YET a fitting place to speak of God. The solitary Anchorites of Syria and Egypt, though ignorant that the busy world is man's noblest sphere of usefulness, well knew how congenial to religious musings are the pathless solitudes.

Cole, according to Nevius, disavowed nature’s mountain, the mountain unsanctified, as “lusus naturae,” a freak of nature. But for Cooper, the sublime was “indispensable.” His preference for the Swiss Alps over the “neat” landscapes of England and France reveal as much, but his fondness for the painter Salvatore Rosa over Claude Lorrain is even more telling.

The sublime need not be filtered through allegory. Neither must it be confined to the imagination entirely, as it might have been for the romantic poet. For critics like Christopher

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143 Nevius, *Cooper’s Landscapes*, 15.

Hussey, even the picturesque wasn’t always painterly. It might reflect nature’s real surfaces as well as those idealized. Insofar as Cooper’s landscapes correspond to Hussey’s views, they hew toward an expression of the picturesque neither entirely American (typologically) nor romantic (psychologically), though Cooper employs both words interchangeably in many of his tales.

It’s not that Cooper describes the wilderness in purely secular terms either. Nor does he shy away from the grandeur that other writers would invoke to make the sublime more palatable to an American audience. In his novel, *The Pathfinder* (1840; fourth installment in *The Leatherstocking Tales* but the third in terms of the *Tales’* fictive chronology), Natty Bumppo defines his devotions in his own terms, infusing a protestant worldview with the Indian’s worship of nature and the ancient Greek’s adulation of Olympus. Whereas Crèvecoeur demonizes the backwoodsman as a degenerate and barbarian in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Natty fears losing his own ethical moorings, knowing how decades spent in the woods might totally loosen his ties to civilization. But such sacrifice is not without its gains. “The woods are the true temple,” he says, echoing Washington Irving’s own sentiment in *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835). What he could not find in the sanctuaries of civilized men, he found in the vaulted canopies of the wilderness. This is Natty finding paths in the pathless places. And it is Cooper’s intellectual and aesthetic grappling with a space yet to be fully understood by his own countrymen. But by the 1840s (and I would argue even in the tales published twenty years prior), Cooper had come to make a distinction between the sublime wilderness and the wastes.

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The wilderness, as mentioned earlier, is a kind of temple—a word Natty uses again and again. But waste is the progenitor of wilderness and other vast landscapes. It has that First Cause aura in the literature, with a center that is everywhere and circumference nowhere. Cooper, for example, sometimes refers to the treeless prairie west of the Great Lakes or the lakes themselves as the “waste of seemingly interminable water.”

The vastness of wasteland out-measures and outclasses wilderness as a space difficult to comprehend. Wilderness, at least, avails itself to the monumental. It can be shaped, it can be destroyed. Its dimensions make wilderness memorable in art, history, and literature. The ruin in nineteenth-century painting and poetry parallels wilderness in that way. I might give as an example Thomas Cole’s painting, The Ruins of Kenilworth Castle (1841), the outer walls of which stand in memory of the castle’s former splendor, just as new, leafy growth sprawls across the castle’s broken façade in memory of a wilderness long erased from the English countryside. The two monuments, one post-human and one pre-human, obstruct the onlooker’s view, which is what a monument does. It creates an historical boundary between one’s present and one’s future. If waste, as Brian Thill characterizes it, is “every object, plus time,” then the ruin is every object, plus time, plus memory. Memory, despite its deficiencies, anchors us to the familiar. The absence of memory (ideology) means the absence of the familiar. A general uneasiness about the wastes—even more so than wilderness, even more so than the sublime—seems reasonable at any time, given its characteristics.

Though “wilderness” and “waste,” like “romantic” and “picturesque,” were used

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147 Ibid., 101–2, 113.

synonymously by Cooper, there were small qualitative differences that early colonists and later Americans would have understood as well. Wilderness, for instance, indicated “uncultivated land” while wasteland, such as the desert, might have been entirely “unfit for cultivation.”149 Jill Fraley, an historian of wastelands, adds that “the wilderness might be settled, but the waste would not be,”150 in the mind of the colonizer, at least. The distinction says a lot about how


“virgin land” ideology gained traction in the public imagination. The wastes, as we know, were indeed settled, just not the way colonists appreciated the idea of settlement: building a home, staying in one place, and improving the land by the plough. Native Americans were itinerant. They migrated. They lived in transportable homes. They followed the herds. They planted and abandoned. “[T]o European eyes,” the environmental historian William Cronon reminds us, “Indians appeared to squander the resources that were available to them. Indian poverty was the result of Indian waste: underused land, underused natural abundance, underused human labor.” For whose relationship to the land differed from western custom, the colonists showed only contempt. “Waste,” in this sense, becomes not simply an ethical dilemma but a character flaw. Hence the derided “lazy” Indian. But even as William Bradford noticed, it was precisely English “waste” that the Indian used to his advantage:

That garbage, of which we no use did make;  
They have been glad to gather up and take;  
But now they themselves fully supply,  
And the English of them are glad to buy.

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152 Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 56.

Seeing the “advantage” in the “waste,” as we observed in the previous section, is what kept the poor and marginalized alive in a world governed by the rich. Advantage often meant protection as well. American colonists were to clear all “Swampes and such Rubbish waest grounds” that might shelter harmful animals, wolves especially. The wastes, in that sense, accommodated not just animals but people unable or unwilling to live under a colonial regime. They were ecological sanctuaries for human and nonhuman species alike. On America’s shores, the aesthetics of the picturesque, the sublime, and waste all come down to the definition of “use” and its ideological boundaries.

II. The *Genius Loci* of No Man’s Land

The summer that Francis Parkman embarked on his famous trek toward Oregon, in 1846, America had borders on its mind. The recent annexation of Texas meant a war to come between Mexico and America. The disputed northwest territories (today’s Oregon, Idaho, Washington, parts of Wyoming and Montana) were on track for appropriation as well, along with the territories west of Texas (California, New Mexico, Utah, Arizona, and Nevada)—all of which Bernard DeVoto once described in classic “waste” language as the Great American Desert. Each of the borders implied by these annexations portended the form and character of an America yet to be fully imagined by its writers.

Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail* is a literary history of sorts. But it is also a record of Parkman’s preconceived ideas about wilderness and where (and how) those ideas fall apart.

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154 See John Winthrop’s “Essay on Ordering of Towns” (1635); Cronon, 132.

Traveling ever westward, he searches for Indians across the frontiers of Wyoming. Exhausted, hungry, and sun-beaten, he and his companion, Raymond, inadvertently reach a tract of gay and sunny woods, broken into knolls and hollows, enlivened by birds and interspersed with flowers. Among the rest I recognized the mellow whistle of the robin, an old familiar friend, whom I had scarce expected to meet in such a place. Humble-bees too were buzzing heavily about the flowers; and of these a species of larkspur caught my eye, more appropriate, it should seem, to cultivated gardens than to a remote wilderness.\footnote{Francis Parkman, \textit{The Oregon Trail: The Conspiracy of Pontiac} (New York: Library of America, 1991), 169.}

Instead of The Great Desert, he discovers a menagerie of creatures and ecologies. He weighs the many strange new species against the New England wilderness of his youth only to find that the real wasteland has been his own education. “[T]he experience of one season on the prairies will teach a man more than half a dozen in the settlements,” he writes to his father on his way home in September of that same year.\footnote{Francis Parkman, \textit{Letters of Francis Parkman} (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 48.}

The wastes in works by Parkman, Cooper, and sometimes Irving, reveal America’s “un-chronicled” histories: the epochs of Indians fighting to live and buffalo roaming to survive.\footnote{Ibid.} The signposts of the wasteland’s tenants—its abandoned cabins, its cold campfires and carved carcasses—amount to a “ruinous” scene with little reference to the picturesque ruins of the Old World.

In an open space, fenced in by high rocks, stood two Indian forts, of a square form, rudely built of sticks and logs. They were somewhat ruinous, having probably been constructed the year before. Each might have contained about twenty men. Perhaps in this gloomy spot some party had been beset by their enemies, and those scowling rocks and blasted trees might not long since have looked down on a conflict, un-chronicled and unknown. Yet if any traces of
bloodshed remained they were completely hidden by the bushes and tall rank weeds.  

The wilderness Parkman thinks he knows is clouded in uncertainty: “perhaps,” “might,” “yet”—as if it were a secret kept by the “bushes and tall rank weeds.” It is, he says later, the “genius loci . . . at war with all [of the outsider’s] nervous apprehensions.”

Parkman has difficulty reconciling what he sees with what he has read and learned before his journey west. The wastes having no satisfactory counterpart in the orderly disorder of picturesque painting, a genre Parkman relies on more than his own eyes, as he explains to his readers, “The intervening country . . . will probably answer tolerably well to . . . preconceived ideas of the prairie; for it is from which picturesque tourists, painters, poets and novelists . . . have derived their conceptions of the whole region”—himself included. This is an early impression, of course, and one that moves rapidly toward bewilderment. But in those early impressions, Parkman often defers to poetry as an affective compliment to his firsthand accounts of landscapes and Indians. Mason Wade, editor of Parkman’s Journals, sees this as a weakness in The Oregon Trail. In his introduction to the 1846 journals, he writes:

The journal lost much . . . in the process of thus being transmuted into book form. . . . Parkman had yet to shed the rhetorical impedimenta with which Harvard had encumbered his style; and he was self-consciously trying to be literary, under the romantic influence of his own literary idols, Byron and Cooper, and those of Gaylord Clark, in whose Knickerbocker Magazine the first version of The Oregon Trail appeared . . .”

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159 Parkman, The Oregon Trail, 169.

160 Ibid., 172.

161 Ibid., 11.

Parkman’s imitations of Byron and Cooper suggest the limitations of the story’s observational records as well as its lyricism when journeying “out of bounds”—a reference to the original subtitle of his book (*A Summer’s Journey Out of Bounds*) but an unwitting metaphor for the difficulties Parkman has in reconciling what he sees with what he thinks he knows.\(^{163}\) Chapter 17 of *The Oregon Trail*, titled “The Black Hills,” opens with an excerpt from Lord Byron’s “Childe Harold”:

To sit on rocks, to muse o’er flood and fell,
    To slowly trace the forest’s shady scene,
Where things that own not man’s dominion dwell,
    And mortal foot hath ne’er, or rarely been;
To climb the trackless mountain all unseen,
    With the wild flock that never needs a fold;
Alone o’er steeps and foaming falls to lean;
This is not solitude; ‘tis but to hold
    Converse with Nature’s charms, and view her stores unrolled.\(^{164}\)

Parkman often reflects on the conventions of romantic solitude, the wanderer in search of enlightenment or hermit fleeing worldliness. But it’s not really solitude, argues Byron, that awaits one in the desert, on the mountaintop, in the deepest forests. It is nature “unrolled,” its hidden part laid bare. And that is precisely what the “childe” (Parkman) is unprepared to see. Like Caspar David Friedrich’s painting, *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818), Byron’s itinerant hero takes his place atop the rocks, musing over waters, forests, and valleys, which is to say, over those expanses of earth in no way subjugated to “man’s dominion,” a dominion of an increasingly questionable validity. The wanderer takes inventory of himself and of the vastness obscured by his own vantage point, his own limited perception. Byron’s recreation of the knight

\(^{163}\) Ibid., 386.

Figure 3: Casper David Friedrich, The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (c. 1818)
errant as wandering aesthete (more bewildered than courageous) complements Parkman’s narrator who goes to the Black Hills to estrange himself from the familiar and to study “the manners and character of Indians in their primitive state” and “to sketch those features of their wild and picturesque life” as witnessed by “his own eye.”165 But there would be psychological consequences for seeing what could not be unseen.

The Black Hills are mountainous outcrops in southwestern South Dakota that extend from the Great Plains into Wyoming. The volcanic, granite strata erodes about an inch a year and attracts paleontologists, archeologists, and miners. More importantly, it is a land sacred to the Lakota (Sioux) tribes who were “given” the land by the U.S. government under the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, then stripped of the land later in the same century because of its mineral wealth. The arid, rocky wasteland of the Black Hills and Badlands appears in much of Parkman’s narrative. Oftentimes, he cannot quite find his own words for a landscape “more wild than the wastes Mazeppa rode over.” In Byron’s poem, “Mazeppa,” the hero, is stripped naked and strapped to a wild horse. Parkman borrows from the poem the idea of desolation to describe his own journey:

Man nor brute,
Nor dint of hoof, nor print of foot,
Lay in the wild luxuriant soil;
No sign of travel; none of toil;
The very air was mute.166

The emptiness of this mute, trackless desert is only a repetition of what “waste” means etymologically. But empty it was not. Parkman sensed the inconsistency and, as if to

165 Parkman, The Oregon Trail, 4.

overcompensate for his own doubts, he averted his eye, reaching not only beyond the scope of the American frontier for romantic associations but beyond his present as well. In the passage that follows, Parkman observes the Lakota passing through the defiles and steep escarpments of the Black Hills. But the entire scene is a rearrangement of nature into a set of props, as on a stage, and the actors appropriate to a picturesque narrative:

The place was shut in among tall cliffs, and so deeply shadowed by a host of old pine-trees, that though the sun shone bright on the side of the mountain, nothing but a dim twilight could penetrate within. As far as I could see, it had no tenants except a few hawks and owls, who, dismayed at my intrusion, flapped hoarsely away among the shaggy branches. . . . In that perilous wilderness, eight hundred miles removed beyond the faintest vestige of civilization, the scenes of another hemisphere, the seat of ancient refinement passed before me, more like a succession of vivid paintings than any mere dreams of the fancy. I saw the church of St. Peter’s illumined on the evening of Easter-Day, the whole majestic pile from the cross to the foundation-stone; penciled in fire, and shedding a radiance, like the serene light of the moon, on the sea of upturned faces below. I saw the peak of Mount Etna towering above its inky mantle of clouds, and lightly curling its wreaths of milk-white smoke against the soft sky, flushed with the Sicilian sunset. I saw also the gloomy vaulted passages and the narrow cells of the Passionist convent, where I once had sojourned for a few days with the fanatical monks . . . and the grated window from whence I could look out, a forbidden indulgence, upon the melancholy Coliseum and the crumbling ruins of the Eternal City. . . . A bare round hill rose directly above them. I rode to the top, and from this point I could look down on the savage procession as it passed just beneath my feet, and far on the left I could see its thin and broken line, visible only at intervals, stretching away for miles among the mountains. On the farthest ridge, horsemen were still descending like mere specks in the distance.167

Parkman constructs a ruin out of these allusions. And when the historical brick and mortar exceeds his own reach, he turns to his childhood for a sense of familiarity:

. . . I gained a height, whence the little valley out of which I had climbed seemed like a deep, dark gulf, though the inaccessible peak of the mountain was still towering to a much greater distance above. Objects familiar from childhood surrounded me; crags and rocks, a black and sullen brook that gurgled with a hollow voice deep among the crevices, a wood of mossy distorted trees and prostrate trunks flung down by age and storms, scattered among the rocks, or

167 Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, 244.
damming the foaming waters of the little brook. The objects were the same, yet
they were thrown into a wilder and more startling scene . . . \(^{168}\)

Between the “inaccessible peak” and the “deep, dark gulf”—between the superego and the id—
Parkman stands as a stranger (a loose aural anagram of “savage”) both to his environment and
himself. Nothing is as he expected. Not only is he surrounded by the sublime but a veritable
garden, that which opposes the sublime: “grassy terraces,” wild fruit, and flowers. But the wastes
have more to show: plains “thickly peopled,” “broad dusty paths made by the elk,” “grass on all
the terraces . . . trampled down by the deer,” “numerous tracks of wolves,” and “foot-prints
different from any that I had ever seen, and which I took to be those of the Rocky Mountain
sheep.”\(^{169}\) It’s not just that each path represents a border at which the wastes force him to stop
and reflect and pay some psychological tribute to the truth of his surroundings; it’s something
even more astounding. Each path represents some equivalent to his own western sense of
civilization. Everywhere there are signs of language networks, trade routes, ceremonies, hunting
paths, kinship circles—a phenomenon “never read or dreamed” by the outsider. Part of the
difficulty is that these borders are not there to keep Parkman out. They are opportunities for
figures like Parkman to transgress their own psychological borders, their own preconceived ideas
about what the wasteland is and who its native inhabitants are. Moreover, this transgression
means, though Parkman does not know it, that he must become a lesser presence in his own
narrative. His misreadings of the wastes enable us to see through his eyes more clearly.

Parkman’s visual misreadings complement the perpetual miscommunications in The
Leatherstocking Tales. Cooper moves his characters through the landscape socratically,

\(^{168}\) Ibid., 226.

\(^{169}\) Ibid.
postponing the reader’s encounter with the wastes by way of dialog. For instance, in *The Prairie* (1827—third installment of *The Leatherstocking Tales* but the final story in the chronology of the narrative), Dr. Obed Bat, the naturalist, and Natty, the tracker, find themselves caught, as often happens, in a web of misunderstandings. They have just escaped a fire set by the Sioux Indians of the western plains when they notice a large burnt carcass. Natty identifies the creature as a buffalo. But the naturalist wonders how a man untutored in the sciences can discern the animal’s kind from such a mess. “Pray tell now,” Dr. Bat says, “did your exceeding excellence of vision extend so far as to enable you to decide on their Order, or Genus?” “I know not what you mean by your orders of genius,” replies Natty. Genus or genius? Are things really as they seem or does the imagination deceive us? Cooper entangles things further, adding a bee-hunter named Paul Hover to the conversation:

Now, old trapper, that is admitting your ignorance of the English language, in a way I should not expect from a man of your experience and understanding. By order, our comrade, means, whether they [the buffalo] go in promiscuous droves like a swarm that is following its Queen-bee, or, in a single file, as you often see the Buffaloe [sic] trailing each other through the Prairie. And as for genius, I’m sure that is a word well understood, and in every body’s mouth. There is the congress-man, in our district, and that tonguey little fellow who puts out the paper in our County, they are both so called, for their smartness, which is what the Doctor means, as I take it, seeing that he seldom speaks without a particular meaning.171

Paul Hover is correct, of course, but only in an academic sense. But there’s too little room for discovery in so definitive a reading. Cooper, the mouthpiece of the wastes, acts as an agent of confusion, a characteristic response to borderlands, as already noted by Patricia Spyer. But this is

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171 Ibid., 1168.
a “fortunate confusion,” the kind William Empson describes as one type of literary ambiguity, “as when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing.”172 Before the malapropisms worsen and delay things too long, Natty kicks the hide off the burned animal. What Hover fails to clarify, Natty’s foot reveals, as the three men step back, stupefied by the Indian warrior who jumps up from beneath the buffalo’s “hide”—up, in other words, from genus to genius.

Representative of a purely empirical way of knowing, Dr. Bat raises “his tabletts [sic] to the heavens” to “enrich the pages of Natural History”173 with the truth. But Cooper, like Wallace Stevens,174 obviously had his reservations about those who championed the truth over more relative truths. Perhaps the most entertaining of Natty’s allies over the pentalogy, Dr. Bat never sees what is in front of him—blind as a bat, as it were. In search of a new species of grass on the prairies, he imagines he discovers a new beast, something yet to be catalogued under the Linnaean system, an American Chimera:

Oct. 6, 1805 . . . Quadruped, seen by star-light, and by the aid of a pocket lamp, in the Prairies of North America . . . Genus, unknown, therefore named after the Discoverer, and from the happy coincidence of having been seen in the evening—Vesper tulio; Horribilis, Americanus. Dimensions (by estimation). Greatest length eleven feet, height, six feet. Head, erect, nostrils, expansive, eyes, expressive and fierce, teeth, serrated and abundant. Tail, horizontal, waving, and slightly feline. Feet, large and hairy. Talons, long, arquated, dangerous. Ears, inconspicuous. Horns, elongated, diverging and formidable, colour, plumbeous-ashy, with fiery spots. Voice, sonorous, martial and appalling. Habits, gregarious, carnivorous, fierce, and fearless. There . . . there is an animal, which will be likely to dispute with the Lion, his title to be called the King of the Beasts!”175

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173 Cooper, The Prairie, in The Leatherstocking Tales I, 956. See also David Bjelajac, “Thomas Cole’s Oxbow and the American Zion Divided,” American Art 20, no. 1 (2006), 67. Bjelajac references the 1825 50th Anniversary of the Revolution and notes the rise of “the man of science.”

174 See introduction.

Dr. Bat’s need to see anything other than what is right in front of him leads him to read the wastes in correspondingly ludicrous ways. Besides the incident with the buffalo hide, Dr. Bat also mistakes a dead man for a Basilisk, a mythical reptile. More often than not, the monsters Dr. Bat identifies are actually human, as is typical of virgin land ideology. Cooper lifts the veil, or hid, not to reveal the desolation of the waste but to reveal its imminent character.

Natty’s companion, Captain Middleton (the grandson of a hero in second of The Leatherstocking Tales) gazes out over the wastes doubtfully, and says “There is nothing to be seen.” To this, Natty replies, “the air throws up the image like water, and then is it hard to tell the Prairies from a sea. But yonder is a sign that a hunter never fails to know!” Vultures circle in the distance. To see vultures in the prairies means buffalo graze nearby. When Natty says he sees the buffalo by looking upward rather than outward and by reading the habits of the birds, Dr. Bat balks, “your reading is by far too literal.” But soon, Dr. Bat too sees what Natty sees:

Throughout the whole of those moving events which it has been our duty to record, the Prairies had lain in the majesty of perfect solitude. The heavens had been blackened with the passage of the migratory birds, it is true, but the dogs of the party, and the ass of the Doctor, were the only quadrupeds that had enlivened the broad surface of the waste beneath [my emphasis]. There was now a sudden exhibition of animal life which changed the scene, as it were by magic, to the very opposite extreme. . . . The herd, as the column spread and thickened, was like the endless flocks of smaller birds, whose extended flanks are so often seen to heave up out the abyss of the heavens, until they appear as countless and as interminable, as the leaves in those forests over which they wing their endless flight.\footnote{Ibid., 1103.}

\footnote{Ibid., 1102.}
“Now, lads,” says Natty, “you may see through the mystery of the vultures,” not from reality to mythology but from reality to reality, birds to buffalo. As Natty explains, “the air throws up the image like water,” a phrase Stevens reiterates when describing the dump “full of images.” The “genius” of the borderland, or of any wasteland, is its ability to stop its trespassers in their tracks, to force them to look again at their supposedly empty surroundings, and to push them to notice the inconsistencies between what they “cannot see,” as Michael Thompson suggests in his theory of waste, and what they “conspire to see.”

