

**JOHN HAINES AND AMERICAN NATURE WRITING: AN  
ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC OF QUIET ATTENTION**

by

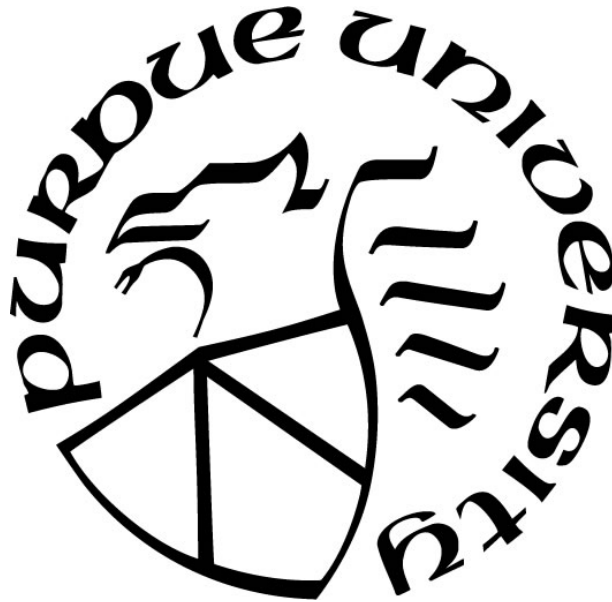
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## **ABSTRACT**

The idea of “wilderness,” of nature itself, is being interrogated in history, philosophy, and English departments throughout the academy; books on our place in the natural world have prominent spaces on shelves in bookstores; newspapers feature editorials on climate change and nature preservation. More attention than ever is being paid to environmental philosophers and nature writers as the ongoing climate crisis slowly but steadily worsens. All the while, however, some important thinkers on these subjects of nature and wilderness are utterly forgotten. My thesis focuses on the work of one of these neglected thinkers, the poet and essayist John Haines (1924-2011). Haines’s name is not mentioned often, if ever, in discussions of prominent American nature writers, and I aim to demonstrate why that is an unfortunate exclusion. Guided by his decades as a subsistence hunter and fur-trapper in the Alaskan bush, John Haines offers a perspective on the world outside of us that deserves consideration. I compare and contrast his ideas with those of other nature writers and poets, as well as environmental philosophers and theorists, and argue that he offers a unique and transformative vision of our relationship to the natural world and the non-human animals that live all around us.

## INTRODUCTION

We live in a world on the brink of collapse. This is not fearmongering or alarmist rhetoric, but a simple, unavoidable fact.

I sit in my climate-controlled home writing this on a computer, the stack of books and magazines at my side illuminated by an overhead light and a small desk lamp. Living as I do in northwest Indiana, it is a virtual certainty that the energy powering the furnace, the computer, the lightbulbs, comes from coal-burning power plants. The coal, of course, comes from some Appalachian mountaintop, blown open, penetrated, and hollowed out by machinery that resembles something out of a science-fiction horror film. The biotic communities that mountain once supported are gone. Worse, if anything springs up after the mountain is abandoned by the industrial interests currently harvesting every bit of it, whatever that is, plant or animal, will have to contend with unimaginably toxic byproduct of the coal-harvesting process. They will not have an easy time of it. The mountain, whatever once made it a mountain and not just a lump on the earth, may be gone forever.

I first encountered the work of John Haines in college. I was re-reading one of my favorite books from high school English class, *Into the Wild*, and for the first time I paid attention to a chapter epigraph: an extended quotation from Haines's memoir, *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*. It struck me like a bolt of lightning and I rushed to the campus library to check out the book. I read it cover-to-cover that evening, riveted by what I found in the pages. Here was a man who had done what Chris McCandless could only dream of doing, and he had done it for 25 years. Even better, and luckily for the world, I thought, he also happened to be a brilliant writer, who wanted to share what it was like living off the land in Alaska. As time wore on I read and re-read the book, each time finding new little nuances, new aspects of his writing that moved

me, new bits of narrative that hung together in sequence (his memoir, as we will see throughout this thesis, can sometimes give the impression of being half-dreamtime). I ventured into the world of American nature writing, devouring the classics of the genre: Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, Krutch's *Desert Year*, Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Though I knew little of poetry, I read all of Haines's I could find, being more prolific a poet than he was an essayist. This set me on the road to the poetry of Wendell Berry, Robinson Jeffers, Elizabeth Bishop, and the Romantics I remembered from high school. Some of these writers I came to love almost as much as I loved Haines, but the Alaskan writer remained the gold standard for me. Still is.