This propensity of the wastes to throw up images like water and to confuse the view actually opens *The Prairie*, as Natty materializes from what seems like the ether of the wastes:

> The sun had fallen below the crest of the nearest wave of the Prairie, leaving the usual rich and glowing train on its track. In the centre of its flood of fiery light a human form appeared, drawn against the gilded background. . . . But embedded, as it was, in its setting of garish light, it was impossible to distinguish its just proportions or true character.

Cooper uses the word “colossal” to describe this man who “unaccountably appeared, as it were, between the heavens and the earth”—a towering Y axis on a seemingly boundless flat plain. Unlike Dr. Bat whose tablets of wisdom are his only hope of reaching the heavens, Natty embodies a kind of ecological convergence between heights and depths, the clearness and obscurity, the known and unknown of nature. Figures similar to this sometimes appear in picturesque paintings, like the Friedrich’s wanderer, shown above, or, less conspicuously,

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181 Ibid., 893, 895.
Thomas Cole’s watchman in *The Oxbow* (1836). But Cole’s watchman, in traditional picturesque fashion, is almost completely engulfed by the forests overlooking the Connecticut River. Natty’s character, on the other hand, is as expansive as the prairie wastes—something that Cooper himself felt in response to the natural settings of his youth. When the Navy assigned young Cooper to the wilderness outpost of Oswego in New York, he wrote to his older brother,

![Figure 4: Thomas Cole, The Oxbow (The Connecticut River near Northampton 1836)](image)

Richard: “I have enjoyed my health, notwithstanding your representations of this sickly Country. In fact this particular situation is one of the pleasantest in the world—and remarkably healthy withal.”182 It wasn’t the adventure Cooper signed up for, but neither was it the no man’s land his brother disparaged.

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Many changes occurred in Cooper’s thinking between the publication of the first book in *The Leatherstocking Tales* and the last, a span of time covering almost twenty years. Politically, he moved more toward the right, although he always leaned right. In fact, one might argue that Cooper contradicted his own national ideals when it came to his politics. He was pro-enclosure and almost loyalist in his anti-democratic principles. Yvor Winters once summed up James Fenimore Cooper as “a man of fragments.” Winters, a literary critic none too taken by Cooper, had very few kindnesses to add, except for this important caveat: “it is likely that the best part of [Cooper] is in the fragments.” Cooper capitalized on this irony. On the one hand, his novels owe much to European traditions of medieval chivalry, Christianity, and epic valor; on the other hand, Cooper resists narrative orthodoxies and pushes the boundaries of heroic type. In his forests of New York State and prairies west of the Ohio, women could be heroic, Indians virtuous, and uneducated backwoodsmen legendary, which was simply indicative of what was actually the case. Cooper’s need to reconcile cultural variation to a unified mosaic of American values is, I would argue, his most consistent trait. His fragments, as Winters concludes, work because they are the “fragments of a civilization.” But only in what the Puritans denigrated as the “waste” could a writer profit by these aesthetic transgressions.


184 Critics have long debated Cooper’s depiction women. For a convincing reappraisal of Cooper’s heroines, see John P. McWilliams, “‘More Than a Woman’s Enterprise’: Cooper’s Revolutionary Heroines and the Source of Liberty,” in Leland S. Person, *A Historical Guide to James Fenimore Cooper* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 61–90.

Cooper’s politics were conservative, but, as suggested, his fictional characterization of the frontier had less conservative tendencies, especially concerning Native Americans and the preservation of the wild. Not only did Cooper grow more stalwart in his conservatism over the twenty years represented by the Tales, he also became more religious. But a surprising continuity exists across the five Leatherstocking novels when it comes to the forests, mountains, lakes, and prairies—not that these spaces didn’t change, and not that Natty doesn’t lament the encroachment of civilization into the wilderness he holds so dear, but that the wastes rarely intimidate the hero or the reader. They invite us, as they did for Parkman, to trespass against the boundaries of our own preconceived ideas about the wastes.

Borderlands had a similar effect on Cooper’s contemporary, Washington Irving. Touring the western prairies, Irving slept under starlight filtered through a vault of leaves. At first his descriptions vacillate between the picturesque and sublime, like so:

We were overshadowed by lofty trees, with straight smooth trunks, like stately columns, and as the glancing rays of the sun shone through the transparent leaves, tinted with the many coloured hues of autumn, I was reminded of the effect of sunshine among the stained windows and clustering columns of a Gothic cathedral. Indeed there is a grandeur and solemnity in some of our spacious forests of the West that awaken in me the same feeling I have experienced in those vast and venerable piles, and the sound of the wind sweeping through them, supplies occasionally the deep breathings of the organ.186

The sentiments expressed here reinforce my earlier claim that America’s relation to the sublime differed from Europe’s in that “grandeur” and an almost religious veneration (Irving transforms the space into a cathedral) diffuses whatever tensions that something so much bigger than a human might cause. But having entered the frontier as if it were a cultural vacuum, Irving

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eventually discovers something unexpected—not the antithesis of civilization but a larger, more encompassing, more cosmopolitan empathy within himself, an empathy not nearly as reliant on grandeur and a religious sense of veneration. There is “an expansion of feeling,” he says, “in looking upon these boundless and fertile wastes,” echo,187 echoing a similar expansion of sympathy in Arthur Young, as we saw in the first section, and resonant with Natty’s embodiment of that expansion over the prairies.

III. Sing with Us

Expansion of sentiment underlies much of what makes the romantic tradition romantic. But in Cooper’s prairies (as in Parkman’s and Irving’s), that expansion transgresses the ideological border between Nature and nature, which is to say, between the western ideal and a reality not always beautiful, not always logical, and certainly not always familiar. The animals, from the perspective of these waste aesthetics, are often the first point of discord and confusion, the first recognizable ideological border between settler and nature. It is also, therefore, the first opportunity for the ideological borders to be broken.

To understand Cooper’s aesthetic pairing of discord and wasteland, we have to turn to James Thomson’s long poem, The Seasons (1730).188 An excerpt from the “Winter” section of the poem opens Cooper’s first chapter, “See, Winter comes, to rule the vary’d Year, / Sullen, and sad, with all his rising Train; / Vapours, and Clouds, and Storms.”189 I am using the 1746 edition

187 Ibid., 131.


of *The Seasons* here as the edition standardized by James Sambrook. Cooper’s epigraph looks like this but with some slight variation in capital letters. In the original 1726 draft, Thomson begins with an exclamation: “SEE!”190 That initial “SEE!” presages the closing of *The Leatherstocking Tales*, which ends with “Here!”—the last word Natty utters before he dies in *The Prairie*.191 From *The Seasons*, Cooper obtains the architecture of his novel.192 *The Pioneers* proceeds from early winter (the “SEE!” of Thomson’s “Winter”) toward summer and back to autumn’s end. As the seasons progress, the fact becomes increasingly clear that Natty, maybe even Cooper, does not think of nature’s changes as picturesque constructs only. The *Tales*’ mandate to the reader—to “SEE!” “Here!”—is an aesthetic entreaty to characters of the wastes as well. It asks its audience to look past its wilderness ideologies and observe the borderlands with their own eyes, to see what really lives and exists in those places dismissed as empty.

Implicated in what might be considered the *Tales*’ two-word manifesto is an account of the nonhuman world as well. *The Seasons* outlines an elemental premise, what Thomson calls “the awful world-revolving power.”193 Cooper too sees that which moves the world beyond human civilizations. He begins his famous pigeon scene in *The Pioneers* not with the birds but with the weather and its “succession of great and rapid changes.” Wind, “breathed freely upon the valley,” imitating ocean waves, sets the “whole field in motion,”194 much the same way


Thomson describes the natural force that “impels, and rules the steady whole.” The settler is a part of that force. When frontier families strip the forests, they do so “as effectually, and almost as promptly, as if a whirlwind had passed along the place.”\(^{195}\) They imitate what Thomson describes as the “all-perfect hand”:

> With what an awful world-revolving power  
> Were first the unwieldy planets launch’d along  
> Th’ illimitable void! Thus to remain,  
> Amid the flux of many thousand years,  
> That oft has swept the toiling race of Men,  
> And all their labour’d monuments away,  
> Firm, unremitting, matchless in their course;  
> To the kind-temper’d change of night and day,  
> And of the seasons ever stealing round,  
> Minutely faithful: Such th’ ALL-PERFECT HAND,  
> That pois’d, impels, and rules the steady WHOLE.\(^{196}\)

Here is nature beyond the cathedral, beyond grandeur, where “void” is simultaneously “whole” with planets, men, seasons—where time is “minutely faithful” yet spread to the ends of “many thousand years,” where no “monuments” can withstand the “flux” and “change of night and day” yet life remains “pois’d” and “steady” all the same. Cooper and Thomson recognize the character of this “whole” as the character of the wastes. But what the settlers in the \textit{Tales} can’t see is just how much a part of themselves the wastes embody as well.

Natty can “see” the wastes. He knows what lives “here,” unlike Dr. Bat, the supposed self-proclaimed wilderness expert of \textit{The Prairie}. Natty’s intimacy with life beyond the borders of civilization needs no taxonomy. One’s own senses supersede such academic categories. Sight

\(^{195}\) Ibid., 898.

\(^{196}\) Thomson, "Summer," lines 32-42, in \textit{The Seasons}, 60.
is important, as is sound. Natty’s intelligence might be likened to what Thomson, in the “Spring” section of his poem, calls “the listening waste”:

    And winter oft at eve resumes the breeze,
    Chills the pale morn, and bids his driving sleets
    Deform the day delightless: so that scarce
    The bittern knows his time, with bill ingulpht
    To shake the sounding marsh; or from the shore
    The plovers when to scatter o’er the heath,
    And sing their wild notes to the listening waste.197

To be part of the “listening waste” is to recognize oneself as part of a larger “whole,” just as the American bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*) and the piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*) listen for the marsh grasses to crack in the cold, telling them to fly south, and just as the marshes listen to the birds “sing their wild notes” in their departure.

Thomson calls this natural discord a “waste of music,” which is, in itself, “the voice of love.”198 “Love” seems a strange analogy here, but in the larger ecological context of the poem, “love” means something like cohesive difference. In my introduction, I call attention to Slavoj Žižek’s equivalent use of the word “love.” To “love,” Žižek says, while standing in a garbage dump, is to accept the differences of others or the Other. It is the opposite of idealization. To orient ourselves to the world ecologically, then, we must love the wastes, claims Žižek.199 The birds in Cooper’s *The Pioneers*, for example, aren’t of the poetic, melodious kind. They inspire only madness in those who, to use a phrase by Emily Dickinson, are deaf to their “divinest

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198 Ibid., line 615, in *The Seasons*, 32.

Sense.” Though the problem is ideological, the consequences are very real, as Cooper illustrates in his ensuing pigeon scene.

“The heavens are alive with pigeons,” cries Richard Jones, the overzealous know-it-all Sheriff of The Pioneers. Martins, gulls, pigeons, eagles, and a medley of other birds, flock overhead. The household wakens and hurries through breakfast as if “by a sweet frenzy driven” (a line from the chapter’s opening epigraph) and rushes toward the hills. Less than a couple pages later, the heavens’ winged devotees are no more. This is the waste scene made famous by ecocritics of the last few decades. In one fell swoop (an ironic idiom considering its original meaning as the predatory dive of a bird), Cooper manages to capture both the glut and gall of frontier wastefulness.

It’s April. Spring has come to the frontier town of Templeton. New York’s protracted winter lingers only in fits and starts. Budding leaves are still some weeks away. For now, only the remnants of winter fuel, “dark and charred stumps . . . of the proudest trees of the forest,” protrude through the sludge and melt. “Discordant screams” of geese descend onto a “dark and gloomy lake.” April has yet a century of cruelty to impose before T.S. Eliot will immortalize the West’s psychological wasteland. But here, before the “last sheet of agitated ice” disappears, a

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201 Cooper, The Prairie, in The Leatherstocking Tales I, 244.

The frontier household, as Cooper describes it, hoards an arsenal. Men, women, and children prime their six-foot ducking guns, brandish their horsemen’s pistols, string their bows and arrows, and hoist their crossbows to eye level. The pigeons flock so densely that some shooters fire into the sky without even looking. Clouds of carcasses rain down on the fields to rot. As extravagant as this massacre seems, Sheriff Jones takes the sport a step further, wheeling in a small canon—death by decadence. In true frontier fashion, the execution ends not with a whimper, but a bang.

In the section of *The Seasons* called “Spring,” we find responses to such discord that coincides with Natty’s own thinking. “And lost in lonely musing in a dream,” / Confus’d . . . /

Ten thousand wandering images of things, / Soothe every gust of passion into peace.”  

How do they soothe, why do they soothe? Because “in the roughening waste, their humble texture weave[s]” together into a shared image and sound.  

“Shook sudden from the bosom of the sky,” Thomson, like Natty, sees “[a] thousand shapes . . . than human more [more than human].” And this medley “th’abstracted ear / of fancy strikes.” “Fear not us,” the birds seem to say, “but with responsive song / Amid these dim recesses, undisturb’d / By noisy folly and discordant vice / Of Nature *sing with us* [my emphasis].” Unfortunately, none of this happens in *The Pioneers*.

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205 Ibid., line 643, in *The Seasons*, 32.

The settlers refuse to hear to the music in the discord. Had they done so, “every gust of passion” might have been soothed, as Thomson writes.

Neither the birds nor Natty hear discord in the polyphony. They are not caught up in the settler’s “eccentric design,” to borrow a phrase from Marius Bewley. Bewley was writing about the conflicted nature of the American novel, trapped as it often is between “ideas and ideals, and a world of bitter fact.” In no place does this conflict emerge more clearly than in the borderlands where reality tolerates no trespasser’s ideologies for very long. As mentioned earlier in this section, the borderlands are often treated as places “out of place,” or in Parkman’s words, “out of bounds.” This is essentially the etymology of the word “eccentric,” from the Greek _ekkentros: ek_ (out of) and _kentron_ (center). Sculpted as it is out of bird, beast, and tree, the wastes in _The Leatherstocking Tales_, on the contrary, communicate concentrically, the centers of its many forms of agency being shared, overlapping. Hence the discord, but also the “awful world-revolving power” that Thomson argues “rules the steady whole.”

There is a debilitating eccentricity in the settlers’ supernatural notions of the sublime, as the aforementioned John Dennis described it. Cooper, for instance, provides a foil to Natty in the form of a Calvinist named David Gamut in _The Last of the Mohicans_ (1826). Gamut, a master of psalmody, sings his way through the wilderness to elicit god’s protection. But to the Indians and to Natty, the singer alienates himself from his surroundings. Natty even goes so far as to call Gamut a “devil,” an amusing but deliberate reversal of the Puritans’ haunted wilderness:

“Think over your prayers,” [Natty] whispered, as they approached him; “for he, to whom you make them, knows all tongues; that of the heart, as well as those of the mouth. But speak not a syllable; it is rare for a white voice to pitch itself properly

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in the woods, as we have seen by the example of that miserable devil, the singer.”

The god of the wastes “knows all tongues” but prefers, as Natty suggests, the nonhuman notes. Natty too favors the “waste of music,” which can “soothe.” Sound engineers often use the chatter of birds to relax listeners. Our co-evolution has taught us to equate the presence of birds with safety and stability. When no birds are to be found, something is usually wrong. The pigeons, however unmelodious to some ears, reflect the health of the forest, just as hovering vultures signify the vital cycles of the prairie.

Cooper exalts this discord against the romantic and picturesque. No lark twitters in strict pentameter. No dove transcends the pigeon. Cooper again draws his example from Thomson who naturalizes Jesus’ response to the Pharisees in Luke when Jesus says, “I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.” Likewise, Thomson’s seasons would “raise a general voice” if they should go unsung. For Cooper, the wastes sing not because god wills it but because if they do not, the fragments that compose the “steady whole” will disperse and disappear, which is the function of border ideology: to make invisible that which one “sees” “here.”

IV. Disimprovement

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208 Cooper, The Last of the Mohicans, in The Leatherstocking Tales I, 703.


211 Thomson, “Summer,” line 188, in The Seasons, 68.
The border ideologies that prevent figures like Dr. Bat and David Gamut from seeing the “here” of the prairies parallel the boom of land speculation after the American Revolution. Loyalists and landed gentry, having surrendered, forfeited, or abandoned their properties after the war, cleared the way for high risk real estate ventures. Speculators bought thousands of acres, sight unseen, and turned them around for astronomical profits.  

William Cooper, James’s father, was one such entrepreneur. He clear cut a portion of New York’s Otsego wilderness to develop Cooperstown, the model for Judge Temple’s Templeton in *The Pioneers*. William prided himself, he said, on the “reclamation” of “large and fruitful tracts from the waste of creation” (as if they had once been his to reclaim). But he sold and rented those tracts to Yankee settlers whose good intentions surpassed their means to pay. Many defaulted. Many fled. With no real cash value to bolster his investments, William, upon his death in 1809, left to his heirs a “waste of creation” far more worthless than it had been wooded and undomesticated.  

Having inherited fiscal ruin, James Fenimore Cooper became a speculator too, but not of land. In *The Leatherstocking Tales*, Cooper wonders how different Otsego might have been had someone like Natty Bumppo intervened in early efforts to settle the wilderness. How might the new merchant elite have profited by Natty’s example? How might the “waste of creation” have fared in Natty’s republic? To everyone but Natty, waste meant two things: unimproved land—

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214 Ibid., 3.
that is, land devoid of agriculture, commercial enterprise, and in many cases, Christianity—and whatever exceeded traditional representations of western civilization, be it Indian, buffalo, or an unproductive stand of sugar maples. Cooper indicted the so-called Era of Good Feelings for its indignation toward the wastes and responded in his fiction with aesthetics of disimprovement. In *The Pioneers*, for instance, Natty burns his own house to the ground as an act of resistance against the borders instituted by settlement law. He defies western establishment, having weighed the finished product in Templeton and found it wanting. Fire restores the landscape and, at the same time, cleanses it of pastoral romanticism, returning to the land its nonhuman agency. But Cooper needed his readers to hear the human agency beyond that border as well.

By the time the Treaty of Paris (1783) appropriated the vast Indian territories between the Alleghenies and the Mississippi, New York speculators had defrauded the Iroquois, buying up everything in sight with useless promissory notes. Some tribes removed to Canada, others headed West. The preeminence Cooper yields to his Indian characters, like the Mohican Chingachgook, suggests an intimacy with Native Americans that Cooper really never experienced. He based Chingachgook on an Indian who traded in Otsego from time to time. But Indian sightings were scarce outside of these markets. As a result, Cooper makes the relationship between Natty and Chingachgook such a visual and defining feature of the *The Leatherstocking Tales* that Chingachgook cannot disappear, not from the reader. He and Natty reveal one another like the duck reveals the rabbit in Jastrow’s psychological illusion.215 By fusing Natty and Chingachgook in this way, Cooper internalizes the borders between wilderness and wastes—or

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more to the point, he reflects the border already internalized in the ideologies of his contemporaries.

“Fusion” might best describe that moment when the eccentric borders become concentric, which is to say, when the ideological borders expand to include all the different agencies and identities of the wastes. It’s a word that has been used to describe Cooper’s unconventional narrative style. In the *The Leatherstocking Tales*, each character’s identity (an identity often fragmented into several aliases) fuses with a corresponding environmental niche: “tracker” with the prairie; “bee hunter” with the meadow; *Eau Douce* (“Fresh Water”) with the Great Lakes. Even if the action wanes, the plot progresses when changes in the environment or in the weather fuse with the characters’ inner struggles.216 Gerry Brenner, taking the idea of fusion a step further, calls the reader’s attention to the phrase “composite order” in *The Pioneers*.217 Composite order, in its original sense, describes a particular style of Roman column whereby Ionic and Corinthian ornaments intertwine. In Cooper’s novels, “composite” suggests a similar convergence of social ideals and aesthetic forms. Judge Temple’s mansion, the architectural centerpiece of the wilderness settlement, is a mishmash of old and new design, something akin to the experiment called America with its cultural and ethnic, Federalist and Republican, rural and urban synergies. The mansion, in other words, admits of alterations, says the narrator, “as circumstances might require,”218 just as America’s democratic tenets necessitate compromise and tolerance.

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216 Philbrick, “Cooper’s *The Pioneers*”: 591.


218 Cooper, *The Prairie*, in *The Leatherstocking Tales I*, 41.
In *The Pioneers*, written several years before Cooper’s sojourn to Switzerland, Cooper considers the composite order of America’s wastelands and their innate genius for disimprovement.\(^{219}\) At one point early in the novel, the narrator describes the steps leading up to Judge Templeton’s mansion. The frost amalgamates between each step, forcing the stones to separate and sink. The house virtually lifts away from the ground, metaphorically upending the cornerstones of the American judicial institution. The Judge imagines he has conquered chaos by reclaiming order, as William Cooper put it, from “the waste of creation.” But the wasteland practices its own form of reclamation. The beautiful dew is not as romantic as it may appear. It has the strength to subvert the Judge’s alien order.\(^{220}\)

William Cooper (Judge Temple) built his own mansion on the remains of the previous landowner’s home—a landowner who, in turn, had developed his property over the ruins of even earlier Indian abodes. William knew this history and built on the previous foundation as a gesture of his dominance over the wastes and its inhabitants. It’s a common western trope, as Raymond Williams illustrates in *The Country and the City* (1973). In poetry, the “country house” aestheticizes unlawful appropriations, as when the house of Fairfax, founder of the New Model Army, was built atop a priory that had been destroyed. “In its extreme forms,” writes Williams, “this is a true reification of the houses themselves: the house, and then by derivation its occupants being the evident sign of an order, even though this order was being continually reconstituted by the political and economic formation of a new aristocracy and then a new

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\(^{220}\) Cooper, *The Prairie*, in *The Leatherstocking Tales I*, 58.
agrarian capitalism”—and on American soil, by the wilderness speculators.\textsuperscript{221} Even Sir William Blackstone, the man “most responsible for the spread of English common law to the colonies,” writes Kathryn Temple, recognized the chaos that law often inflicted on the “harmony” of justice, and in that sense, the aesthetics of waste at work in \textit{The Pioneers} reflects an inverse relationship between the institution of so-called “order,” as sanctioned by law, and the disorderly justice of the wastes.\textsuperscript{222} Cooper’s attention to this history is remarkable, given its ideological subtlety, and all the more remarkable for the invention of a natural antithesis to the imposition of such eccentric “order.” In \textit{Hard Facts} (1985), Philip Fisher’s important study of realism in American fiction, Fisher argues that, aesthetically speaking, “Cooper ‘made up’ the [American] wilderness.” He meant that Cooper “was able to lodge the details, the settings and the characters, the moral pride and moral shame of this history in the imagination of the American and European world, and that later representations drew on the history that he made symbolically concrete.”\textsuperscript{223} In my readings, America’s wastes seem to be the counterpart to that very same invention of wilderness. \textit{The Leatherstocking Tales} is one of the first attempts to clarify not just the misrepresentations of wilderness but the ongoing misunderstandings of unfamiliar agencies and forms of usefulness in the wastes. It pinpoints, even if not consciously, that particular border both inside and outside the reader’s preconceived ideas about wastelands.


Back in Templeton, order is slowly but steadily subverted by each rainy or snowy droplet against the stone.\textsuperscript{224} If the steps to the Judge’s mansion signify William Cooper’s rise to power, then their disimprovement deconstructs that architecture with its own elemental world-revolving power. Natty, at times, personifies this same chthonian force. When he burns his house to the ground, he wields entropy like a sword. But elsewhere, fire, like frost, clashes with the settlement autonomously. For example, Mount Vision, the high vantage point from which Judge Temple first looks down onto the valleys of his future Templeton settlement in \textit{The Pioneers}, erupts later in the novel with wildfire, threatening the valley like a Titan. The catastrophe doesn’t veer too far from historical events. In the actual Cooperstown, fire consumed the brewery (1804), the Cooperstown Academy (1809), and the Otsego Manor in which William and James once lived (1853).\textsuperscript{225}

By describing the will of the landscape as if it superseded the will of the story’s human characters, Cooper obliges the reader to resist the oversimplifications of a traditional plot. I agree with Bewley that “adventure” for Cooper is a convention, mostly tied to the hero’s sense of morality, and that the heart of the stories lies elsewhere. But ascertaining the morality of each character is not enough, as the reader’s own relationship to moral convention changes over time. Bewley understood this too. He writes, “action as a phenomenon of the physical world has moral significance in its own right,” but such phenomena are “imponderable.” I think Bewley may be speaking more for the reader than for Cooper who pondered these phenomena a great deal. Reading the waste as its own character, with its own unfamiliar morality, may be more useful to

\textsuperscript{224} Taylor, \textit{William Cooper’s Town}, 44–45, 144.

\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 228, 285.
today’s interested reader. Certainly it is useful in modeling alternatives to linear ideologies like those embodied in the person of Temple and his settlement and the doctrine of manifest destiny. As mentioned earlier, Natty appears in The Prairie as a “fiery light,” a vertical signpost like a finger pointing to one place. Similarly, the wildfire on Mount Vision halts Judge Temple’s expansionist campaign, as if it had made a moral decision of its own. The “improvements” will stop, the mountain seems to say, “here.”

V. Borderland Citizenship

Had Natty been completely indigenous, rather than the adopted white son of the Otsego woods (“un magnifique hermaphrodite moral” as Balzac called him), The Leatherstocking Tales might have sent a less conflicted message about America’s borderlands. That not being the case with Cooper, nor with most of the nineteenth century’s fiction writers, the old ideological confusions about borderlands persisted. In fact, they persist still, as the twentieth-century Cherokee-American-Canadian writer, Thomas King, has argued in his own fiction. In this final section, I turn to King’s short story, “Borders,” as an example of the ways in which borderland ideology continues to impact our sense of social and individual identity. Though the perspective in Cooper’s Tales and King’s story differ greatly—the first coming from the colonizer and the second from the colonized—the general blindness toward the agency and utility of the borderlands remains a central obstacle. The wastes—the physical place of the borderlands—has nothing to do with prairies or wilderness in King’s story, which makes King’s close reading of

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227 Honoré de Balzac, Revue Parisienne (Slatkine Reprints, 1840), 70, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/iau.31858045839820.
borders all the more important. Just as the wastes shift in Cooper’s narratives according to what the characters deem useless or empty, we see in “Borders” what makes the concept stable over time. The idea (as opposed to the reality) of uselessness or emptiness creates continuity, so that a borderland can be a reservation or the short distances either side of a national border crossing, or even something as inconspicuous as the parking lot of a duty-free convenience store. No matter the location, no matter its geography or status as property, the challenge remains the same challenge Cooper put to his readers almost two hundred years ago: to “SEE!” “Here!”

A Canadian citizen with Native American heritage, Thomas King speaks from experience on borderlands, both geographical and ideological. Born in Sacramento, California, to a Cherokee father and German-Greek mother, King grew up in concentric worlds. His schooling was American and Catholic, but his cultural education was Cherokee. At the University of Utah, he wrote a dissertation titled, *Inventing the Indian: White Images, native Oral Literature, and Contemporary Native Writers*, in which he explored representations of Native Americans in the writings of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Augustus Stone, and James Fenimore Cooper. King found in the writings of Cooper not just an important series of misrepresentations of Native Americans, but an aestheticization, he argues, that even the early explorers handled with greater fidelity to facts. “The explorers were keen observers,” King writes. “While they sometimes attempted to correlate the wonders of the New World with the ideals of Arcadia, Eden, Atlantis, and other utopian mythologies, their reports have a directness in the description of the Indian and Indian culture that was lacking in the more spiritually and emotionally charged language of the

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228 Arnold E. Davidson, *Border Crossings: Thomas King’s Cultural Inversions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 5.
colonists.” The other side of that coin is that among colonial and postcolonial chroniclers of European descent, few writers question the supposed inferiority of Native Americans like Cooper. But the questions are implied, not explicit, and appear muddled by a great deal of personal reservation on Cooper’s part. This, according to King, has to do with a fundamental symbolical difference between Natty’s character and the figure of the Native American:

[I]t is clear that Bumppo, unlike the Indians, is not a fugitive; he is the advance guard of civilization. Bumppo may resemble an Indian, but he is not one. He may live in the forest, but his degree of civilization and sophistication is beyond the level of other frontiersmen and rivals that of judges, generals, and fine ladies. He is not the survivor of a dying race but, rather, the larva stage of a larger and more powerful creature.

The Indians of Cooper’s narratives are the “last” of their kind, which appealed to writers of the romantic period. To die bravely was a noble enterprise. Never mind the fact that in reality, invasions, wars, and Jacksonian removal acts had contracted a virtual genocide.

In each of Cooper’s Tales, we meet Natty at this border once again. The geographical frontiers change—sometimes in the forests, sometimes on the prairies—but the premise is the same. The frontier recedes, not in relation to receding territories but in relation to the visibility of its indigenous populations, which is why King’s story, “Borders,” resuscitates the same questions posed by Cooper’s Tales that both inspire and resist the encroachment of foreign nations. Borders, King claims, encourage postcolonial readings of Native American history, art, and literature. But to think in terms of postcolonialism is to read that history, art, and literature

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230 Ibid., 31–32.

231 Ibid., 28–32.
only as a response or counterpart to colonialism. Native American traditions, however, precede the “colonial moment” and can (King argues that they should) be read on their own terms. It is not a position supported universally by other indigenous writers but one that King feels reflects the reality of his own multicultural heritage and multinational identities. His stories are literary transgressions of these “imaginary” borders, but with real world implications.

“Borders” is about a family in the Blackfoot tribe—a tribe with which King became familiar during the 1980s—living on the Canadian side of the 49th parallel: a mother, her daughter and young son. At its core, “Borders” is about the relationship of identity to place and how that identity becomes complicated by generational difference, commercialism, and competing cultural and political nationalities.

For the mother, tribal affiliation is everything. Her people’s struggle is more than a history published in a textbook. The tribe’s long resistance against foreign governments is the source of her indomitable pride. But the daughter hasn’t had to defend her identity against colonizing nations. She wants to find her own place in the world. Against her mother’s wishes, she moves to Salt Lake City, a place advertised for its various entertainments in a brochure she finds. The commercial flare of the American city represents an escape from the borderland reservation in which she grew up. And the son, only eleven or twelve, narrates the story from his own naive point-of-view, even further removed from his tribal history and the significance of national borders. The source of border ideology, King suggests, is not just the consequence of

232 Davidson, Border Crossings, 7.

forced colonization but a matter complicated by generational difference. Why make this point? To show how much effort, how much work, the deconstruction of such ideologies requires when the person, even of indigenous origins, is conditioned so young, a point to which I will return momentarily.

But the real crisis takes place when the mother drives her son down to Salt Lake City to visit her daughter. When they arrive at the Canadian-American border, the guards ask her to state her nationality, to which she replies, “Blackfoot,” with no further elaboration. In an exchange reminiscent of Melville’s Bartleby, the mother refuses to identify as an American Blackfoot or Canadian Blackfoot, only “Blackfoot.” The mother enacts her own “standoff” with the American and Canadian guards.234

The Canadian border guard was a young woman, and she seemed happy to see us. “Hi,” she said. “You folks sure have a great day for a trip. Where are you coming from?”

“Standoff.”

“Is that in Montana?”

“No.”

“Where are you going?”

“Standoff.”

The woman’s name was Carol and I don’t guess she was any older than Laetitia. “Wow, you both Canadians?”

“Blackfoot.”235

“Standoff” is both a place and a position in King’s story. Stand Off, Alberta—an unincorporated community within the Blood Indian Reserve, part of the Blackfoot Confederacy—is home to the mother and her children. Blackfoot reservations straddle the American-Canadian border, as the narrator explains:


235 Ibid.
The border was actually two towns . . . Coutts was on the Canadian side and consisted of the convenience store and gas station, the museum that was closed and boarded up, and a motel. Sweetgrass was on the American side, but all you could see was an overpass that arched across the highway and disappeared into the prairies.236

Though brief, King’s description captures what’s essential about the borderland, or what is essentially arbitrary about the borderland. Nothing special identifies the American side nor the Canadian side. A refueling station tells the automobiles to keep on going, nothing to see here. A defunct museum displays its history in ruins. And a motel finishes the erasure of the place, there being nothing more profuse and, at the same time, completely banal than the motel, as Sinclair Lewis observed in his convincing satire of American values, Babbitt (1922): “But when I get that lonely spell, I simply seek the best hotel, no matter in what town I be—St. Paul, Toledo, or K.C., in Washington, Schenectady, in Louisville or Albany. And at that inn it hits my dome that I again am right at home.”237 It’s the standardization of place. To be in Coutts or in Sweetgrass is the same as being anywhere else in Canada or America.

The mother’s own standoff at the border is not just a standoff against an ideology. When the guards deny the mother access to America and send her back, she faces the same problem at the Canadian border. Following protocol, the guard asks the mother to state her nationality, but to no avail. Caught between nations, the mother and son spend the night in their car, parked in the empty lot of a duty-free convenience store. The store sells flags and alcohol but, as a vendor of patriotic souvenirs, is somehow neither American nor Canadian either, only property, only commodity—a commercial counterpart to Salt Lake City. It’s to this borderland, this between-

236 Ibid., 134.

space, that the Blackfoot mother and son are relegated, not just as a family but as a people. But King is not making another postcolonial critique of “hegemonic spatial and political arrangements,” argues Katja Sarkowsky. In Sarkowsky’s reading, “Borders” is a future-oriented story, not a past-haunted lamentation. King’s ambitions lie more toward “constellations” of “citizenship”—ways of coexisting beyond the nation-state. Hence the importance of the story’s narration from the son’s naive point-of-view.

Generational difference does more to negate ideological borders than policy or militant enforcement of policy. For the guards and for the mother, the 49th parallel is as impenetrable as stone. It’s a border that defines persons as much as it does nations. But the daughter speaks of her own identity much more fluidly. “I can go and come as I please,” she says, because her father is American. Younger still, the son doesn’t understand the problem of coming and going between nations, much less the meaning of his own affiliation with Canada or the Blackfoot tribe. Naivety of this kind is not just a starting point; it is, in its way, a destination, if by naivety King means an informed rejection of identities based solely on geopolitical divisions. It is, on the one hand, a social and aesthetic theory, and on the other, a political strategy. But where is the precedent?

Even though the mother is unwavering in her standoff against the pretenses of any country that might tell her who she is or is not, her stories are what contextualize King’s antinationalist “constellations” of “citizenship.” In a key passage, the narrator recalls a night

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239 King, One Good Story, That One, 131.
spent in the parking lot of the duty-free store. His mother tells him a story (though his mind is on his stomach):

“You see all those stars,” she said. “When I was a little girl, my grandmother used to take me and my sisters out on the prairies and tell us stories about all the stars.”

“Do you think Mel is going to bring us any hamburgers?”

“Every one of those stars has a story. You see that bunch of stars over there that look like a fish?”

“He didn’t say no.”

“Coyote went fishing, one day. That’s how it all started.” We sat out under the stars that night, and my mother told me all sorts of stories. She was serious about it, too. She’d tell them slow, repeating parts as she went, as if she expected me to remember each one.240

Like Robert Nisbet, in his important book, Sociology as an Art Form (1976), King respects the ways in which aesthetics bind identities to communities. The coyote is the classic trickster figure in Indian folklore and the archetypal transgressor against borders of all kinds: tribal borders, gender borders, differences between species, and borders between physical and metaphysical realities.241 The mother seems to know, at least subconsciously, that “nations are in fact made and unmade at their borders,” as historian Sheila McManus argues.242 Therefore, the coyote must survive, its example rehearsed, its transgressions communicated, not for the sake of the museum

240 Ibid., 142.

241 See Mark Shackleton, “‘Have I got stories—’ and ‘Coyote Was There’: Thomas King’s Use of Trickster Figures and the Transformation of Traditional Materials” and “‘Sometimes It Works and Sometimes It Doesn’t’: Gender Blending and the Limits of Border Crossing in Green Grass, Running Water and Truth & Bright Water” in Gruber, Thomas King: Works and Impact.

erected in the memory of a culture but for the sake of a future “citizenship” more akin to the stars than to nations.

Just like Cooper’s *Tales*, the problems presented in “Borders,” therefore, are problems to which the *reader* must respond, not the other characters. The border at all times reminds those on either side of its demarcations that they too are subject to the between-state. Between what and what? That’s the question and the anxiety. The places that Cooper’s Otsego settlers and King’s border guards call home are subject to change at any moment, without reference to legitimacy. It’s this idea that many early American writers resist. But it is also what makes characters like Natty and the boy in King’s “Borders” transgressive figures. They are coyotes that infiltrate and subvert literary efforts to chart the nation’s course toward greater self-idolatry. In these stories, the heroes of the wastes meet with difference in the borderlands. But in so doing, they escape the ideological borders they could not see otherwise.
III. Waste-as-Thing

In 1861, a story appeared in the *The Atlantic Monthly* that would put Wheeling, Virginia (to become West Virginia two years later), on the map of America’s literary canon. Ostensibly about immigrant labor in the mill industry, *Life in the Iron-Mills*, delves into a far more complex series of problems. Hugh Wolfe, a Welsh immigrant mill hand, spends his evenings smelting pig iron for the railroads and, in his downtime, sculpting figures from the excess manufacturing waste called “korl.” While touring the mill, the owner’s son and his companions encounter one of Hugh’s sculptures, a female figure in tormented pose. The figure shocks and awes the “bourgeois” visitors. Nevertheless, they cannot bring themselves to respond the way the korl woman wants them to respond. I’m using “want” intentionally here, though the korl woman is an inanimate composition, a thing. When art historian and critic W.J.T. Mitchell asks, “What do pictures want?” he knowingly poses an unanswerable question, not because he expects a photograph to speak for itself but because in a very real sense the viewer cannot speak for the image. This is exactly my position as a reader in Davis’s story and oftentimes as a reader of waste aesthetics more generally. I want to know what the korl woman wants, which is to say, what the wastes want, precisely because the wants of those who are treated as waste, by association with their labor or class or abilities, often go unheard. Even if the question evades an answer, I want at least to understand better “what” the question represents. “Random things [my emphasis],” argues art critic Dave Hickey, “found to be beautiful, create polyglot constituencies.

They represent for those who convene around them both who they are and what they want.”

The implications of Mitchell’s question, in other words, are as social as they are aesthetic, especially if by “constituency” we mean those whose mode of communication fails to translate usefully in a commodity system. Rebecca Harding Davis, the story’s author, grapples with questions exactly like this.

In this section, I compare and contrast Hugh Wolfe to Judith Scott, a woman whose picture I first encountered on the cover of Eve Sedgwick’s book, Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity (2003). In the photograph, Scott stands a cocoon-like textile sculpture upright on a table. The sculpture bulges in the middle, as if about to split its seams with whatever it keeps inside. An entanglement of yarn, rope, and thread composes the outer layers, against which Scott presses her face and torso, almost as if she were embracing the object. The two forms vaguely mirror one another, though Judith’s large, imposing hands clearly differentiate that which is to be touched from that which one touches. And in this case, touch means everything. Judith, born deaf and with Down syndrome, cannot communicate by any traditional means. Even with her textiles, no one can be certain whether or not she intends these sculptures as art or anything else. For Sedgwick, the intention matters less than the affect: the closeness she feels to the creator as a result of the sculpture’s texture and the proximity it begs of its audience. “To perceive texture,” writes Sedgwick, “is never only to ask or know What is it like? nor even just How does it impinge on me [author’s emphasis]? Textural perception always explores two

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Figure 5: Judith Scott (Cover of Touching Feeling by Eve Sedgwick), Photo © Leon Borensztein 1999
other questions as well: How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?”245 The question resonates with Davis’s story because, in the end, challenging labor conditions are connected to wasteland ideologies and conceptions of use value. Even Davis’s narrator feels unsure about the utility of art in circumstances like those she describes. What use is the korb woman? And, in Judith’s case, what use is the textile sculpture? What hope can these works provide in terms of institutional change? Hope—whether expressed aesthetically or by way of faith—is a dangerous commodity in Davis’s story, as the opening epigraph asks, “What hope or answer of redress”246 might someone bound to oppressive circumstances expect—especially when that person is looked upon as not much different than the wasteland in which he or she labors? But in the cases of both Hugh Wolfe and Judith Scott, waste upsets preconceived notions of utility, especially those innate to commodity-thinking, and in so doing, expands not only the idea of use value but its corresponding values as well: personhood, freedom, and most important to this study, ability.

I. Scumming the Bullion Dross

Rebecca Harding Davis’s Life in the Iron-Mills introduces a new kind of American wasteland to the literary scene, a wasteland that departs in interesting ways from its associations with frontier wilderness and the wastes-as-commons. In this industrial frontier, immigrants labor with no hope of a city on the hill. Their city is Dis, an inferno under the hill—a landscape, as one of Davis’s characters describes it, “summat deilish to look at.”247


247 Ibid., 39, 45.
Hardly a land of opportunity, this America’s “idiosyncrasy,” as the narrator describes it, is smoke and ash, auguring both the violence of the Civil War and the growth of industrial prosperity. The smoke makes clear observation difficult, even on a psychological level, as if everyone, from the immigrant laborer to the wealthy mill manager, were caught in a fog of uncertainty about individual direction, uncertainty about economic roles, and uncertainty about the country’s future. “Masses of men with dull, besotted faces” rarely look up from the ground, says the narrator, “. . . skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes; stooping all night over boiling cauldrons of metal; . . . breathing from infancy to death an air saturated with

Figure 6: Detail from Eli L. Hayes, Simmons Titus & David Rumsey Titus Collection, and Cartography Associates. Wheeling Iron Works - Top Mill Wheeling Iron and Nail Co., Wheeling, West Va., 1877
fog and grease and soot . . .” It was not uncommon for polluted mill towns to choke residents indiscriminately. But “[f]or industrial advocates,” writes Jill Gatlin, “smoke symbolized manufacturing might and economic triumph,” despite the unbreathable air and blackened buildings. From the 1830s through the 1860s, politicians in Wheeling defended their begrimed environs against the example of cleaner cities like Cleveland. Wheeling had six rolling mills and was second only to Philadelphia, which had seven, and Pittsburgh, which eclipsed them both with fifteen within city limits. Its economic well-being outweighed arguments for the physical welfare of its citizens. For some cities at this time, smog was a mark of success. It meant hard work and good protestant ethics. Whereas poverty, as always, reflected moral inadequacy.

To this bleak environment, Life in the Iron-Mills flashes back. The narrator describes a house formerly occupied by Welsh immigrants, the cellars of which lodged the Wolfe family: Hugh Wolfe, who refines iron, Hugh’s father, and Hugh’s cousin, Deborah, a hunchback employed at the cotton mills. Hugh’s story touches on the plight of immigrant laborers whose numbers contributed to the milling workforce of nineteenth-century Wheeling. Physical

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248 Ibid., 40.