As I wandered down the academic path towards becoming a professional medievalist, I kept Haines's work close, continuing to read anything and everything that came to my knowledge written about him. This was not hard, as much to my shock, virtually nothing *was* written about him. To date, three books have been published about John Haines and his work: two essay anthologies that came before I even discovered his work (one in 1996, one in 2003) and one monograph, published only recently, in 2017. This tiny collection of work reflects a baffling lack of interest in John Haines, though I believe I understand more now than I did years ago about why his work has remained in the peripheries of the constantly expanding canon of American nature writing. Understanding the reason for such a lack of attention does not make me feel any better about it. And so ten years after discovering John Haines, I'm writing my master's thesis on him and his work.

This thesis is an attempt at explaining what I believe to be Haines's central ecological philosophy and offering that philosophy as one worth considering in this time of environmental crisis. To date no published work does so. That is not to say the work on Haines fails to consider

at all his ecological thinking—of course it does, being as he is so obviously a writer with a mission—but that there has been no explicit attempt at consolidating his work, poetry and prose alike, into a series of normative positions and examining them as such. I have structured this thesis in a way that I believe is most conducive to taking John Haines seriously, contextualizing him and his work in a suite of other, more famous, nature writers, and showing how some of his positions differ wildly from those with whom he is commonly categorized and ignored, read simply as another mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century regional nature writer (that’s when he’s considered at all, which is not often). Three chapters follow. The first is an introduction to John Haines’s life, a brief biography and some commentary from those who knew him. The second is a study of wilderness, working from Haines’s own writing, and using a few of the many philosophers and political theorists who have critically examined concepts such as “nature” and “wilderness” since the 1980s. The third chapter is a comparison of Haines’s work, poetry and prose alike, to those with whom he is sometimes grouped: Elizabeth Bishop, Edward Abbey, and Robinson Jeffers. All of this will serve, I believe, to show that Haines: 1) is different from his contemporaries in ways absolutely worth knowing; 2) offers, throughout his body of work, his own interesting and important commentary on conceptions of nature and wilderness; and 3) deserves a prominent spot in the canon of American nature writers, and can be read through new and fascinating lenses of ecocritical study, such as Timothy Morton’s idea of “dark ecology.”

We live in a time referred to as the Anthropocene extinction, the Holocene extinction, or the sixth mass extinction. The *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*, a report issued in May 2019 by the United Nations, shows an “unprecedented” decline in biodiversity around the world. Over a million species face extinction without some sort of



“radical change” in human behavior worldwide.<sup>1</sup> So far, at least here in America, that warning has been met with crickets. (It is horrifyingly easy to imagine in the not-so-distant future that cliché will be meaningless—no one will know what a cricket sounds like, as they will be extinct.) We tote reusable bags to the grocery store, throw our empty plastic bottles in a recycling bin, and unplug our phone chargers after the devices are blinking a steady 100%. But none of these little gestures will matter a bit if government, and the corporate world that government is ostensibly there to corral, does not radically revise their own ways of doing business. A reckoning has by all measures long since arrived, the individuals at the highest rungs of power need to be active participants in helping to literally save the world, and we as a nation elect Donald Trump. Reasons for optimism are elusive.

I believe that what John Haines has to offer us, what has largely gone unnoticed by academia and the broader reading public, is a reason for optimism. He shows us a world in which we can come to recognize ourselves not as merely existing in nature, or working somehow in harmony with nature, but *as* nature, pieces of an unimaginably complex whole, not immersed in or enveloped by but *one with*. This sense of belonging brings with it, I would hope, respect, consideration, and, as Haines himself says, “a certain attention to the world.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/05/1037941>

## WHO WAS JOHN HAINES?

At the center of my argument is that ancient, myth-dominated relation to the world that has been called magical. Words, thoughts, forms, and acts, once constructed and set in motion, might have an effect on the world—on nature, on the enemy, on the object of one's desire, and so forth—and often enough were intended to do just that.

John Haines, "What Are Poets For?"

John Haines is not a name with which many are familiar, even those who study ecological writing in the academy and elsewhere. Whereas you could strike up a conversation with most scholars of nature writing and ecocriticism about, say, Edward Abbey or Robinson Jeffers, mention the name Haines and you're likely to get a puzzled look and a "who?", or, perhaps, if luck is on your side, a "I have run across a poem or two before," followed by a meaningful trailing-off and changing of the subject. This is a shame. It also necessitates some introduction of the man and his *oeuvre*.