251 Ibid., 206. For more in the depiction of the poor as morally inferior to the rich, see introductory discussion of Vinay Gidwani’s anthropological study of garbage pickers and, in the first section of this essay, the depiction of the poor as “idle” thieves and beggars by the Tory gentry.
conditions were poor, but political nativism at the time worsened matters. Having risen to prominence in the early 1850s, the Know-Nothing Party detested foreigners and Catholics and opposed their assimilation economically, even violently. Families like the Wolfes faced opposition in all aspects of their daily lives.

Davis illustrates just how dark life could be for the Welsh laborer by setting the story in a series of cave-like locales. In the damp, blackened basement, the Wolfes (a name suited to the animal existence depicted and the “kennel-like rooms” in which they slept) do little else than eat potatoes and labor in the mills. Rarely is there even enough time to sleep, as Deborah returns home from the cotton mills only long enough to fix Hugh’s dinner and carry it to him. “Their lives were like those of their class: incessant labor . . . eating rank pork and molasses, drinking—God and the distillers only know what; with an occasional night in jail, to atone for some drunken excess.”

Hugh spends most of his waking hours puddling in the Wheeling furnaces. A puddler refines raw metals into stronger, purer metals with intense heat—a sweltering business of fire and iron. Something of John Milton’s Hell frames the mill industry and its arduous labor, as William Blake famously noticed of mills in the preface to his epic poem, Milton: A Poem in Two Books (c. 1808), when he described the Albion Flour Mills of London as “dark” and “Satanic.” Blake’s demonic vision steals into Davis’s prose report:

> The road leading to the mills had been quarried from the solid rock, which rose abrupt and bare on one side of the cinder-covered road, while the river, sluggish and black, crept past on the other. The mills for rolling iron are simply immense tent-like roofs, covering acre of ground, open on every side. Beneath these roofs Deborah looked in on a city of fires, that burned hot and fiercely in the night. Fire in every horrible form: pits of flame waving in the wind; liquid metal-flames writhing in tortuous streams through the sand; . . . It was like a street in Hell.\(^253\)

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\(^{252}\) Davis, Life in the Iron-Mills, 42.

\(^{253}\) Ibid., 45.
I offer the narrator’s description because Hell, in literary discourse, is the wasteland of wastelands, the ultimate representation of use value depleted, so much so that its perceived absence always means suffering for someone else. But in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667; rev. 1672), we find another parallel to Davis’s *Iron-Mills*, one that aesthetically repurposes the idea of that ultimate wasteland. In the first book, after Satan rouses his legions to make of Hell something more suited to the majesty the demons feel they represent, we get a description of Hell not unlike Davis’s description of the mill, but also of the material Hugh will repurpose to aesthetic ends: “There stood a Hill not far whose griesly top / Belch’d fire and rowling smoak; the rest entire / Shon with a glossie scurff, undoubted sign / That in his womb was hid metallic Ore.”

The idiosyncrasy of this place is also smoke and ash, but the metal signifies opportunity in a place especially designed to be *empty* of opportunity.

```plaintext
Soon had his crew
Op'nd into the Hill a spacious wound
And dig'd out ribs of Gold. Let none admire
That riches grow in Hell; that soyle may best
Deserve the precious bane.

* * *
Nigh on the Plain in many cells prepar'd,
That underneath had veins of liquid fire
Sluc'd from the Lake, a second multitude
With wondrous Art found out the massie Ore,
Severing each kind, and scum'd the Bullion dross
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Even in Hell, “wondrous Art” can tap the richness of the wastes, the “bullion” of the “dross.” It is, oddly enough, this “soyle” that “may deserve the precious bane.” Bane, in its archaic sense,

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would have meant poison, or something deadly. The critique is economic in nature, money being the root of all evil. Gold would be a mineral quite appropriate to Hell, in that sense. But Milton strangely pairs adjectives and nouns with opposing meanings (precious and bane, bullion and dross). The affect is slightly confusing, as if the speaker were hesitant to commit to what otherwise might be a fairly straightforward critique of greed and power. In the 1732 edition, the classical scholar and English theologian Richard Bentley called the final phrase of the passage quoted “[a] strange blunder since bullion is the purified ore; and dross, the scum and refuse of it.” In 1749, Thomas Newton, Bishop of Bristol, drew from the so-called “blunder” an ideological analogy pertinent to Davis’s, saying, “‘Bullion’ here does not mean purified ore but
ore boiled or boiling; when the dross is taken off it is then purified. Milton writes in a way agreeable to this in ‘Of Reformation’, ‘by the same Alchymy that the Pope uses, to extract heaps of gold, and silver out of the drossie Bullion of the Peoples sinnes’. Of course, Newton’s analogy isn’t quite appropriate, given the context. He looks at the metaphorical use of dross and bullion in a broad, literary way, though Milton obviously means to criticize the Anglican and Catholic church’s fleecing of the congregation. And still, Milton’s juxtaposition of conflicting ideas is what makes it expansive enough to uphold opposing interpretations. That something rich lives within the body, empty of goodness and redemption, does indeed resonate with the passage in *Paradise Lost*, for the emptiness of the dross is never really empty. It can be remade with that “precious” metal within—another metaphorical excavation of the wastes, but one that makes Milton’s Satan relatable, or at least, sympathetic—a useful figure in the deconstruction of waste ideology—if only for this reason: a group cast out of paradise observes in the refuse of Hell what Heaven itself refuses to see. To the question of what the wastes want, the necessity of being seen stands out and gives the reader something to compare and contrast: what those in the wastes see versus what those outside the wastes see.

There are two ideological classes of outsider in Davis’s story, the immigrants being the most obvious class and the one Davis’s readership would have recognized as such. But halfway through the story, a small party of men enter from outside the foundry. They include Mr. Clarke, the overseer; Kirby, son of the mill’s owner; Doctor May, local physician; Mitchell, Kirby’s brother-in-law; and a reporter. Mr. Clarke and the reporter eventually exit the scene and leave the three remaining men to the darkness. Why is the departure of Mr. Clarke and the reporter

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significant? After all, the narrator never follows up on their whereabouts and never has them respond to later events. An overseer imposes on the public his own visual interpretation of reality. He controls by seeing for, or in the place of, everyone else, enforcing his views in any number of ways: politically, legally, physically. A reporter vies with the overseer for a depiction of reality less obscured by propaganda. But essentially, the reporter is like the overseer in that he or she sees for the public in as authoritative a fashion as the facts can muster. Remove these two extremes of public oversight, and what remains is the individual’s one-on-one encounter with reality and, more importantly, with his or her own preconceived ideas about that reality. Context, historical and otherwise, may help very little in piecing together the logic of that experience, not unlike Milton’s use of conflicted language, which is why, when this happens outside of fiction.

Figure 8: Richard Serra, Tilted Arc (1981); photo by Anne Chauvet
in public spaces—say, the open display of an avant-garde sculpture—the object encounters resistance. Robert Hughes calls this phenomenon the “shock of the new” and gives the example of Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981), a minimalistic and “ferociously uncivic sculpture” that cut a rather large office plaza in downtown Manhattan in half.\textsuperscript{257} It was destroyed eventually due to public outcry. In *Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in American Culture* (2006), Michael Kammen notes that much of the negative criticism that public art (he talks about sculptures here too) sometimes garners from media and political offices has to do with the artist’s failure to “achieve historical perspective” by alluding to past works that supplement, rather than supplant, “historical and moralistic motifs.”\textsuperscript{258} He quotes an article from *Newsweek* in which a particularly unfavorable review of a public sculpture appears. In its way, the passage speaks perfectly to the matter of Kirby, May, and Mitchell:

> The simple fact is that most modern art is not well suited to serve a public purpose. For the most part, abstract art was made to be seen in a private room or in the neutral space of a museum. It does not celebrate common cultural aspirations or fix any hierarchy of social values, which was a traditional function of public art. There is no iconography which people without esthetic know-how can interpret; if public sculpture commemorates anything . . . it is the artist himself.\textsuperscript{259}

The “artist himself,” the individual’s aesthetic expression, confounds “common cultural” sentiment and fixed hierarchies of social value, as clearly the case of outsider art—*art brut*, the art of the autodidact—attests, given its exclusion from mainstream exhibition and education. But


more than that, as the art critic Dave Hickey argues, it is often “not the thing portrayed that challenges us . . . It is [our] impudent resort to praise of the margin (not some vague critique of the mainstream) that challenges the powers that be.” When the margins (the wastes) are extolled, “the institution is disclosed for what it is: the moral junkyard of a pluralistic civilization.”

Mitchell is the byproduct of that civilization. He is the story’s dilettante, a dabbler in arts and sciences, a cosmopolitan and amateur, but even he is shocked into silence when suddenly he encounters the korl woman. “‘Kirby, what’s that?’ Mitchell started back, half-frightened, as suddenly turning a corner, the white figure of a woman faced him in the darkness,—a woman, white, of giant proportions, crouching on the ground, her arms flung out in some wild gesture of warning.”

To say that Mitchell’s fright alludes to the experience of sublimity much evoked in mid-nineteenth century literature and earlier might seem the appropriate reading of the scene. But the erasure of historical and iconographic context in this supposedly empty wasteland warrants some expansion of our inquiry.

The initial shock of the encounter results, first, in silence, then in two attempts to sense the sculpture physically. It’s almost as if, spoken language being removed, an involuntary reliance on the body’s instinctual literacy takes over. “I thought it was alive,” says Mitchell. Kirby touches it, feels that it is korl, and wants to know who made it. “Can’t say,” says one of the lower overseers. “Some of the hands; chipped it out in off-hours,” he says. “Chipped to some purpose,” Kirby replies. “Do you see, Mitchell?” “I see,” says Mitchell. There is so much to

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262 Ibid., 53.
unpack in this brief exchange, but of particular interest to me is Davis’s focus on sight, touch, and the “purpose” of both. In a moment reminiscent of James Thompson’s exclamatory “SEE!” in our earlier reading of James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Leatherstocking Tales*, Mitchell must reckon with the physical object before him, rather than the idea of the object. Is the korl woman real or a misinterpretation of his surroundings? Is it familiar or completely beyond the scope of reason?

He had stepped aside where the light fell boldest on the figure, looking at it in silence. There was not one line of beauty or grace in it: a nude woman’s form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with some one poignant longing. One idea: there it was in the tense, rigid muscles, the clutching hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf’s. Kirby and Doctor May walked around it, critical, curious. Mitchell stood aloof, silent. The figure touched him strangely.⁶³

Mitchell, we are to understand, is a man of the world, a man conversant in philosophy and the history of ideas, a man not to be left dumbstruck by sculptures that allow of multiple interpretations, “accepting all, despising nothing in heaven, earth, or hell, but one-idead men,” the narrator tells us.⁶⁴ And here is a sculpture whose “one idea” Mitchell senses but cannot hate for reasons he himself cannot immediately fathom. In the imperfection of the korl woman’s form bides a strength that is “tense,” “wild,” “eager,” and “starving.” But the sculpture refuses to be read as “wild” by one reader and “tense” by another. She is both at once, and to that kind of affect, spoken language can’t always respond. The sculpture’s semblance to something familiar is enough to give Mitchell pause. As Alfred Gell argues in his theory of anthropology: recognition, if only vague recognition, is the first step, or stage, in the process of affective

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⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 51.
communication. “I see,” says Mitchell. But touch is also important, which leads me into the part of this study that deals more strictly with the problem of affect and intention.

Mitchell is “strangely touched.” Perhaps the most critical moment in the story, the outcome will decide Hugh’s fate. It is a moment of decision, a moment of opportunity. Mitchell can choose to perceive this place and its denizens differently, or he can walk away. “Touch” means several things, but three interpretations in particular seem important to this passage. The first has to do with a biblical allusion that Davis doesn’t describe in any of her personal writings but that would not have been out of keeping with the narrator’s Christian education. Mitchell is in a state of disbelief before this otherworldly figure. So too was the apostle Thomas commanded to touch Christ’s wound in order to believe what he saw. But the allusion is “strangely” reversed in Davis’s story. The korl woman, who is the figure of the divine, insofar as the work of art outlives the Wolfes, touches Mitchell, as if he were the one with the wound, and as if he were the one with the power to resurrect another person in this story. Of course, he is that one, and he does have that authority. The second meaning of touch corresponds to the idea of confusion—a typical response to the wastes, as was noted in section two of this essay. To be “touched” (or “touched in the head”) expresses our mistrust of a person’s sanity. We think the person “slightly mad” or “mentally unsound.” “I believe his brain’s touched,” says Hugh’s jailor toward the end, after Hugh laughs and says, “I think I’ll get out,” despite the irons on his feet. In Shakespeare’s Hamlet, the stars that oversee Hamlet’s tragedy are described as “wonder-

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266 John 20:27 KJV.

wounded hearers.”268 It’s a phrase I like to apply to Mitchell, struck as he is by a work of art, wounded by wonder, and like Hamlet, caught in a fight-or-flight scenario. And finally, Davis suggests the importance of sympathy. Once can be “touched” by a work of art—moved emotionally269—which is equally important if, in the language of semiotics, the sign compels us to create meaning as a response. That meaning draws on our sympathies, even, whether we know it or not, our complicity, which can be uncomfortable, even frightening.270 All three understandings of “feeling” inform the way Mitchell reacts to the korl woman, but at this point, I want to make an analogy that I hope adds real world stakes to this emphasis on affective communication and its relationship to waste aesthetics.

II. Craf ting Affect

Judith Scott, who appears on the cover of the aforementioned book by Eve Sedwick, was born with Down syndrome and lost her hearing while still very young. Sadly, her deafness went misdiagnosed, and like many disabled children during the mid-twentieth century and earlier, she was institutionalized, spending over thirty years of her life barred from educational opportunities. Judith eventually moved in with her sister in California where she was enrolled in Oakland’s Creative Growth Art Center (CGAC). After trying her hand at two-dimensional pictures—using


270 Hickey, The Invisible Dragon, 24–27. Hickey makes reference to Robert Mapplethorpe’s highly controversial X Portfolio and the public’s response to what most felt had no counterpart in the tradition aesthetic institutions of the time.
pencils, pens, paint, and producing visual nests of squiggles and zigzags—Judith was given the opportunity to work alongside fiber artist, Sylvia Seventy, who, after struggling with Judith to follow the class prompts, decided to give her free reign with her materials. The objects that Judith made incorporated the entanglements of her sketches and brought them into a three-dimensional space, equally as perplexing to the eye as her early drawings. If the eye were the only point of contact, then Judith’s work might end in its indecipherable knots. But here again

Figure 9: Judith Scott, Line Drawings

“the question is less about ‘what’ things are for a given society,” as Hickey, Sedgwick, and Bill Brown argue, “than about what claims on your attention and on your action are made on behalf
of things.²⁷¹ The action Seventy took on behalf of Judith’s drawings and their claims on her attention was to expand the repertoire of instruments rather than reduce them—a decision, as suggested earlier, that Mitchell faces when confronted with the korl woman. Should he expand Hugh’s opportunities or restrain them, based solely on the “thing” created?

In Judith’s earliest textiles, unidentifiable clusterings of found objects protrude under a thick dermis of paint. Depending on how exhibitions display the sculptures—horizontally or vertically—claims made on these sculptures’ behalf might range from the organic to the totemic.

Figure 10: Judith Scott, Textile Bundle with Paint

Interpretations of this kind feature heavily in John MacGregor’s biography of Scott, to which I will return momentarily. But “[i]f society seems to impose itself on the ‘corporeal imagination’,” as Brown suggests, “when and how does that imagination,” he asks, “struggle against the

imposition, and what role do things, physically or conceptually, play in the struggle?"^{272}

Ascribing an imagination to the textile, whether “corporeal” or otherwise, seems to me a step too far toward anthropomorphism. But the fact that the “thing” resists anthropomorphism does not necessarily mean that understanding it is out of the question. It simply means that the borders of the viewer’s imagination have been reached. To tread further would be to trespass on the intention of the maker, which is not unusual in situations where the thing made cannot be explained by the maker, whether due to disability, as in Judith’s case, or to some other reason. Simply put, the maker’s intent may be known, but that’s not to say that the thing’s “struggle” against interpretation is not a kind of language in itself.

Echoing the sociologist Richard Sennett, Alexander Langlands, archeologist and medieval historian, reminds us that craft is “how we interact materially, with each other and our immediate surroundings.” But there is a much older use of the word, the meaning of which is far more capacious. The original word “cræft” was used over a thousand years ago in the writings of Alfred the Great (849 CE – 899 CE), Anglo-Saxon King of Wessex. Cræft spoke to one’s “skill” in the making of artifacts, as it does still. But it carried with it additional connotations, like “wisdom” and “resourcefulness,” or a wisdom in resourcefulness.^{273} Wrapped and knotted with brightly colored yarn, Judith’s sculptures incorporate those aspects of her surroundings that are hard and rigid into a softer medium. The process is always the same, which, in itself, may not speak to Judith’s agency in any normative way, but with regard to her cræft, a certain

^{272} Ibid.

resourcefulness inflects the object. Yarn, embroidery floss, trims, cardboard, fabric, and newspaper compose the exterior layers which, themselves, have unknown depths, variations, colors, and textures, not to mention (in the case of the newspapers used) information. To speak as if fibers make up the surface of the object is only partially true. The insides of these textiles are packed with concealed objects—broomsticks, craft balls, yarn cones, pieces of metal, shoes, whatever Judith could find lying around—and those internal objects are themselves fragments of other things, so that the final piece is only deceptively whole.

Judith’s work is like a horizon. The closer one approaches, the further it removes itself, which is only to say that the sculpture, ultimately, leads us back to ourselves. Glenn Adamson in his book, Thinking through Craft (2007), stresses the importance of this dialectical experience in craftwork. “[C]raft only exists in motion,” he says. It is “organized around material experience” which is itself a “relational concept rather than a fixed category.”274 Eve Sedgwick remarks on those fixed categories in her introduction to Touching, Feeling, attacking models of normative communication. She claims that touch, for instance, is not just a type of intelligence like any other; it communicates more immediately than other perceptual systems.275 Its raison d’être is contact—the antithesis of the rule drilled into every kindergartener: Keep your hands to yourself. Sedgwick draws on Renu Bora’s provocative essay, “Outing Texture,” to explain the potential of touch to affect understanding. Bora differentiates between texture (with one x) and texxture (with two) in order to salvage the history inscribed in tactile art or artifacts. “Texxture is the kind of texture that is dense with offered information about how substantively, historically, materially, it

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275 Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 14.
came into being. A brick or a metalwork pot that still bears the scars and uneven sheen of its making would exemplify texture in this sense. Texture, on the other hand, is “usually glossy if not positively tacky” and “insists instead on the polarity between substance and surface, texture that signifies the willed erasure of its history.” Korl, for example, is the waste byproduct of refining pig iron and the medium used by Hugh to create his sculpture. The rough korl gives the sculpture a reality, a history. More importantly, it creates a texture for Hugh by association. Though it may be anachronistic to say so, it is useful to think of Davis’s achievement here as an appropriation of waste for the invention of texture so that the truly invisible “thing” (Hugh) can be discovered by those ideologically blind to his presence. My confidence in this claim comes from the fact that korl never really existed. Davis made it up. In her essay on Wheeling’s iron industry and its Welsh laborers, Anne Kelly Knowles explains:

Korl is an imaginary amalgam of furnace slag, a glassy by-product of the smelting process that was sometimes beige; and the light porous, dark-gray cinders that were scraped out of puddling and heating furnaces at rolling mills after each “turn.” Neither material would have existed in large blocks, nor would either be amenable to carving, except perhaps by blow-torch.

To squelch lingering suspicions, Knowles visited abandoned blast furnaces and consulted expert metallurgists and industrial archeologists of American iron who verified the claim. Davis’s korl is a fiction—but a necessary fiction. Like Judith, Hugh gathers the wastes—the material at hand—and constructs what John Macgregor refers to, with regard to Judith Scott’s sculptures, as

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276 Ibid.
277 Ibid., 14–15.
278 Ken Fones-Wolf and Ronald L. Lewis, Transnational West Virginia, 231.
“messages not sent, but nevertheless received.”

The textual message is a defense against historical erasure, which Arthur Young, in the first section of this essay, decries as the “blank” that history always makes of the wastes. Hugh’s presence—the fact that he exists in the mill, however thoroughly that existence may be disavowed—is a reminder of the threat of refinement. Eavesdropping on the bourgeois visitors, Hugh marks in Mitchell’s face “every smallest sign of refinement, then back to himself, seeing as in a mirror his filthy body, his more stained soul.”

Mitchell, May, and Kirby—more specifically, their class—represent the purveyors of refinement.

In a sequence of photographs taken of Judith working on a textile from the beginning of February to mid-May, 1998, we are shown Judith’s textualizing process. First, she appropriates something no longer useful. In at least one case, that thing is a broken floor fan. Then she wraps the fan with an initial layer of rope or thread or yarn, trapping at the joints other found objects: chunks of Styrofoam, wood, cardboard tubes. Once the joints are secure, the fragmented areas begin to outgrow the original object as a kind fibrous tumor. The object’s spatial coordination—the base of the fan serving as a foundation—falters under the weight of the additions. The fan itself is eventually eclipsed beyond recognition as more Styrofoam, boxes, tubes, and detritus get sutured onto the surface and eventually disappear. The process is a long one, and what these photographs do not show are the many hours that Judith is left to her own devices. Working six hours a day, every day, for nearly twenty years at the CGAC, it was difficult for staff to monitor her every move. It wasn’t until these textiles were x-rayed later that a surprising number of “extra” items were discovered inside. Judith scavenged material from nooks and crannies, even


Figure 11: Judith Scott Working

Figure 12: Judith Scott Working
private offices, all over the studio. Surprisingly, no one noticed these “shopping expeditions,” as Macgregor calls them. She concealed her findings in her purses or bags. Not until wallets and car keys vanished did eyes turn toward Judith. But the problem was never one of theft. It was the irretrievability of the objects and the subsequent budgetary discrepancies of missing inventory. The CGAC took the matter as an opportunity, says MacGregor, to “adapt.” The question was: how might the program expand its concept of economy and utility to include Judith’s talents?

This question puts intention in the hands of those who compose the social context in which Judith, and others like her, live. Many social theorists, Foucault being the most obvious, and outsider scholars like Lyle Rexer, have argued that deviancy is a socially constructed matter, making the institutions responsible for the claims these things make on our attention and even more so on our actions—either, on the negative side, as messages of social aberration or, on the

positive, as indexes of economic dependency. This is partly what prevents the legitimacy of outsider labor. But the fact that craft is involved has something to do with it too, as Langlands explains: “craft is . . . a loaded term as it is a pragmatic description of how one earns one’s livelihood. In its defamatory use value judgements are made. To uncritically accept the present reading of craft [that is, as a labor of lesser value than industrial manufacture] is to fail to see beyond its recorded history to the actual ability and skill it purports to describe.”

Langlands traces the defamatory use of the word back to craft’s association with necromancy and magic, then onward to being “crafty,” or cunning and deceitful. There is something in the word that indicates self-taught skill, amateurism—another category of self-improvement that fared poorly in the twentieth century’s push toward specialization. But such is the effect of language on real social relationships. I am not trying to make a case here for cræft’s revival as a concept or a word. After all, the problem has more to do with action than spoken language. But the decline of cræft’s stock resonates with the ideological implications of waste—namely, that the defamatory character of “craft” (which is in no way universally defamed) is a kind of disavowal. As I’ve been arguing thus far, the word “waste” is often a textual disavowal of real places and categories of people considered useless by some majority or authority. It’s not difficult to understand why. Like waste, craft threatens commodity systems with alternative economies. This is what Vinay Gidwani, in his “Six Theses on Waste,” argues in the case of commons and their self-contained economies, as discussed in the introduction to this essay. The craftsman or craftswoman, in many instances, would prefer to make than to consume, severing dependencies normalized by commodity systems.

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282 Langlands, Cræft, 19.
The CGAC, if it were to abide by a normative social ethos, might consider Judith’s textiles transgressive, performed as they are by a person whose abilities translate inefficiently to the larger commodity system in which the CGAC itself participates. Or it might act in opposition to its own economic interests and refine Judith’s abilities by isolating her and her sculptures—that is, by keeping them away from the public eye or by further enabling the overseers (as mentioned in Davis’s story) to blind the public to the disabled’s economic potential. But “what is economy?” Jacques Derrida asks in his essay on gift exchange. Among its irreducible normative values, economy includes law (nomos) and home (oikos: home, property, family, the hearth, the fire within). Nomos does not only signify the law in general, but also the law of distribution, the law of sharing or partition, the law as partition and participation. As soon as there is law, in other words, there is partition, there is economy.283 To this definition of economy, I would add the word, “fairness.” Over and over, Davis’s narrator admonishes the reader to “be just.” “Be just: when I tell you about this night, see [Hugh] as he is. Be just,—not like man’s law, which seizes on one isolated fact, but like God’s judging angel . . .”284 In her short treatise on aesthetics and materiality, On Beauty and Being Just (1999), Elaine Scarry addresses the issue of “fairness” both in terms of the amicable features of one’s appearance and the ethical issues raised by the act of “being fair,” “playing fair,” and “fair distribution.” An interesting etymology follows: from the Dutch verb, vegen, and its German counterpart, fegen, meaning “‘to adorn’, ‘to decorate’, and ‘to sweep’.” “But fegen,” she continues, “is in turn connected to the verb ‘fay’, the transitive and intransitive verb meaning ‘to join’, ‘to fit’, ‘to unite’, ‘to pact’. ‘Pact’ in turn—the making of a


284 Davis, Life in the Iron-Mills, 49.
covenant or treaty or agreement—is from the same root as ‘pax, pacis’, the word for peace.”

Ultimately, fairness moves us toward a “symmetry of everyone’s relations to each other.”

Here too, we get a sense of Adamson’s thinking on craft—that a dialectic between the environment and the thing created are important to its social reception, nevermind the cognitive abilities of the creator. The fair distribution in this economy has, first and foremost, to do with the expansion of equalities to those typically excluded from normative economies.

Derrida goes on to say that it is the act of circular reciprocity that gives energy and shape to the exchange of gifts—the cycle of the economy, the circulation of goods, the revolution which defines the circle in motion. For example, art historian Miwon Kwon talks about the effects of the avant-garde on the art world of the 1960s and 70s, arguing that (aesthetic implications aside) the dissident artist at this time attempts to install alternative models of exchange that counter, complicate, or parody the dominant market-and-profit-based system of exchange. In fact, many of [these movements] engage the logic of the gift economy as one such alternative. By this I mean that the artwork in such cases functions as a mechanism to instigate social exchanges or interaction that specifically put into motion a circuit of obligation and reciprocity, typically involved in giving, receiving or accepting, and giving in return. Furthermore, in addition to reorganizing the position and relationship of the art maker and art audience in a general sense, such artwork, through process of exchange, tests each person’s sense of honor and dishonor, shame, power, risk, fear, status, humiliation, and prestige.

The passage is worth quoting in full for its applicability to Judith’s social situation, not only to the extent that it frames the aesthetic economy of outsider art as a commons, whereby resources


(gifts) can be used in nonsubtractable ways, but that it contains within its own experiment in fairness an antidote to the defamation of craft. But most important here is the porous nature of this particular gift economy. Though it could be self-sufficient, excluding itself from normative economies, it could also extend its boundaries to include certain aspects of those same normative economies, like the buying and selling of goods (in this case, art) for capital, so long as that capital circulates back into the commons. This is, in fact, how the CGAC operates. Judith Scott depends on the CGAC as a creative outlet, but the CGAC equally depends on Judith’s production to help fund the other so-called disabled artists they teach.

Thus far, I have used the word “capabilities” freely, without relating it to a specific theory. By capability I mean a particular revision of Rawlsian economics predicated on “[t]he dominant theory of justice in the Western tradition or political philosophy”—the Social Contract—“which sees principles of justice as the outcome of a contract people make, for mutual advantage, to leave the state of nature and govern themselves by law.”287 Martha Nussbaum’s groundbreaking essay, “Beyond the Social Contract: Capabilities and Global Justice” questions the actual existence of any real socially “mutual advantage,” given how uneven access is to education, medicine, and economic security throughout the world. Nussbaum uses the subject of disability as a way to address the problems with western, particularly American, social contracts. Tenet #4 of her Ten Principles for the Global Structure, which says that corporations should start living up to their “corporate” identity,288 is represented most effectively by the relationship between the CGAC and Judith’s work—a relationship predicated on the idea that disability is


288 Nussbaum, 10–12.