John Haines was born in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1924. The son of a Navy officer whose family often traveled, Haines rarely spent more than a few short years in any given place. In the few pages where Haines writes about his childhood, contained almost exclusively at the back of his book *Living off the Country*, he relates stories ranging from witnessing a suicide at the age of seven on the streets of Los Angeles, to stealing an official staff vehicle from a base and taking it out on a joy ride with friends. Peter Wild, writing in a small book for the Boise State University Press, describes these little anecdotes from Haines's childhood as "represent[ing] but a few spots of humor" in the author's work. Haines is not a comic writer, far from it, and the juxtaposition of Los Angeles trauma with hijinks on a Navy base just about sums up his own feelings about his childhood. Haines himself admits that his childhood was one separated from most other people in his life. "I was seldom close to anyone in my youth," he writes, "for reasons I do not entirely

understand, I held myself apart and would not, or could not, allow anyone else to stand too close to me. The solitude has been an affliction, and perhaps at the same time a necessary refuge.”<sup>2</sup> His frequent moves across the country and his sometimes less-than-ideal relationship with his parents caused considerable strain on the young Haines. He describes the military life in which his family was enmeshed as a “strange world in which to grow up,”<sup>3</sup> and writes of the crushing disappointment when his father's assignment causes the family to leave Seattle, a home Haines had come to love: “I hated to leave that place of wonder and light. I cried bitterly and would not believe I might ever see it again.”<sup>4</sup>

Such transience and difficulties wrestling with the constant motion to and fro across the continental United States certainly informs Haines's craving for stability as he grows older. He introduces the somewhat brief chapter of autobiographical as a different life altogether from the one he created for himself in Alaska: “I look back on the two decades of life before I went to Alaska, where in almost every sense life began all over for me, as if they were another country and in another century. That period is still part of me, but it is intact and separate, a book in itself.”<sup>5</sup> It is not hard to see, then, that as Wild puts it, Haines “sees his art as a long process of recovering something of the native ground denied him in childhood.”<sup>6</sup>

That very ground he sought was slow in its arrival. During World War II, Haines himself served in the Navy, working as a radio and radar operator on ships in the south Pacific. Unsurprisingly, he did not find this work satisfying. After the war and a year of art school he attended with help from the GI Bill, Haines went to Alaska. For roughly fifteen months between

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<sup>2</sup> Haines, *Living*, 163.

<sup>3</sup> Haines, *Living*, 169.

<sup>4</sup> Haines, *Living*, 167.

<sup>5</sup> Haines, *Living*, 163.

<sup>6</sup> Wild, *Haines*, 9.

1947 and 1948, Haines homesteaded near an old gold-mining camp named Richardson, which sits southeast of Fairbanks, deep in Alaska's interior. In 1948 he headed back south to the lower forty-eight, where he attended more schools: St. Johns, the National Art School, American University, and the Hans Hoffmann School of Fine Art.<sup>7</sup> In 1954 he returned to Alaska, where he stayed more or less permanently for the next fifteen years, having built himself a home on a hill overlooking the Tanana River, once again near Richardson, seventy miles or so from Fairbanks. While he came to Alaska intending to paint and sculpt, he came to find that the place in which he had situated himself defied all attempts to represent it visually. Instead, he discovered that “poetry seem[ed] to have been a natural response to my living there.”<sup>8</sup> While he arrived for his second, longer, formative stay in Alaska in 1954, his first book of poems, *Winter News*, was not published until 1966, at which point Haines was 42 years old. This fifteen-year-long period he spent at his cabin along the Tanana is certainly the basis for much of his life's work, and it is that work, produced during his time there and afterwards, reflecting upon it, that is the focus of this thesis.

Between '54 and '69, whereupon he sold the property (much to his later regret), Haines worked as an independent hunter and trapper, running miles of his own trap line, using snares and dead-drops and more, cleaning and selling the pelts to keep himself in beans and rice. For meat, he hunted, taking a moose every season he could. He picked berries and grew his own vegetables on land he himself prepared for that purpose. For company he had a wife, for a time, Jo, and the few remaining old-timers at Richardson, survivors of the gold rush period that began early in the twentieth century. These men and women “could not have been living in the area for more than fifty years, but in their memories and the stories they told ... already the place had

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<sup>7</sup> Wild, *Haines*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Haines, *Living*, 10.

begun to acquire the dimensions of myth.”<sup>9</sup> These individuals, however few he finds there, are frequently the subject of his prose writing. He comes to know them, learn from them, admire them. He tells stories of drinking whiskey with them in run-down local watering holes, swapping stories of other, since-departed trappers and fellow homesteaders. “For the first time in my life,” he writes, “I became aware of individuals, in all their quirkiness and singularity.”<sup>10</sup> People and individuals may not be the focus of a bulk of Haines's work, but it would be unwise to neglect their importance. For a writer often pegged as a nomadic monk, who is occasionally accused of some apocalyptic vision of the future including a certain misanthropic dimension, Haines is awfully concerned with people, those he knows as individuals but also people as a broader entity, people with a capital P.