simply a different type of capability. Capability is not the byproduct of charity or profits. Rather, argues Nussbaum, it is the relation of disabled things-in-motion to other things-in-motion that creates what Bruno Latour calls “collective agency,” where “things” compel their audience to adapt to the needs of the community over the individual. In this case, the “community” includes the environment as well: the tools, especially, that the disabled need to speak affectively and be understood, or if not completely understood, at least supported. At the risk of distracting my reader from the line of argument, I want to explain briefly what Latour means by collective agency, so as not to apply it arbitrarily to the subject at hand. To explain his theory, Latour recounts the classic debate over whether or not guns kill people or people with guns kill people. The question, according to Latour, leads to a false conclusion based on a false binary—namely, that guns and humans are distinct entities. Latour argues that once the gun and hand meet, the result is a new collective agent: gunman. We might say, then, that the original goal of man-without-gun is not to harm someone else but to express his anger some other way. When the gun enters the equation, it interrupts man-without-gun’s initial intent. At this point, he detours toward another set of possibilities. Maybe he uses the gun, maybe he doesn’t. The outcome does not matter. What matters is that man-without-gun has become man-with-gun, a hybrid, a collective.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁹ Bruno Latour, Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 174–215. Alfred Gell, in Art and Agency, argues something similar. Instead of “collective agency,” Gells talks about “material-cultural mysticism” whereby “things” can be said to have agency in relation to their human users. Like Latour, Gell isn’t arguing for the consciousness of sticks and stones. A girl’s relationship to her doll is not unlike a person’s affection for Michelangelo’s David. These things become “social beings” in the call and response of human affections and considerations. I footnote Gell here to avoid the term “mysticism” in my own analysis, which, to my mind, carries with it less useful associations. “Social being” is a good phrase, but it doesn’t retain the emphasis on intelligence the way “collective agency does,” so I keep with Latour’s language here.
If we stick to Latour’s analogy, what seems to matter most is the express purpose upon which all other actions and detours follow the creation of that collective agency. Judith may not fit Latour’s model precisely as he articulates it, but if we modify the example slightly, then we might say that objects (yarn, string, sticks, paint, etc.) join together in the labor of the primary agent (Judith) to form a similar collective agency. The same could be said of the CGAC. Why is this important? It’s important because of the question Kirby puts to Hugh in the iron mills: What does the korl woman want? And to this simple question, Hugh submits an equally simply but poignant answer: “Summat to make her live.” A collective economy with values that recognize collective agency, like the CGAC, can provide a living for those who merely exist in the wastes.

Closed systems of hobby-oriented, craft labor—the weekend gardeners, the model airplane builders, the Starbucks knitters—according to Glenn Adamson “constitute their own worlds of reference”—an “interiority of amateur social structures. Such closed worlds are easily dismissed from the outside.” But their capacity for greater standards of equality may be worth serious consideration if, as “both a public and classless phenomenon,” the products (for example, Judith’s sculptures) can be “pedaled to every imaginable niche in the market.” “It should not be ignored” argues Benjamin Fraser in his study of the CGAC, “that the existence of a community-based art center . . . works against the possibility of exploitation by returning profits

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291 Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 139.

292 Ibid., 140.
from artistic work to the same social group whose labor has produced them.”

A substantial amount of the money made from the auctioning of Judith’s art, and the art of those alongside whom she works, goes directly back to the needs of the CGAC. But again, the outsider economy posited here is not closed. It takes advantage of the larger commodity system. The outcome of this relationship has less to do with capital than it does with the translation of disability to capability, which is to say, of making something or someone formerly treated as waste a valuable contributor to a larger shared economy based almost entirely upon that person or thing’s aesthetics. In this unusual “commodity situation,” to quote Arjun Appadurai, negative connotations of exploitation are reversed, as it is the social group in need who actually benefits. But, of course, the disabled, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised benefit too, the legitimacy of their work being recognized.

Judith’s example emphasizes the importance of legitimacy over intent in aesthetics of waste. Given the extreme circumstances of her isolation and the fierce productivity of her later years, much of the writing on Judith’s craft focuses on intent. Judith, for instance, appears to be embracing her sculpture as if it were a doll on the cover of Sedgwick’s book. Is it a doll? Is it a cushion? Is it a cocoon? The title of MacGregor’s biography, *Metamorphosis: The Fiber Art of Judith Scott* (1999), not only positions Judith’s work within the scholarship of that art in which things are, as Lyle Rexer puts it, created “under the conditions of a massively altered state of consciousness” by “people who are [often] institutionalized or psychologically compromised

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294 Ibid., 521.
according to standard clinical norms,” i.e. “outsider art,” but it also assumes the transformation of Judith through art, a romantic notion and in many ways the subject of Davis’s own critique in *Iron-Mills*. But the example of the CGAC shifts the responsibility of change to the economic system, not the disabled or the marginalized. The irony, of course, is that the system has been changing all along, becoming more multicultural, more contested, and more divided. Such was the “message not sent but nevertheless received” even at the start of the twentieth century. Industrialization refined (almost to the point of obliteration) post-enlightenment’s trust in reason and romanticism’s hope in universal fraternity. What modernism lost, writes Robert Hughes, was “the necessary metaphors by which a radically changing culture would be explained to its inhabitants.” None of the metaphors or tropes available to Davis could have reconciled Hugh to his condition—and by extension, the condition of the enslaved across the board, both in the mills and on plantations.

To be fair, many of Judith’s textiles bear a strong resemblance to cocoons and therefore beg a butterfly’s biography, though MacGregor never credits Judith with a consciousness capable of rendering the cocoons with intent. “There is not the slightest possibility that Judith envisions the eventual outcome, the final form, of her work,” says MacGregor. “She is engaged in a process of discovery and is observing the birth and mysterious transformation of the ‘thing’.” Of course, it is MacGregor making this observation, not Judith. A critique would be difficult, maybe impossible, without contriving familiar associations for the reader: a cocoon, a

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spider web, a doll, a mummy. The narrator of *Iron-Mills* takes on a similar role. In her article, “Sculpture in the Iron Mills: Rebecca Harding Davis’s Korl Woman,” Maribel Molyneaux argues that the narrator in Davis’s story is there to keep the reader’s attention on the “underclass.”²⁹⁸ That she does. The narrator implores her reader to pay attention—to look, to see, and to be just—even though she cannot help but to ascribe justice, in the end, to a place beyond this world, noting in the story’s final declaration: “God has set the promise of the Dawn.”²⁹⁹ That promise is a substitute for intent. Because the korl woman’s symbolism is so detached from the aesthetic, political, and religious symbols of western civilization to that point, the reader cannot, as she might wish to do, trust any promises about Hugh’s future or the future of those in his position. Davis makes this clear by opening the story with another sculpture—a broken angel whose “wings are covered with smoke, clotted and black.”³⁰⁰ The symbolism here is unmistakable, borrowing as it does from familiar Christian tropes, even Milton’s fallen angel. But the korl woman is born of industrial institutions, a modern reality never before experienced and completely without precedent. If God is to play any part in the greater scheme of things, that part must be, or so the story suggests, outside the scope of this narrative. There is a “great gulf,” says the narrator, between Hugh and the upper classes, “never to be passed”—a Dantean abyss of “difference.”³⁰¹ And this too is what the “thing” seems to “want”—not just “summat to live” but something to hope for.

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³⁰⁰ Ibid., 40.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 49-50, 52.
III. Hope: The Most Dangerous Commodity

Hope and justice are of primary concern in Davis’s Iron-Mills, but the distinction is not an easy one to discern. The narrator characterizes hope in religious terms: justice, as it were, in another life. But there is also a kind of emancipatory aesthetics that borrows from the language of religion, coupled with aesthetics, as the narrator says, “Think that God put into this man’s soul a fierce thirst for beauty,—to know it, to create it; to be—something, he knows not what,—other than he is.”302 This sentiment falls in line with what I identify in the final section of this essay as “self-emancipation,” which differs from Emerson’s “self-reliance.” Self-reliance may motivate Hugh to sculpt the korl woman, but it will not remake Hugh. For that metamorphosis, certain real, fiscal resources are required. As Georg Lukács reminds his readers, literary tropes alone cannot give back what commodification has taken.303 But Davis does something interesting. True, if Hugh were compared to commodities only, the problem would be less mysterious and more easily characterized. But Davis is not trying to “give back” what has been taken from Hugh, for even that which has been taken is beyond even Hugh’s understanding. Instead, Davis searches for a point of contact between these two worlds, these two classes, so vastly separated. It’s a place to begin, in terms of hope and justice. But conversation, discussion, debate—language by traditional means—won’t bridge that divide. The symbol of the korl woman is an

302 Ibid., 48.

affective mediation, “inert and mute,” in its way, but able to touch and to be seen. Appadurai
speaks precisely to this point when he says,

[c]ontemporary Western common sense, building on various historical traditions in philosophy, law, and natural science, has a strong tendency to oppose ‘words’ and ‘things’. Though this was not always the case even in the West, as Marcel Mauss noted in his famous work The Gift, the powerful contemporary tendency is to regard the world of things as inert and mute, set in motion and animated, indeed knowable, only by persons and their words.304

But when figures like Hugh cannot speak the language of these historical traditions, they are treated as if they were unknowable and without language, indeed without agency.

The professional and leisure classes—represented by the mill owner, the doctor, and the dilettante—exemplify a normative model of communication, walking and talking through the mines as if no one else were there but themselves. Even if Hugh could speak when spoken to, which he can, he cannot express clearly what it is he wishes to say. Deborah also is a woman of few words. And why shouldn’t they be silent? Fatigued, undernourished, poorly educated, and miserable, Hugh and Deborah, as the narrator describes them, have no reason to hope. What precedent do they have for miracles, for angels? In her literary biography of Davis, Jean Pfaelzer argues that the crucial difficulty of Iron-Mills is the “struggle to find an aesthetic language to express the ineffable nature of industrial reality.”305 But the stakes extend beyond accurate descriptions of a life in the iron mills—beyond even the reporter’s careful observation, which is one of the aspects of Iron-Mills that makes it such a useful text in the study of social metaphors like waste, the story being a kind of report inspired by fact. But its primary means of


communication differs from the newspaper. The korl woman, for instance, is not only an expression of Hugh’s personhood in the face of reification; it is also the expression of what Emma Lazarus would call later the “wretched refuse” in her sonnet, “The New Colossus” (1883):

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Lazarus’s sonnet, emblazoned on a bronze plaque at the foot of the Statue of Liberty, is America’s most important poem, I would argue, in the genre of waste aesthetics, making an explicit connection between ideologies of waste and the people (the immigrant, the poor, the refugee) to whom that ideology is applied. Though 1883, the year the poem was first published, is not 1861, the aesthetics bear comparing given not only the “message not sent but nevertheless received” but the use of the female sculpture to convey the message. The statue offers “world-wide welcome” to the “huddled masses” of Hughs and Deborahs. Liberty, the “Mother of Exiles,” beckons to the “homeless,” the “tempest-tost.” But these castoffs of humanity are precisely what America’s government often rejects, hence the message that is never really sent but, for those invested in social justice or such people, received all the same. Davis’s Iron-Mills and America’s monument to freedom share an elemental narrative. The iron industry is its plot. The “poor” “huddled masses yearning to be free” are its characters. Hugh sculpts the korl woman from the “refuse” of the puddled iron, the same iron that frames the statue. But the korl has a

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“fleshy hue” and texture. It is fragile, soft, easily manipulated, all things indicative of individualism without legal protections—that is, without legitimacy.

Even the physical posture of the korl woman anticipates Lady Liberty’s outstretched arm and open face. What she lacks, however, is the texture of the korl woman. Lady Liberty, ultimately is too refined to shock the Mitchells and Mays out there. Here too we are coming to terms with the difference between the written word and the affective language of the body, the poem and the sculpture. Lazarus’s poem is not unlike the museum plaque that gives context to the artifact. But in the wastes, as I’ve tried to underscore, context of any kind often eludes us. “I see,” says the narrator as she looks at the korl woman, “a bare arm stretched out imploringly in the darkness, and an eager, wolfish face watching mine: a wan, woeful face, through which the spirit of the dead korl-cutter looks out, with its thwarted life, its mighty hunger, its unfinished work.”

By comparison, Lady Liberty may look somewhat naive. The korl woman’s body is metonymic: a half-composed emblem expressed, for the most part, by the groping gesture of its “tense, rigid muscles, the clutching hands.” The narrator refers to Hugh and his fellow miners as “hands,” a common term used still today to refer to those whose labor is considered unskilled, or sometimes to all laborers generally. Knowles notes that typically Wheeling’s mills hired between fifteen and three hundred men (not a thousand, as Davis suggests) and of these men, roughly fifty percent were unskilled laborers. Thirty percent were skilled rollers, puddlers, and the like, and twenty may have been nail cutters. The hand is the harbinger of the factory cog.

308 Ibid., 53.
309 Ken Fones-Wolf and Ronald L. Lewis, Transnational West Virginia, 220.
Says Kirby to May, “I tell you, there’s something wrong that no talk of ‘Liberté’ or ‘Egalité’ will do away. If I had the making of men, these men [the immigrant laborers] who do the lowest part of the world’s work should be machines,—nothing more,—hands. It would be a kindness.”

Davis’s metonymic observations were prescient. Artists like Francis Picabia, for instance, wedded Fordism and human anatomy in ways that came to exemplify the ironic convergence of mechanical efficiency and human degradation. But Mark Seltzer, in his article “The Still Life,” argues that the hand in Davis’s Iron-Mills refuses to be reduced to machine metaphor and likens this resistance to Davis’s own act of writing. For Seltzer, the hand is but another manifestation of the still life, which is itself a genre that “links aesthetics to the market.” So much of traditional still life, after all, makes commodity its muse, especially food—pheasants and fruit often portrayed in decadent heaps, sometimes to the point of rot and decomposition. With this in mind, Seltzer reads still life as a form of conspicuous consumption. Certainly, this is part of what the korl woman wants to say, or does say in the affective context of her environment. But part of it too is a critique of the historical moment through a kind of affective


311 Caroline A. Jones, “The Sex of the Machine: Mechanomorphic Art, New Women, and Francis Picabia’s Neurasthenic Cure” in, Picturing Science, Producing Art, eds. Caroline Jones and Peter Galison (New York: Routledge, 1998), 145–80. The literature on machine/body metaphor is rich and extensive, going back at least as far as Hobbes and on through Marx. For a more summative view of more recent studies of this metaphor in nineteenth century literature, see Minds, Bodies, Machines, 1770-1930, eds. Deirdre Coleman and Hilary Fraser (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).


313 Ibid., 458.
Figure 14: Portrait d'une jeune fille americaine dans l'état de nudité, 1915
theory. Kirby looks over at Deborah sleeping on the pile of ash, then turns to his companions and says, “So many nerves to sting them [the laborers] to pain. What if God had put your brain, with all its agony of touch, into your fingers, and bid you work and strike with that?” The question implies two things: first, that the agency, the intelligence, of the laborer is in the very hand that strips him of his personhood (he is just a hand), and second, that the pain he suffers at his own fingertips is just as excruciating, if not more so, than the experience of pain by one whose intelligence is more traditionally recognized. Davis’s use of “touch” is far more sophisticated than has been acknowledged in the literature on her work, but perhaps not unjustly, as interest in affect is a relatively recent development among scholars and activists. But at the symbolic forefront of this interest stands the korl woman. The industrial waste that is her skin, her face, her arms and hands give texture to history and a tangible grammar to her language.

IV. Conclusion: Money & Meaning

Dumbstruck and confused, Kirby, May, and Mitchell turn their attention to Hugh who is asked to explain himself. The interrogation leads to a moment of ethical and philosophical crisis. Will they acknowledge Hugh as a person, like themselves, with capabilities? Will they help him out of this situation? Is the korl woman enough to affect that kind of change? And what, ultimately, does Davis mean by this strange pairing of art, waste, labor, and power? May, after looking over the korl sculpture, speaks to Hugh:

“Do you know, boy, you have it in you to be a great sculptor, a great man?—do you understand?” (talking down to the capacity of his hearer: it is a way people have with children, and men like Wolfe,)—“to live a better, stronger life than I, or Mr. Kirby here? A man may make himself anything he chooses. God has given you stronger powers than many men,—me, for instance.”

May stopped, heated, glowing with his own magnanimity. And it was magnanimous. The puddler had drunk in every word, looking through the
Doctor’s flurry, and generous heat, and self-approval, into his will, with those slow, absorbing eyes of his.

“Make yourself what you will. It is your right.”
“I know,” quietly. “Will you help me?”
Mitchell laughed again. The Doctor turned now, in a passion,—
“You know, Mitchell, I have not the means. You know, if I had, it is in my heart to take this boy and educate him for”—
“The glory of God, and the glory of John May.”
May did not speak for a moment; then, controlled, he said,—
“Why should one be raised, when myriads are left?—I have not the money, boy,” to Wolfe, shortly.
“Money?” He said it over slowly, as one repeats the guessed answer to a riddle, doubtfully. “That is it? Money?
“Yes, money,—that is it,” said Mitchell, rising, and drawing his furred coat about him. “You’ve found the cure for all the world’s diseases.—Come, May, find your good-humor, and come home.”

The exchange is not as straightforward as it seems. Money is both a serious and facetious answer. Mitchell, in his expensive fur coat, sarcastically validates May’s complaint that if only May had the money, he’d help. Of course, May does have the money, as does Mitchell, and certainly it would do Hugh a lot of good. But the incredulity implied by Mitchell’s sarcasm is not so easily ignored either, as changes required to help not only Hugh but all of those in his position are as socially systemic as they are financial. Hugh himself responds with disbelief: “Money?” he asks “doubtfully,” as if so simple, and so precise, a remedy could alleviate suffering so profound, or bridge a “gulf” so wide. Here again, the story experiments with Emersonian self-reliance. “Make yourself what you will. It is your right,” May says. The patronizing tone of a man like May was not lost on Davis who, in her autobiography, expressed disappointment at the vague shibboleths of New England’s Brahmin intellectuals:

Whether Alcott, Emerson, and their disciples discussed pears or the war, their views gave you the same sense of unreality, of having been taken, as Hawthorne said, at too long a range. You heard much sound philosophy and many sublime guesses at the eternal verities; in fact, never were the eternal verities so dissected

and pawed over and turned inside out as they were about that time, in Boston, by Margaret Fuller and her successors. But the discussion left you with a vague, uneasy sense that something was lacking, some back-bone of fact.  

The patronizing tone is not lost on Hugh either who, as a representative immigrant, embarked, as so many laborers did, to make themselves anew on American soil. “I know,” says Hugh—*I know I have the right to make of myself what I will.* But “[w]ill you help me?” he asks. May makes the mistake of averting the eye from the sculpture to Hugh. Hugh’s language is not May’s language. Only the korl woman can convince May, the story seems to suggest. As Bill Brown argues in his own essay on Davis’s *Iron-Mills*, “[M]erely seeing Wolfe would amount to an absolute misrecognition: a failure to see that he is (already) other than he is (and not just the degraded laborer he is). This is why the story requires the statue: it allows you to see what you cannot otherwise see”—what May and his companions cannot otherwise see.

But this encounter not only calls May’s attention to Hugh as a person, it calls attention to needs that money cannot always satisfy. We are not entirely certain if May realizes this. His aggravation might very well be due to the financial obligation he’s forced to feel, and that only. But when May asks what Hugh *means* by his korl woman, Hugh says, “She be hungry.” But no money can satisfy this hunger, and one suspects May understands, if only because of how terrifying the prospect of helping Hugh seems to be. “She be”—hunger, depravation (both physically and intellectually). That is what she *is*, is what *he* is. We know too that the korl

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woman wants “[s]ummat to make her [Hugh] live.” The “message not sent but nevertheless received” here is that Hugh is a being with desires greater than his needs. He understands, when he questions the mention of “money” as a remedy to his ills, that existence alone does not make a life. And this is the challenge May and his companions face. To give life, May must give more than money—money representing only a small expense in the greater social sacrifices required.

Hugh’s and Judith’s stories speak to the necessity of literacy in aesthetics as an important component of systemic change with regard to waste ideology, disabilities, and a movement toward more comprehensive social agency. In that sense, Iron-Mills is a strange blend of utopian criticism and dystopian anxiety. May and Mitchell like the idea of change but fear it will mean the end of their own livelihoods and freedom. Though Davis offers no alternative for the commercial values that dismiss the poor and marginalized, her story does seem to make a clear distinction between the significance of money and meaning when it comes to systemic social reform—a sentiment Dave Hickey puts rather poignantly, “institutions die from loss of funding, not lack of meaning. We die from lack of meaning and of joy.”

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318 Ibid., 55.

IV. Waste-as-Garden

Conceptually, wastelands and gardens oppose one another—emptiness vs. fullness, lack vs. abundance, disarray vs. order, danger vs. safety. One helps to define the other. The garden is everything the wasteland is not, and vice versa. But in gardening magazines and gardening advertisements, that which makes a garden a garden rarely appears. The rot, the compost, the rich decomposition gets edited out. Not only that, but the gardeners themselves are sometimes missing. What remains is the afterimage of hard, messy work without much reference to the cause. Whether it’s a photo of the gardens at Versailles or a digital snapshot of one’s own backyard cabbages, the image of the garden sans gardener shares with Edenic lore the idea that abundance can be ours without recourse to sweat and hard work. Erasures of this kind are innocent enough on the surface. But ideologically, they perpetuate a myth of exile from a better world rather than a plan of improvement for the current one.

In this section, I frame western garden aesthetics as a problem to be solved. How, for instance, can the less glamorous side of garden discourse—the messy labor involved, the unsightly waste created, and especially the relationship of gardens to those cast out toward the margins of society—be reconciled to its long history of Edenic ideals? The photographer Margaret Morton sees some conceptual overlap between wastelands and gardens. They share, she claims, a “transitory” nature, not only because both are subject to change and impermanence, but because of their use by those who are themselves transient, either by choice or by force. Ultimately, it’s not the actual garden I’m concerned about. It’s how the garden’s “transitory” qualities expand the concept of wastelands so that ideological divisions between wastelands and gardens are not so stark. My examples in this section may seem wide-ranging, as I move from
the gardens of homeless New Yorkers in Morton’s photography to the legend of the itinerant Johnny Appleseed to New England’s transitory gardener par excellence, Henry David Thoreau, but in all cases, we are interested in what the garden’s ideologies (progress, civilization, order, perfection) prevent us from seeing in the wastelands they seemingly oppose.

I. Transitory Gardens

In 1993, photographer Margaret Morton and urban landscape designer Diana Balmori co-published a book titled Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives—a selective look at gardens built by New York’s homeless. The book opens with a dedication to “the uprooted individuals who have tilled the streets of New York City in search of a home and, in the process, have laid bare the meaning of garden.” Although Morton and Balmori concede the long historical necessity of gardens for people of little means, they note how few of those gardens are ever remembered by history or literature. The “meaning” of the garden in this book, then, has to do with class consciousness. But it also speaks to the ideological resonance between home and garden. Both suggest at least a modicum of security and wellbeing. We might differentiate between a home and a shelter, for instance, if the shelter lacks certain furnishings or is only useful temporarily. Likewise, a garden might not seem like a garden if it fails to convey a sense of domesticity and stability. I’m intentionally narrowing the scope of what a garden and home communicate in typical middle class publications like Better Homes and Gardens, House & Garden, and Fine Gardening. In Instagram ads like the one shown below, purple cone flowers and trellised clematis ornament the yard and porch of a well-kept, folk Victorian, garden district

Figure 15: Description from Better Homes and Gardens: "Scalloped paneling on this front porch gable gives off a sweet, farmhouse look that ties the whole threshold together."

house. And like most images of this kind, the people who live and garden here are nowhere to be seen. Cropped where hints of neighboring property or paved roads might intrude upon the serenity of the ideal home, the image perpetuates the Edenic trope of beauty and abundance. This is the garden glamor that Morton and Balmori mean to transgress. “Constructed out of scarcity by persons whose basic needs—food, work, and shelter—are not met,” writes Balmori, homeless gardens “embody a sense of precariousness and fragility in nature.” Nevertheless, “[f]ew better examples of hope and the wish for fulfillment could be found.”\textsuperscript{321} It’s this latter claim about hope in seemingly hopeless places that resonates with the aesthetics of waste I’ve been characterizing.

\textsuperscript{321} Ibid., 3.
In Morton’s photographs, we see no houses and rarely even any “gardens,” if by gardens we mean the cultivation of soil and the presence vegetation. But that’s not to say that the homes are missing, because in Morton’s images, the kind of garden that makes a house a home is reimagined. Gardening, in Morton’s book, becomes a way of constructing a home from almost nothing. And to that extent, the homeless garden resists ideologies of permanence and perfection. The homeless garden is, as Morton’s title states explicitly, “transitory.” The hope of which it speaks is a hope that saunters (to borrow from Thoreau), a hope that transgresses against the political and economic immobilization of the poor and the marginalized.

In Morton’s and Balmori’s study, several types of transitory gardens appear, each of which belongs to a longer history of community gardening or the history of access to, and cultivation of, common land. The two types of garden most relevant to this section are those constructed by squatters who often stake their claim to unused or run-down property, not uncommonly viewed as urban wasteland, by virtue of their gardens, and those constructed by the homeless who are constantly on the move. In a series of images called Anna’s Garden (Figure 16), Morton passes through a chain link fence, guarded by a small wooden door with the words “Beware of Thieves” painted on it. Who exactly the thieves are, and what exactly they are out to steal, is a social question inscribed less explicitly on the transitory garden itself. There are no vegetables in Anna’s garden, no fruit trees or berry bushes. In the green morass of pachysandra and thicket of young ailanthus (a.k.a., “tree of heaven,”—a key metaphor in Betty Smith’s 1943 novel, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn), Anna, who squats in the tenement across the street, exhibits a menagerie of stuffed animals and baby dolls. The image evokes shrines and votive displays
commonly found at gravesites or memorials. In the Uyghur region of China, for instance, colorful scraps of cloth on dead branches ornament sacred burial grounds. In urban

Figure 16: Anna's Garden © Margaret Morton

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areas, all manner of memorabilia—from beer bottles to balloons—are left at locations of fatal car crashes and homicides. But the transitory garden is detached from social and cultural memory. It cannot serve as a memorial. Neither is it likely to be venerated, like Mexican altars with their piles of skulls and icons. Everything about the transitory garden speaks to the plight of the transitory person. At first, the few toys collected in Anna’s garden might be hardly noticeable to passersby—just more litter in another vacant lot. But the cultivation of the collection, the growth of its content, draws attention to itself. Individual figures become noticeable, and what we see is that the animals are intact, but the human dolls are maimed, missing arms, heads, or legs. “We have here two gardens juxtaposed,” says Morton: “a Garden of Eden for animals and plants and a garden of evil for the doll-humans. Wholeness is set against the wounded, and a feeling of imminent danger is pervasive.”

323 Beware of thieves, for something has been taken—an Edenic ideal, a chance to participate in surrounding social institutions that promise opportunity and equality. The transitory garden’s aesthetics are those of self-emancipation from such ideals of order: the advantages of property, for instance, and the independence, authority, even personhood historically associated with the ownership of land.

In Jimmy’s Garden (Figure 17), Jimmy himself relaxes on his personal waterfront. Surrounding the little makeshift pond is an assortment of waste: tires, a wooden palette, construction debris, slats of wood trim tacked together to make a white picket fence, torn tarps and plastic bags, a chair missing its front legs, and the tray from a refrigerator. “[H]ardly traditional ingredients for a garden,” writes Balmori, but for Jimmy, that’s exactly what it is. And what it is has everything to do with “ease, a sense of well-being.”

324 Gardens, as advertised,

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324 Ibid. 60–62.
convey that ease and that sense of home. That Jimmy constructs his ease from the wastes says more about the conceptual nature of the garden than the actual presence of nature. Eight days after Morton took this photograph, Jimmy’s garden was bulldozed. Jimmy too disappeared.

The stability and stasis one typically associates with gardens are luxuries rarely afforded to the homeless. Reconceptualization of these qualities is necessary in the case of transitory gardens. Nathaniel, nicknamed “The Mayor,” gardened for a time in Tompkins Square Park. In his characterization of the garden, a couple more important details arise for thinking about how the aesthetics of waste in this context resist definitions of utility, stability, even “ease” as advertised by commodity systems.

I’ve got a place, I’ve got a garden. It came from things growing, actually. Two or three big sunflowers came up there from seeds. I had a praying mantis there. I found it on the other side of the fence, caught him, and put him in a cage. I would bring him out to play in the garden in the daytime. At night I would put him on a stick and put him back in his cage. People would come by and ask to leave something in the garden: an earring, a flower. Some people wanted to add to it. Some would want to take away from it. Some of my friends would add something to the garden and come back and see if it was still there a week or two later.325

The garden, with or without plants, provides a space in which to enact one’s own domesticity. Instead of a dog or cat, Nathaniel keeps a praying mantis. The sunflowers happen to come up where a couple seeds have fallen from someone’s snack. Found objects compose an illusory display of order. Nevertheless, that illusion is enough to establish community. Participation is what Nathaniel’s garden elicits. “There are no useful elements here,” writes Balmori: “no productive vegetable garden, no place for sitting. It is a composition made for its own sake and

325 Ibid., 64.
Figure 17: Jimmy’s Garden © Margaret Morton
for its owner’s enjoyment”; nevertheless, it has a public face, “one that elicits a response.”

I would add only that the response the transitory garden often elicits is one very much unlike the response of city authorities to homeless gardens. Like Jimmy, Nathaniel cannot keep a garden in one place. He too is eventually forced to move on. Eviction is always just around the corner for the homeless gardener.

But if the popular garden image is the one in which the gardener disappears, or is disappeared, the transitory garden is an aesthetic reclamation, however briefly, of the gardener’s personhood. Since the writers I’ve analyzed thus far tend to use images of wasteland to resist the ideological erasure of the poor and marginalized, the trope of the transitory gardener belongs,

326 Ibid., 66.
and is essential, to America’s history of waste and wasteland aesthetics. Few examples emphasize the point better than America’s legendary vagrant, Johnny Appleseed.

II. Seeding the Transitory Garden

The year is 1774. John Hancock delivers the fourth Massacre Day oration in commemoration of the Boston Massacre. The British pass the Coercive Acts, which strip Massachusetts of the right to govern itself. In response, the colonists organize the First Continental Congress. In this atmosphere of upheaval and discontent, John Chapman, remembered today as Johnny Appleseed, is born.

Chapman grew up as one of several siblings, each fighting for space of his and her own in a very small house. Breathing room might be have been the reason he and his half-brother Nathanial waved goodbye to the Connecticut River Valley and set out for the Ohio wilderness on foot—on bare feet, as the story has it—sometime between 1792 and 1796. Apart from that, we know very little about his motivations. Post-Revolutionary America was a mess economically. Congress recalled all of its paper money, dropping the circulation value down to zero, and farming families, such as Chapman’s, suffered most from the downturn. Chapman’s religious fervor calls attention to itself as well. He would later become a devoted Swedenborgian, but the initial allure of “religious individualism and romantic dreams” out there in the vast territories might have summoned him from hearth and home. Of course, as the historian Howard Means argues, we can’t discount the incentive of cheap land.327

Whatever the reason, Chapman’s real story doesn’t quite live up to Disney’s animated sing-along. Historians like Means have done much over recent years to recover the real John Chapman from his legend, and what we’ve learned is that Chapman’s transitory gardening was more radical than his legend suggests. James Scott, in his book, *Seeing Like a State* (1998), explains that which has made transients (or the idea of transience) radical historically. In preindustrial societies, for instance, nomadic communities proved difficult for kings to manage, which is to say, difficult to tax. In order to make the Chapmans of the world “legible,” as Scott puts it, the landed elites mapped local residents. By deforesting the commons and shaping them into quantifiable grids, self-sustaining farmers and craftsmen could no longer use the wilderness to hide. Authorities could monitor labor and enforce royal decree with less resistance and difficulty. Armies too could mobilize more efficiently through the grids. Add to these adjustments a few bureaucratic details, like fixing surnames as a matter of public record, and the modern urban infrastructure is born. Chapman lived off the map, calling home wherever he laid his apocryphal cast iron hat, which makes his image as a kind of American saint somewhat problematic by today’s standard.

But in Chapman’s time, the standard was slightly different. He shared in the patriotic zeal one would expect from a generation of young Americans only a handful of birthdays removed from the nation’s independence. As a child of the Revolution, Chapman was not anti-statist by today’s measure. Neither was vagrancy uncommon on the frontier. Few, however, braved the winters, risked starvation, or bared themselves to ambush by Indians very long if they could help it. Frontiersmen explored with purpose. Their ambitions were simple. Some were trappers and

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traders. Others looked to settle, and more than one speculated in real estate. Chapman shared the latter’s ambition. In the mid-1790s, he traveled to Warren, Pennsylvania, where a land agent of the Holland Land Company hired him out. Chapman became a surveyor, travelling across vast tracts of land, often working for others along the way for a place to stay or for food to eat.\textsuperscript{329} To substantiate himself economically and socially, he knew he had to buy property and improve it: cultivate it, fence it, and erect some semblance of a dwelling. In other words, Chapman needed to plant himself, as it were, in order to become a “legible” American. Yet Chapman remained transitory and strangely hieroglyphic, leaving only wild apple trees in his wake. But the trees and the transience were, in fact, strategic, as Means explains:

If John Chapman was only one of many nurserymen trying to make a living at the edge of the known world of commerce, his approach to the business couldn’t have been more original. Of overhead, he had none so long as he slept outside, as he most often did, and dined on the grains and nuts and berries the fields and forest had to offer. Capital costs were near zero, too: an ax for felling, a scythe for mowing, a grub hoe for planting. . . . Chapman left the nurseries to survive on their own. Transportation costs didn’t count, since he seemed compelled to walk in any event.\textsuperscript{330}

Even at the start of America’s enterprise as a nation, dissidents like Chapman were figuring out how to embody the citizen without sacrificing the individual, how to achieve economic and social legitimacy without undermining one’s freedom to resist conformity, how to exhibit patriotic virtue without sacrificing allegiance to one’s personal ideals.

\textsuperscript{329} Means, \textit{Johnny Appleseed}, 65, 70.

\textsuperscript{330} Ibid., 89.
Almost everything about Chapman’s legend challenges the American Dream of property and power, not least of all his radical pacifism and empathy. Stories tell of Chapman dousing his fire at night to prevent the accidental death of a mosquito. He even refused to graft his trees, fearing injury to his saplings. Instead he planted from seed at the risk of bitter, if not inedible, apples. No historical American hero cuts quite so strange a figure. The heroic exploits of Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone; the Yankee oracle, Jack Downing; the boatsmen of Twain’s Mississippi adventures, and America’s titan, Paul Bunyan all exude a certain amount of hubristic, aggressive masculinity. For these sturdy backwoodsmen, self-worth depended entirely upon their marksmanship or their wrestling reputation or their wood-chopping might. But Chapman, a man with St. Francis-like sensitivity and a squatter’s contempt for fences, sits uncomfortably within America’s heroic pantheon.

Lawrence Buell, in agreement with Leslie Fiedler, makes a similar observation about representations of male heroes in America’s pastoral literary tradition which “serves as a liminal site,” he says, “for male self-fulfillment in recoil from adult responsibility associated with female-dominated culture in the settlements.” The heroic type, then, was explicitly anti-feminine and, by my understanding of “self-fulfillment” in this context, mostly concerned with his own needs or wants rather than those of a family or the community. Glossing over Chapman’s radical empathies, the solitary orchardist might satisfy these heroic standards, at least at first glance. But Thoreau later identifies a second category of heroic ideals that apply to

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Chapman and that set him further apart from other heroic types. These alternative ideals fall under the rubric of “self-emancipation,” the difference between self-fulfillment and self-emancipation being largely one of ego. The former type of heroism depends on social affirmation, the latter requires the personal freedom necessary to define his own ideals.

Paul Bunyan and Johnny Appleseed exemplify the difference—Bunyan, whose tales postdate Appleseed’s by more than half a century, but who sometimes appears alongside Appleseed as a figure opposed, in manner and in virtue, to Appleseed. Bunyan first appeared in the *Duluth News Tribune* in 1904, though his tales probably entertained loggers around their campfires long before Bunyan transitioned to print. The first record of Appleseed’s story dates back to 1853 when Pennsylvania’s Judge Lansig Wetmore described to his audience a frontiersman who toted a sack of apple seeds on his back and wandered barefoot through the wilderness. The two legendary figures would meet later, despite historical discrepancies, in Henry Baily Stevens’s 1930 script for *Johnny Appleseed and Paul Bunyan: A Play of American Folklore*.

Henry Baily Stevens discovered in these two heroic types the essential problem with American heroism in general. The problem was not that Bunyan represented strength and Appleseed humility but that property meant self-fulfillment and social progress to one and the opposite of self-fulfillment and progress to the other. In the play, the year is 1801. Chapman

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arrives at a familiar orchard only to find the land newly settled by the Woolery family. A romantic intrigue springs up between Gertrude, Mr. Woolery’s daughter, and Chapman, only to be challenged by another suitor, Paul Bunyan. Bunyan, having made his fortune cutting trees, offers Gertrude security, so long as she plays the dutiful housewife. But Gertrude falls for Chapman who, before he leaves, trades Mr. Woolery his rifle for a shovel—a symbolic gesture reminiscent of the famous passage in the book of Isaiah: “and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks.” To both Bunyan and Mr. Woolery, the gesture is incomprehensible. “I’m going out to make a flower garden in the wilderness,” says Chapman. “A damn fool if ever I saw one,” Mr. Woolery responds.

A year later, Chapman returns. But his fidelities have become even more radical. He considers himself married to the wilderness and to the apple tree. Friendship, Johnny tells Gertrude, will have to suffice. But Gertrude can neither fathom nor abide the rejection. She revenges herself on Chapman by accepting Bunyan’s proposal and commanding him to cut down the property’s last apple tree, indeed the last of any tree, as a wedding gift. Bunyan complies in this thinly veiled reenactment of Salome and John the Baptist. Indians appear from the woods to scalp Bunyan for his crime. But Chapman intercedes. He takes both the Indian’s knife and Bunyan’s axe, then picks up a shovel before delivering the play’s final homily:

This is the master’s tool! This never smells of blood! With it we shall dig a hole and bury the axe and the tomahawk. With it and a bag of apple-seeds we can change the face of the world. Look at this waste land where there is only stumps. You have seen it beautiful with oak-trees and pine and hemlock, but we can make it yet more beautiful. You shall see.

335 Isaiah 2:4 KJV


337 Ibid., 88.
Appleseed makes an important point about “waste land” here. His vision for the land is one of mature trees and fullness, not stumps and emptiness. So how is this a waste aesthetic if what Chapman envisions is the opposite of wasteland? I want to make a careful distinction here between wasteland as an imagined ideal and wasteland as a place of possibility. One thing I’ve been arguing all along the way is that people—often the poor and disenfranchised, but sometimes the indigenous too—often inhabit spaces that others identify as wasteland. Usually these spaces are less than ideal in terms of resources and living conditions. Aesthetics of waste are not aesthetics that romanticize these spaces as beautiful. On the contrary, aesthetics of waste are often expressed by those forced to reimagine them out of necessity. It’s a way of finding practical optimism in otherwise hopeless conditions. Furthermore, what Morton’s photographs show us, and what Appleseed expresses in Stevens’s play, is that the wastes are not only where outcasts live. They are, in most cases, where we all live. Appleseed stands on a ruined landscape that both he and Bunyan must now endure. But Appleseed evokes the image of the shovel. This domestic tool conveys an asymmetry between it and the more popular heroic image of the rifle. It is an image of possibility for a different kind of future—one in which the wastelands are improved, but not at anyone else’s expense, especially any minority.

Too little about the play survives to account for Stevens’s intentions beyond what the play gives us. But the story of the apple tree also draws from the orchard’s historical relationship to the wastes. Cider, for example, was a staple of eighteenth century colonial and early American subsistence farming. Because, as mentioned earlier, apples planted from seed often produce bitter fruit, orchardists grafted their trees onto stock carefully selected for sweetness. But seed
trees could make a small profit when used to make cider. The wild orchard’s advantage was that it fulfilled one of the requirements for “improving” land. These orchards, because they were a source of income, were also taxed as property. But apple trees grow in varied conditions, even in poor soil, which means that settlers could plant their orchards unsystematically across diverse landscapes. Tax collectors often ignored what they felt was unusable land. Consequently, many families appropriated the wastes as a tax shield, scattering their orchards beyond the municipality’s purview. These wasteland orchards could provide the Chapmans of the frontier with a means of self-emancipation without sacrificing the idea of a more prosperous nation.338

The Appleseed-Bunyan standoff signifies competing theories of progress—theories still very relevant today though obscured somewhat by a dichotomous system that recognizes, for the most part, only two types of economic and social organization. One is driven by capital, the other by social welfare. But the wastes exceed borders, ideological as well as physical, as this study has tried to show. In the wastes, alternatives to normative economic and social theory sometimes speak through fictions of progress.

III. Planting Progress

The French writer Jean Giono had a Johnny-Appleseed-like character in mind when he wrote his famous short story, “The Man Who Planted Trees” (L’homme qui plantait des arbres, 1953). Giono’s tale recounts the life and works of the wandering agrarian, Elzeard Bouffier. The

338 Kerrigan, Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard, 19. In his essay, “The Wild Apples,” Thoreau also says “[s]ome soils, like a rocky tract called the Easterbrooks Country in my neighborhood, are so suited to the apple, that it will grow faster in them without any care, or if only the ground is broken up once a year, than it will in many places with any amount of care”: Thoreau, Walden, Disobedience, and Other Writings, 294.
title is its own spoiler. Bouffier hauls a sack of acorns across the Alpes de Haute Provence and its surrounding wastelands, leaving saplings along his path. Plotwise, there isn’t much more to say. But to make matters somewhat more improbable, Bouffier plants his oaks in the shadows of the World Wars, dropping seeds while airplanes drop bombs. Many of Bouffier’s trees burn at the altars of Ares. Nature, no less ruthless, cannibalizes her fair share as well. Bouffier’s labor meets resistance on all sides. Nevertheless, he plants on, not ignorant of his losses but anticipating them. It is with this idea that vagrancy, waste, and progress cohere into an aesthetic departure from other frontier stories rooted in manifest destiny ideology.

If a crisis is to be found in Giono’s story, beyond the wars to which his seems oblivious, it must have more to do with illicit cultivation than the loss of any trees. The narrator asks Bouffier if the land on which he plants his seeds is his. “He said it wasn’t. Did he know who the owner was? No, he didn’t. He thought it must be common land, or perhaps it belonged to people who weren’t interested in it. He wasn’t interested in who they were.”339 By the end of his life, enough of Bouffier’s acorns survive to reforest miles and miles of barren valley, attracting homesteaders to a trompe l’oeil of wilderness.

The story reframes our two competing notions of progress, not in terms of socialism and capitalism but in conceptual terms. The first is arithmetical: one bomb created, one bomb dropped. The metaphor reenacts the idea of linear progress. To reach point B from point A as quickly as possible, all obstacles preventing a straight line of motion are removed.340 The second


340 Paul Virilio, Speed and Politics (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2006). Virilio coined the word, “dromology,” to account for the way in which wars drive history and time. Dromology is literally the science of speed.
is geometrical. Progress, in this form, expands in a self-perpetuating way. But most importantly, the geometrical method accepts failure as part of its process. In this scheme, disaster and progress form a codependency—what sociologist Ruth Levitas calls “necessary failure” in her essay, “Looking for the Blue: The Necessity of Utopia.” It’s the method, not the destination, that matters in this scenario.

Walter Benjamin took up the problem of arithmetical progress in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940). “This is how one pictures the angel of history,” says Benjamin: “His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage . . .” The angel is helpless to do anything about it, caught up in a storm “blowing from Paradise,” which is the future perfection that society imagines it will attain if it keeps its speed and its forward momentum. “This storm is what we call progress,” Benjamin says. The second world war clarified the situation for Benjamin, as it did for Giono whose participation in the first world war made him a pacifist for life. Even Virgil, argues Kevis Goodman, “imagined that ‘a time shall come when in those lands, as the farmer toils...with crooked plough, he shall find javelins eaten up with rusty mould, or with his heavy hoe shall strike on empty helms, and marvel at the giant bones’.” Those “giant bones” are the seraphic relics of Walter Benjamin’s Angelus Novus, but in a literal sense, they

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put one in mind of the dead whose gigantic proportion is buried nameless and faceless in the wake of progress.

Figure 19: Angelus Novus (1920), Paul Klee

If, in Giono’s story, Bouffier had planted his acorns along the bombardier’s flight line, how swift and comprehensive the loss would have been. But Bouffier lives and works in the wasteland, off the highway and common lines of transport. The oaks he plants, unlike bombs, have a reproduction value independent of the planter’s labor. They proliferate themselves. In Bouffier’s wake, the forest grows not just forward but backward and outward, upward and downward, fulfilling Benjamin’s hopes for the Angelus Novus. In the event of hurricanes, floods, fires, or insects, the biological factory keeps churning out seeds and leaves. Something
will survive. Slow forest succession complicates matters. Giono’s story spans a lifetime. In that same period, several wars come and go. But if the reader bears in mind that Bouffier is only one person working with one species of tree (though he does experiment with others), she might imagine the impact of a hundred Bouffiers, or a hundred Johnny Appleseeds, armed with a plethora of species, adding to geometrical growth a more dynamic theory of progress.

John Stilgoe supplies useful historical context to this subject in his book, *Landscape and Images* (2005). In a chapter entitled, “*Landschaft* and Linearity,” geometrical and arithmetical examples of progress are likened to agricultural path-communities and industrial road-societies. *Landschaft* is not only the etymological precursor to landscape, it suggests the nonsubtractable use of land by many people, as in a commons. More importantly, it reverses the image of the garden as described earlier as land manicured and cleansed not only of unsightly waste but the people who actually work and live there. “[*Landschaft*] connotes the inhabitants of a place and their obligations to one another and to their land,” a “spatial expression of identity, order, and value, a kind of collective self-portrait of small-group life.”

Landscape, on the other hand, shares its image with the garden insofar as it functions as a medium, like clay, to be sculpted in the likeness of commodities.

In his essay, “A Native Hill,” Wendell Berry underscores a similar analogy. He contrasts the contouring paths of Native American communities with the linearity of our modern roadways. “A path,” writes Berry, “is little more than a habit that comes with knowledge of a place. It is a sort of ritual of familiarity” by which “[the path] obeys the natural contours; such obstacles as it meets it goes around. A road, on the other hand, . . . embodies a resistance against

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the landscape. Its reason is not simply the necessity for movement, but haste.” Berri’s “haste” is the same haste of Bouffier’s bombers, of Benjamin’s Angelus Novus, and the rationale of linear progress. Obliterate all obstructions. The landschaft, or path, approach of Bouffier and John Chapman retains a circularity that imitates the cycles of the seasons and the body’s own biological repetitions. Its ideology is both aesthetic in its symbolism and radically participatory in its scope, which, according to Stilgoe, harkens back to the original correlation between the transitory gardener and the land. “[T]o move about the landschaft,” writes Stilgoe, is “to move within the symbol.”

Like Bouffier, John Chapman’s own habits challenged linear notions of progress. Though he did own land, his relationship to it was largely usufruct. He kept no one out and rarely kept himself in. He was, to use Bouffier’s more suggestive example, a vagrant who valued cultivation without expansion. The aesthetic value of such practice lies not only in the emancipation of oneself from the many ways in which a person can be held captive by his or her property, but in the resistance against heroicism bent on destroying the fruitful labors of the marginalized and the transitory.

IV. Myriad Ways of Seeing

—Strata jacent passim sua quaque sub arbore poma.

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346 Stilgoe, Landscape and Images, 33.
“The apples lie scattered everywhere, each under its tree.” Thoreau recounts Virgil’s seventh eclogue, translated somewhat to his own purpose, but all the more meaningful for that very reason. The quotation adds to Thoreau’s Sabbath meditations during his week on the Concord and Merrimack rivers and speaks to the emancipatory symbolism of a tree whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere. In his essay, “The Wild Apple,” Thoreau praises the fruit’s very human “independence and enterprise”:

Here on this rugged and woody hill-side has grown an apple-tree, not planted by man, no relic of a former orchard, but a natural growth, like the pines and oaks. Most fruits which we prize and use depend entirely on our care. Corn and grain, potatoes, peaches, melons, etc., depend altogether on our planting; but the apple emulates man’s independence and enterprise. It is not simply carried, as I have said, but, like him, to some extent, it has migrated to this New World, and is even, here and there, making its way amid the aboriginal trees...

Thoreau anthropomorphizes, but many botanists and biologists today are researching the theory that some plants may have survived their evolutionary struggle more successfully than others because they adapted specifically to human needs, the apple tree being primary among those plants that escaped their small ecological niches to proliferate globally. Prescient in his depiction of the apple and its host, Thoreau invents what might be read as a coat of arms for the transitory gardener. But more than that, he translates the transitory nature of the tree itself into an alternative to linear progress. The apple tree, independent of its Chapman or Bouffier, propagates geometrically, making its own way toward conditions suitable to its needs. It is an image of radical self-emancipation, not because it resists the stigmas that often accompany the transient,

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though that is true, but because it frees the image of wastes from immobility. The aesthetics here beg reconceptualizations of that which traditionally has been missing from definitions of progress—i.e., consideration of nature’s own forward momentum.

In the final paragraph of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*—a travelogue and tribute to Thoreau’s brother John who passed away before the book’s publication—Thoreau ties his boat once more to an apple tree on the banks of his native Concord.\(^{349}\) The apple’s image bookends his musings on the inherent inequity of property, the affections of fraternity, and his own journey to self-emancipation. Thoreau’s excursion traces not only a river but a series of ideological transgressions, particularly against common misunderstandings about nature’s transitory economies.

Linnaeus’ *Oeconomia Naturae* (1749) established a thematic precedent for studies of economy in nature well into the twentieth century. That nature organized itself with efficiency seemed to naturalists like Charles Lyell, George Perkins Marsh, and even to some extent, Charles Darwin, the starting point for serious study of the biological world, and understandably so. By clinging to the idea of order, even in the face of natural selection, one could still believe in progress for humanity. This “economy of nature” protected a sense of purpose. Naturally, the underlying anthropocentrism of such a belief would be difficult to abandon entirely, especially in nonscientific disciplines. The “myth and symbol” school of the mid-twentieth century, for example, approached representations of nature in American literature and history as if they represented something unique about Americans. R.W.B. Lewis, a prominent figure in the myth and symbol school, wrote about Thoreau as an American Adam. Marxists and new historicists

\(^{349}\) Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers; Walden, or, Life in the Woods; the Maine Woods; Cape Cod*, 319.
maintained the illusion as well. Sacvan Bercovitch argued that Thoreau’s naturalism mirrored, however ironically, capitalism’s own economic order. More recently, however, Richard Grusin has argued that Thoreau understood nature’s economic autonomy and its many antitheses to western economies. Grusin quotes a passage from the chapter in Walden called “Spring,” in which Thoreau applauds the waste nature makes, undisturbed by the enormous sacrifices this extravagance necessitates:

I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp,—tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood! With the liability to accident, we must see how little account is to be made of it.

Thoreau’s use of the word “extravagance” parallels Gidwani’s “excess” in “Six Theses on Waste, Value, and Commons,” an article analyzed in the introduction of this study. Gidwani, an anthropologist with a particular interest in wastelands, examines the ways in which commodity systems subsume commons communities. “‘Commons’ stand opposed to ‘commodity’,” writes Gidwani. Unlike the linear model of progress in the commodity system,

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where resources are extracted from the wastes, produced as goods, consumed, and returned to the wastes, commons rely on nonsubtractable uses of resources. Commodity systems tend to treat nongsubtractable economies as waste, argues Gidwani, not only because they represent competition, as well as untapped pools of resources and labor, but because like all wastelands, they exist outside of the commodity model of progress. For this understanding of “waste,” there are no boundaries. It is a type of “excess,” argues Gidwani, “that is prior to and product of capitalist accumulation that capital, try as it might, can never fully capture and which therefore is an ever-present threat to it.”

Thoreau aestheticizes that *extravagance*, that *excess*, with the image of the apple tree, the transience of which stands opposed to the commodity system, a system only able to move toward what it can consume. Morton’s photographs especially capture this threat. If the wastes did not threaten the commodity system, Jimmy and The Mayor might still occupy their gardens. Chapman’s example adds to Morton’s images a more emphatic correlation between mobility and self-emancipation. The transitory garden both encourages civic participation and, simultaneously, emancipates one from “legibility,” civic discipline, surveillance, and, as Gidwani argues, “discourses of waste that sediment difference.”

Expectation plays an important role as well. Because nature’s “liability to accident,” as Thoreau puts it, is part of its progressive geometry—that is, its “necessary failures,” to quote Levitas once

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Ibid. 778.
more—nature’s economy defies commodity systems in ways that benefit the outliers of those systems.

In “Wild Apples” and “Autumnal Tints,” Thoreau embraces nature’s “useless and valueless” features—features typically associated with the wastes. I am, like many other scholars, tempted to associate this extravagance with wilderness. But wilderness, in fact, is not something Thoreau experienced in the Concord of his time. By 1830, fifteen years before he built his hut on Walden’s shore, two-thirds of New England, except for Maine, had been deforested already. Most of the clearing was due to what Robert Gross calls the agricultural revolution of New England. Hay was the staple crop of Concord. Forests were cleared not only for the timber but for the grass. In Concord, at least, farming really meant grazing. A great deal of the forest’s wood heated Concord’s homes over long, severe winters. Even at Harvard, the largest portion of a student’s tuition paid for the extraordinary amount of wood needed to heat student dormitories. Wilderness is Thoreau’s “garden” ideal. It is that of which he is constantly in pursuit but never finding.

Like John Chapman, Thoreau was a surveyor. He assessed the value of property along its property lines. Thoreau used the surveyor’s grid to rethink his own legibility. Surveying allowed him to approach the subject of wilderness from as many angles as possible, encouraging himself in his journals to

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[p]robe the universe in a myriad points. Be avaricious of these impulses. You must try a thousand themes before you find the right one, as nature makes a thousand acorns to get one oak. He is a wise man and experienced who has taken many views; to whom stones and plants and animals and a myriad objects have each suggested something, contributed something.358

The myriad view of nature is the extravagant view. Again, Thoreau’s approach would be prescient in terms of ecology today and the need to understand environmental issues from the environment’s perspective. To be “avaricious of these impulses,” Thoreau would have to live his life in motion. In his essay, “Walking,” Thoreau describes the life of a saunterer as a wise life, a righteous life.359 Hiring out as a surveyor paid for those transitory compulsions. But from a less poetic perspective, vagrancy, whether paid or unpaid, obliges a myriad view of one’s surroundings—a panoramic vision.

Two moving panoramas were on show in Boston in 1849: Benjamin Champney’s Great Panoramic Picture of the River Rhine and Its Banks and Mr. S. B. Stockwell’s Colossal Moving Panorama of the Upper and Lower Mississippi Rivers. Thoreau saw them both. Combined, they account for an important addition to Thoreau’s thinking about how one sees land. The panoramas collapsed the long epochs between Thoreau’s present and the past. “It was like a dream of the Middle ages,” he said, describing the Rhine panorama. “I floated down its historic stream in something more than imagination under bridges built by the Romans and repaired by later heroes past cities & castles . . .”360 As a man who already had a proclivity for associating what he saw


359 Thoreau, Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings, 260.

360 Ibid., 272; Joon Park, “From Transcendental Subjective Vision to Political Idealism: Panoramas in Antebellum American Literature” (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012),
with the literature he read, Thoreau found validation for his way of seeing nature in the temporal convergences of the panorama.

To make an association of my own, and by way of clarifying what I mean by Thoreau’s panoramic vision, I turn briefly to the work of a twenty-first century photographer, Koichiro Kurita, a Japanese-American who moved to Concord after reading, and becoming obsessed by, Thoreau’s *Walden* in the 1980s. The grids we see in Kurita’s panoramic views of the woods around Walden Pond are pieced together by calotype negatives. The calotype, or talbotype, named after William Henry Fox Talbot, requires contact printing from negative to positive, which limits the size of the final image. To produce a wide panorama, the photographer must reconstruct the view from a number of individual details. The final composition inevitably contains slight temporal disparities between panels. The trunks of trees don’t quite line up. The angles vary by small degrees, setting the overall landscape in motion the way Duchamp’s nude descends its staircase, in spasms of space and time. By emphasizing the time lapse and piecing the images together in slightly disjointed ways, Koichiro adds an aesthetic dimension to his panoramas that speaks to both place and imagination.

So too Thoreau sought an aesthetic “correspondence” with nature—a way to see outwardly what he experienced inwardly. “We have a waterfall which corresponds even to Niagara somewhere within us,” Thoreau said.\(^{361}\) The panorama validated his own visual experience of the natural, the aesthetic, and the historical at once. In one area of the woods, for

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\(^{361}\) Thoreau, *The Journal, 1837-1861*, 47.
instance, he saw “the button-bush in blossom,” and in another, the “tobacco-pipe in damp woods.” “Certain localities,” wrote Thoreau, “only a few rods square in the fields and on the hills, sometimes the other side of a wall, attract me as if they had been the scene of pleasure in another state of existence.”362 There is something prescient about Thoreau’s observations here. We know now that every square inch of soil beneath us contains innumerable bacteria and thousands of microbes, not to mention scores of tiny insects and other lifeforms. Within a single acre, hundreds, if not millions, of worlds might be found, each a “state of existence” unto itself. Such is Thoreau’s panoramic sensibility.

In February of 1851, just a couple years after his experience with the panorama, Thoreau explored the edges of his local meadows where he often went for “unexpected views and

362 Ibid., 63.
objects.” The edges of forests, meadows, even the various properties of landowners, were often referred to as edgelands. Edgelands, like borderlands and other marginal topographies, were considered wastelands because they exceeded the boundaries of usefulness and production, typically in agricultural contexts.363 In his journals, Thoreau wrote,

> The line of rubbish which marks the higher tide—withered flags and reeds and twigs and cranberries—is to my eyes a very agreeable and significant line, which Nature traces along the edge of the meadows. It is a strongly marked, enduring natural line, which in summer reminds me that the water has once stood over where I walk. Sometimes the grooved trees tell the same tale. The wrecks of the meadow, which fill a thousand coves, and tell a thousand tales to those who can read them.364

The “rubbish” and “wrecks of the meadow” correspond to the “Wild” that Thoreau finds not only in his own imagination but in the wastes.365

> Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps. When, formerly, I have analyzed my partiality for some farm which I had contemplated purchasing, I have frequently found that I was attracted solely for a few square rods of impermeable and unfathomable bog,—a natural sink in one corner of it. That was the jewel which dazzled me.366

How distant from, and how defiant of, John Bunyan’s Slough of Despond this is, though Bunyan looms in the imagination of Thoreau’s New England neighbors as that which was most sinister

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365 Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, 273.

366 Ibid., 274.
about the wastes. Landowners could keep their fences. For Thoreau, an estate without limit, composed of swamps (about which I will have more to say in the next section) and edgelands, protected what was wild in the mind and in the land.

V. The Fourth Estate

Farming may have met the needs of Concord’s citizenry, at least at a subsistence level, but that is not to suggest, as Robert Gross argues, that New England farmers were totally “self-sufficient.” Many readers are “led astray,” Gross explains, by figures like J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur and the yeoman farmer of Jeffersonian acclaim. Horace Greeley, in “The Farmer’s Calling,” itemized the depravities of the agrarian’s way of life:

I know well, from personal though youthful experience, that the farmer's life is one of labor, anxiety, and care; that hail, and flood, and hurricane, and untimely frosts, over which he can exert no control, will often destroy in an hour the net results of months of his persistent, well-directed toil; that disease will sometimes sweep away his animals, in spite of the most judicious treatment, the most thoughtful providence, on his part, and that insects, blight, and rust, will often blast his well-grounded hopes of a generous harvest, when they seem on the very point of realization. I know that he is necessarily exposed, more than most other men, to the caprices and inclemencies of weather and climate; and that, if he begins responsible life without other means than those he finds in his own clear head and strong arms, with those of his helpmeet, he must expect to struggle through years of poverty, frugality, and resolute, persistent industry, before he can reasonably hope to attain a position of independence, comfort, and comparative leisure. I know that much of his work is rugged, and some of it absolutely repulsive; I know that he will seem, even with unbroken good fortune, to be making money much more slowly than his neighbour, the merchant, the broker, or

367 Ibid., 283. Thoreau admires John Bunyan in the same essay, further demonstrating Thoreau’s tendency not to reconcile (perhaps he was indifferent to the matter) his literary heroes to the antipathies they held against the wastes.

368 Gross, “Culture and Cultivation,” 45.
eloquent lawyer, who fills the general eye while he prospers, and, when he fails, sinks out of sight and is soon forgotten . . .

Nevertheless, he urged his sons to become farmers, not for economic success, but for the farmer’s “reverence for Honesty and Truth” and “manliness of character.”

Even during its boom in New England between 1800 and 1830, the stationary, agricultural economy improved conditions mostly for the wealthiest landowners. The majority of small business and subsistence farmers depended on one another, employing localized systems of barter and exchange. To rely totally on oneself would have been a recipe for financial disaster. Those unencumbered by property could take advantage of “myriad” economies: a little gardening, a little trading, hiring out one’s labor here and there without having to recoup losses from a failed crop and abysmal debt.

This is not to romanticize the many plights of vagrancy, especially as depicted in Margaret Morton’s photographs. Thoreau’s example is only viable for those who, like himself, have the advantage of “enormous self-discipline, [perhaps] parents nearby, and a bachelor’s solitary existence.” The economic downturn of the late 1830s, however, forced many farmers to adopt Thoreau’s *modus operandi*, whether it suited them or not. Other scholars, like Brian Donahue, note how many farmers did the opposite. Instead of becoming quasi-ascetic, they pooled their resources and diversified their husbandries. “These yeomen did not maximize any

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370 Ibid., 111.


372 Ibid., 55.
one crop at the expense of others, but aimed instead to optimize a wide range of production and exchange at the household and community level,” says Donahue.\footnote{Brian Donahue, “The Great Meadow: Sustainable Husbandry in Colonial Concord,” \textit{Historically Speaking} 6, no. 2 (2004): 36–37, https://doi.org/10.1353/hsp.2004.0025.} In both cases, necessity dictated discipline but not necessarily the transitory aesthetics that Thoreau prioritized in his own life.

Thoreau defined his transitory aesthetics a little more clearly in his essay, “Walking,” where he differentiated between “civil” and “absolute” freedom—what I would call, in the context of mobility, static and transitory freedom, respectively.

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks—who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering, which word is beautifully derived “from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going a la SainteTerre,” to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, “There goes a Sainte-Terrer,” a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however, would derive the word from sans terre without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering. He who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all; but the saunterer, in the good sense, is no more vagrant than the meandering river . . . \footnote{Thoreau, \textit{Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings}, 260.}

Despite the false etymology of Thoreau’s “saunter,” the metaphorical value remains particularly fruitful in the study of wastelands and their aesthetics. Saint Terre, the Holy Land, feeds the Adamic myth of progress and self-making. Not surprisingly, it’s the etymology that Thoreau preferred, “[f]or every walk is a sort of crusade,” he said. Thoreau was nothing if not a crusader against slavery, war, and industrial degradation of the environment. But “sans terre”—Thoreau’s alternate etymology for “saunter”—comes closer, I would argue, to his personal way of seeing,
inhabiting, and imagining his surroundings, without losing any of its political edge. In fact, the “no land” or “no place” to which “sans terre” refers evokes the Greek etymology of “utopia,” a word historically loaded with “civil” and “absolute” ideologies. “Sans terre” also has less to do with an ultimate arrival than an act of transition, of passage, of crossing, of transgression, which is the subject of the essay and the unifying inclination across all of Thoreau’s social, economic, and creative pursuits. What differentiated Thoreau from other surveyors was that he spent more time in his writing defamiliarizing ideological borders than he did establishing real ones. To walk “sans terre” was to make the familiar strange again. “To conceive of [nature] with a total apprehension I must for the thousandth time approach it as something totally strange,” said Thoreau while contemplating what it meant to truly know a plant or the land on which it grows beyond taxonomy and geography. In his own way, Thoreau was emptying the land of that which obscured its real contents (the opposite of home-and-gardening magazines). He was razing the garden ideal and occupying the wastes. This is what Morton’s photographs show as well: the transitory gardener reconstructing from the wastes his own extravagant existence despite his expulsion from the economic and political Garden, capital G. Though Thoreau suffered no expulsion, he chose emancipation from a system of stagnant ideals and walked toward his own wasteland.

Some might compare Thoreau’s transitory views to Walt Whitman’s in the final version of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” published in the 1860 edition of Leaves of Grass. In this poem,

Whitman wrote, “Distance avails not, and place avails not,” as he cleared history of whatever obstacles might prevent future generations from crossing into his country and he into theirs, imaginatively. But with Whitman, transition expanded to religious dimensions. Absolute freedom encompassed death and life. Thoreau too imagined nature in expansive ways, but in order to push against the political and economic boundaries of the present. More representative of Thoreau’s views is the American sociologist and literary critic Lewis Mumford’s. Mumford’s views on utopia, for instance, resonate with Thoreau’s characterization of “sans terre.” “We travel through utopia,” Mumford wrote, “only in order to get beyond utopia: if we leave the domains of history when we enter the gates of Plato’s Republic, we do so in order to re-enter more effectively the dusty midday traffic of the contemporary world.” Mumford emphasized transition, not transcendence. Stanley Cavell interpreted Thoreau’s experiment at Walden Pond in a similar way. One enters a state of “captivity,” he wrote, (which can be the state or a hut on a pond) in order to depart ideologically freer. That’s exactly what Thoreau did, notwithstanding his transcendental leanings. Over his two years in the woods, he worked through utopia in preparation for what awaited him on the other side. “Walking” pared down the Walden experiment to its essential impulse. In the passage I cited earlier about Thoreau’s love of

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swamps, Thoreau went on to say, “Why not put my house, my parlor, behind this plot [swamp],
instead of behind that meagre assemblage of curiosities, that poor apology for a Nature and Art,
which I call my front-yard? . . . Front-yards are not made to walk in, but, at most, through . . .
[my emphasis]”

A front lawn is a kind of preamble to one’s declaration of stability, stasis, and status. But
the swamp encourages the walker to keep moving. Lamentable are those who walk into the
wilderness only to come full circle, said Thoreau, “to the old hearth-side.”

We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying
adventure, never to return,—prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as
relics to our desolate kingdoms. If you are ready to leave father and mother, and
brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again,—if
you have paid your debts and made your will, and settled your affairs, and are a
free man, then you are ready for a walk.

The biblical references make a secular analogy. The walker sets out to abandon fixed
“institutions” and never return. If a destination must be reached, it would be useful to imagine
it as a kind of “fourth estate, outside of Church and State and People,” he said. He considered,
for example, the plight of women who he imagined would rather live outside of their domestic
incarceration.

But in that sense, the “fourth estate” is not so much a destination as it is, like the idea of
“sans terre,” a moment in which the difficulties of the moment are addressed, then passed
beyond. I return to Vinay Gidwani and his anthropological assertion that waste exceeds both

379 Thoreau, Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings, 275.
380 Ibid., 261.
381 Ibid., 269.
382 Ibid., 261–62.
commons and commodity systems. It is the realm of possibility outside the familiar, normative constructs of “Church and State and People.” “When we walk,” Thoreau observed, “we naturally go to the fields or woods: what would become of us, if we walked only in a garden or a mall?”

By “fields or woods,” Thoreau meant that which lies “outside” the so-called improvements of American society at the time:

Nowadays almost all man’s improvements, so called, as the building of houses, and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap. A people who would begin by burning the fences and let the forest stand! I saw the fences half consumed, their ends lost in the middle of the prairie, and some worldly miser with a surveyor looking after his bounds, while heaven had taken place around him, and he did not see the angels going to and fro, but was looking for an old post-hole in the midst of paradise.

This passage turns on the Edenic paradise suggested in Thoreau’s earlier reference to Saint Terre. Where is paradise, Thoreau seems to ask, if not outside enclosed spaces, both geographical and ideological.

The “fourth estate” belongs, if “belongs” is even appropriate to transitory circumstances, to the transients of the wastes. Robert Sattelmeyer, in his essay, “Depopulation, Deforestation, and the Actual Walden Pond,” reminds us that the area around Walden Pond was essentially “a rural slum, a small village of outcasts, misfits, and derelicts who were excluded from the more homogenous society of Concord.” The people who lived there were (to paraphrase from Walden’s “Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors”) “slaves, ex-slaves, alcoholics, rum sellers, and the Irish.” As mentioned earlier, the wastes were often used by itinerants, vagrants, squatters, and laborers as commons, which is to say, as a means of subsistence beyond the sanctioned

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383 Ibid., 263.

384 Ibid., 264.
economies of the public sphere. Unlike Morton who examines New York’s homeless gardener as a paradigm of radical, transitory thinking, Thoreau might have done more to recognize in his neighbors the practical implementation of the very aesthetics he’d come to idealize for himself. Sattelmeyer and others have taken Thoreau to task for wanting, as it were, to “have his rhetorical cake and eat it too.” The wastelanders of Concord, as well as their indefatigable persistence in the face of adversity, only get a passing mention in the broader scope of Walden. But, as Laura Dassow Walls argues in her recent biography of Thoreau, “What Thoreau was studying at Walden was how to see, in the wastelands at the margins of commerce, the center of a new system of value [my emphasis].” The fact is, he had social and ideological conditioning of his own to work through before seeing Walden and its denizens the way he knew, intuitively, they should be seen. Morton’s revelations would not have been possible, just as these aesthetics of waste, as I’ve been characterizing them, would not have occurred to people in any comprehensible way until at least a hundred years later. Nevertheless, we see the roots of “a new system of value” being formed in this place. And beyond that, Thoreau’s acknowledgment of his neighbors in the wastes, however brief they may have been, were still more than what others were ready to acknowledge—namely, as Walls explains, that “this land was a little village of

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385 Richard J. Schneider, ed., Thoreau’s Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 239–40, http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebookbatch.PMUSE_batch:muse9781587293115; see also Peter J. Bellis, Writing Revolution: Aesthetics and Politics in Hawthorne, Whitman, and Thoreau (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 121–22, 127, http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebookbatch.PMUSE_batch:muse9780820327204, especially chapter six, “To Reconcile the People and the Stones,” in which he claims that Thoreau’s “internal oppositions and contradictions” are “central features of his work.” Thoreau appreciates, for instance, the fact that enclosures of all kinds prevent “the free movement of both Indian and traveler,” says Bellis in his reading of Thoreau’s A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. And it’s in this book that Thoreau not only comments on the self-emancipation available to those of a transitory lifestyle but names the Indian as its representative figure.
former slaves, day laborers, immigrants, and poor whites, nearly all squatters and all without money. yet they’d had houses, gardens, and chickens, families and lives, dreams. . . . The land’s owners [as was typical of their view of the wastes], didn’t care enough about [the land] to evict the squatters, so Walden Woods became one of the two places where Concord tolerated the impoverished, the displaced, and the abandoned . . .”

To be fair, Thoreau’s literary aims were aesthetic and political but rarely anthropological or sociological. Was it not a step in the right direction to “conjure,” Thoreau wrote, “the former occupants of these woods”—the ex-slaves and squatters, the Indians and Irish laborers, Walden’s transitory gardeners? Daniel Peck, in his book on Thoreau’s memory and perception, argues that Walden is spatial in Thoreau’s writings, not temporal. This is as you might expect of a surveyor. By conjuring the former residents of the wastes, “he recasts them as contemporaries, as a single community.”

Thoreau walks, wanders, and saunters through Concord’s wastes to emancipate himself from his and others’ misconceptions (many of them transcendental) about nature and to keep his own views “myriad,” transitory, and “sans terre.” In so doing, he conjures a more inclusive idea of utopia.

VI. Legacy

The wastelands in Morton’s photographs expose a vulnerability in the commodity systems complicit in the creation of those very same wastelands. Not only do the wastelands

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exceed those systems, but, as Chapman’s and Thoreau’s examples show, they represent alternatives to fixed economic and political systems—possibilities beyond the scope of linear ideals of progress. *Walden*, in that sense, is a manual for guerrilla tactics against the commodification of the wastes. The transitory gardening we see in Morton’s images is not a protest movement. It required no particular training or education in the history of civil disobedience. But it is precisely that intuitive re-imagining of the wastes that underscores the threat the wastes present to commodity systems.

Chapman’s and Thoreau’s example, on the other hand, do speak to a particular legacy of protest. The terms “guerrilla” and “gardening” share a unique history that, like Morton’s work, starts in New York City. In 1973, a young painter and her entourage of green thumbs scattered vegetable seeds in run-down lots around her neighborhood. The painter’s name was Liz Christy. She and her friends called themselves Green Guerrillas because they trespassed as a matter of principle on private property in order to plant flowers and vegetables where absentee landlords had allowed the neighborhood to decay. Christy’s efforts came at an opportune moment. Given the poor economic state in which many parts of NYC found itself in the 1970s, any public work that improved the city at no cost to itself might have thrived. Christy’s garden gained favorable attention by local media, and not long afterwards, the city threw in its support legally, incorporating the plot as a community garden.³⁸⁸


Despite the illegal methods involved, legalization of guerrilla gardening was always the goal for Christy and her group. Londoner Richard Reynolds, founder of GuerrillaGardening.org, leading advocate for guerrilla gardening in the twenty-first century, and resident of Central
London’s Elephant & Castle junction, began a similar crusade in 2004 by reviving the dead flower boxes outside his apartment complex. Because no one seemed to care much about the state of these boxes, it came as some surprise to Reynolds when, after tidying things up, the apartment’s administration actually paid to have the garden rendered to its previous state of disrepair. A legal struggle ensued, though Reynolds insisted he would shoulder the cost of maintenance himself. Ultimately, management granted Reynolds permission to cultivate the site legally, which, as Christy noted, was always the guerrilla gardener’s ambition. Had permission been asked at the start, management doubtlessly would have refused, citing regulation without much thought.\(^1\) The experience emboldened Reynolds to adopt protest tactics akin to Gerrard Winstanley’s (see section I of this study). “I do not wait for permission to become a gardener,” Reynolds says,

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\text{but dig wherever I see horticultural potential. I do not just tend existing gardens but create them from neglected space. I, and thousands of people like me, step out from home to garden land we do not own. We see opportunities all around us. Vacant lots flourish as urban oases, roadside verges dazzle with flowers and crops are harvested from land that was assumed to be fruitless.}
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Guerrilla gardening is, put plainly, “the illicit cultivation of someone else’s land,”\(^2\) which might sound slightly nefarious if only gardens were at stake. But the act, like the building of Thoreau’s cabin, symbolizes potential for change in a system legally obliged, for reasons as arbitrary as those argued by Reynolds’s landlords, to prevent the protection of commons. And by “commons,” Reynolds doesn’t mean large areas of land designated for public recreation.

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\(^{1}\) Richard Reynolds, “TEDx Talks,” YouTube, accessed March 2, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsT0YIqwnpJCM-mx7-gSA4Q.

Commons, in their historical context, were places used by many people, especially the poor, to supplement their living. They gardened on the commons, they farmed on the commons, they grazed on the commons. Today’s real commons go by other names. They might simply be neighborhoods, for instance—poor neighborhoods that pull together their resources, especially their labor, in order to subsist in an economy that does more harm than good.

Ron Finley is a good example. Finley lives in South Central, Los Angeles, where “liquor stores, fast food, and vacant lots” create a “food desert.” In fact, the city of L.A. owns twenty-six square miles of vacant lots, the equivalent of twenty Central Parks, says Finley. And most of it surrounds the poor who often have no property of their own. In an act of civil disobedience (gardening is one of the most “defiant acts” you can do, Finley says) Finley and a group of gardeners planted vegetables and fruit trees in the vacant grassy strips of land between his neighborhood streets and the sidewalks—land that residents, according to the city, are expected to maintain. He tells the story of a mother and daughter who would come to his yard at 10:30 at night for food because, he says, they felt ashamed of their hunger, which only justified his resolve to plant in these spaces. Not long thereafter, Finley was issued citations by the city, citations that eventually turned into warrants. It took publicity to fight the city on this issue—newspapers, petitions. Once the media became vocal in its support of Finley’s efforts, city authorities dropped the charges and embraced what Finley had done, not unlike what happened with Liz Christy in New York.391

Wherever poverty exists, transitory gardening can be found, not just in urban neighborhoods but third world countries. In 2006, Indian conservationist and octogenarian,

391 Ron Finley, “TEDx Talks,” YouTube, accessed March 2, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsT0Y1qwnpJCM-mx7-gSA4Q.
Bhausaheb Santuji Thorat, inspired by Giono’s story, began planting millions of trees in the arid tehsil region outside of Mumbai. “I set myself a target of planting 10 million trees a month,” says Thorat, “but I couldn’t have done it alone. So I decided to get the people of Sangamner with me. That’s how I exceeded the target by over four times.” In one year, Thorat and his community planted ninety million seeds over 49,000 acres. Like Giono’s Bouffier, Thorat progressed geometrically, which is to say, with an expectation of loss. Drought and insects plagued the nurseries. Only an estimated 10-12% of the trees survived.\(^{392}\) But that slim wedge of cultivation did much to revitalize both the land and the community’s optimism.

Thorat’s commitment resonates with Nobel Peace Prize recipient Wangari Maathai’s efforts in Kenya. Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement, responded to Kenya’s deforestation and subsequent problems, like rampant malnutrition, with a movement among women to empower themselves and their communities by planting trees. Together, they planted over forty-seven million trees across Kenya against opposition from a ruthlessly misogynistic and antidemocratic government.\(^{393}\) Eventually, the Green Belt guerrilla gardeners captured the attention of a larger, international audience, inspiring the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to develop a Billion Tree Campaign.

Guerrilla gardening emphasizes the political significance of what otherwise might be dismissed as the antics of horticultural hipsters. The illicit cultivation of land is only part of the


story. So too is the war against poverty, resistance to government surveillance, protection of health and safety, advancement of minority rights, growth of community, accessibility to education, priority of empathy and tolerance, and the ongoing justification of aesthetics in arenas other than the university or the museum. These transitory gardeners bewilder—overtake with wilderness—the machines of linear progress. The American literary historian Leo Marx took particular interest in the impact of the industrial revolution on representations of nature in early American literature. In *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), he looked for metaphors that might reconcile wilderness and technology, ending his study on this note:

> The resolutions of our pastoral fables are unsatisfactory because the old symbol of reconciliation is obsolete. But the inability of our writers to create a surrogate for the ideal of the middle landscape can hardly be accounted artistic failure. By incorporating in their work the root conflict of our culture [garden vs. technology], they have clarified our situation. They have served us well. To change the situation we require new symbols of possibility . . . .

The transitory garden, though not the only response to Marx’s challenge, certainly meets its requirements. Moreover, it has historical and aesthetic roots that can be studied, modified, and expanded. The aesthetics of waste are those that focus almost solely on the middle landscape, but from the perspective of the wastes—bottom-up, as it were. This is, as Arthur Young described it at the beginning of this study, the waste’s advantage as a symbol of possibility.

Diana Balmori, in her introduction to Margaret Morton’s photographs of homeless gardens, makes a point worth considering in the larger context of these aesthetics. The transitory garden is the garden that reflects one’s “creative response to today’s conditions.” They “speak . . . of us.” They communicate individuality and self-emancipation in environments that do their

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best to castigate the poor for being poor. “And they announce themselves,” says Balmori, “at a time when we are seeking social and aesthetic redefinitions of the way to use and design open space”—not just for the sake of reclamation or improvement of the environment but for the improvement of lives relegated to wasted spaces.

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