Some of the people Haines met beyond the Richardson homestead have written about their experiences with the poet. Gregory Orfalea was a student of Haines's, the poet's first run as a college teacher, in the fall of 1972 and the spring of '73. Orfalea, now a published historian, writes favorably of Haines, and gives us some fascinating anecdotes and musings on the man, writing as someone who knew him well, not merely as an academic archivist or scholar of poetry. Delivering as lecture what would become, once published, one of Haines's most famous essays, “The Hole in the Bucket,” he pronounced to his attentive graduate students that “American poetry lacks ideas.”<sup>11</sup> This made quite the impression on his audience, causing them to sharply reevaluate so much of the poetry they had come to view without much in the way of questioning or evaluation, the way certain works take on a quality of incontrovertibility when you are an aspiring young member of the academy. “I think Haines,” Orfalea writes, “had seen

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<sup>9</sup> Haines, *Living*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Haines, *Living*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Orfalea, “Walk,” 181.

more things, more cold things, than any American poet had ever imagined. He was beginning to come 'out of the woods of self' himself and he was asking us to do the same."<sup>12</sup> This challenge to his graduate students was formative. Orfalea points out a simple fact that we will come to see in chapters two and three of this thesis: Haines was no Romantic when it came to nature. Haines seemed to be "warding us [his students] off from too-long a stare at the abyss, a stare, I hazard, he never completely shook."<sup>13</sup> That stare may have indeed had a considerable effect on the poet. Orfalea points out that "very few American writers ... have carried that steep a loneliness and isolation" as that which Haines bore.<sup>14</sup> He relates several later encounters and conversations he had with Haines: moments where the writer lamented his failed romantic relationships, where he confessed thoughts of suicide, but also where he took pleasure in Orfalea's nine-year-old son reading Robert Frost, and where Orfalea cooked dinner for him and others, including the poet William Stafford. This is a much more complex portrait of John Haines than that given elsewhere, such as the poet William Witherup deeming him a "mad monk in a seal fur" or Robert Bly's consideration of him as a "welcome herald of society's deterioration."<sup>15</sup> Grim, hyperbolic descriptions that do not fit with the sketches given by a former student.

Haines's last forty years were largely spent in transit. Between 1970 and his death in 2011, Haines "led the itinerant life of an artistic journeyman," traveling from university job to university job, collecting fellowships here and there, teaching workshops and continuing all the while to write.<sup>16</sup> After selling the homestead in '69, he moved to California, then bounced around between Montana, Ohio, Washington state, Washington, DC, and other places. He taught in

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Orfalea, "Walk," 182.

<sup>14</sup> Orfalea, "Walk," 183.

<sup>15</sup> Wild, *Haines*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Warren, *Placing*, xii.

Anchorage for a time, returned every now and then to the Alaskan interior, lived again in the homestead from 1980 to 1994, and spent the last decade of his life in Fairbanks, teaching seminars at the university there. His academic career worked in fits and starts, and stories abound of why precisely he never got the typical tenured professorship accorded to so many famous poets. Mike Dunham, in his essay “No Place for the Poet,” recounts the statements of several colleagues of Haines. Some claimed he was simply too old to be a teacher, that students couldn’t understand him for his dentures and he couldn’t understand them for his hearing aids. A creative writing professor at University of Alaska-Fairbanks disputed that, claiming instead the barrier to his getting a professorship was his personality, that he didn’t understand the process of hiring and became irate and nasty with anyone who could have helped him. Others still dispute that, such as UAF English professor Roy Bird, who claimed it was “good old professional jealousy and academic politics” that kept Haines from a secure job in the ivory tower.<sup>17</sup> Reasons or excuses or justifications aside, the fact remains that Haines’s profile was kept sadly low due to his lack of the typical academic pedigree and occupation. This could indeed be part of the cause of his relative obscurity.

It is not as if John Haines did not engage with the academic, professional, and creative worlds in which he occasionally worked. He wrote reviews of specific books and poems, essays on the state of creative writing more generally, pieces on his own writing process. His stated opinion of much of contemporary poetry is hardly positive. The aforementioned essay “The Hole in the Bucket” is an excoriating take on contemporary American poetry, and it is hardly the only bit of his writing to express such an opinion. He writes elsewhere that contemporary poetry is “a poetry of increasing isolation and narcissism,” and derides American poets in particular as self-

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<sup>17</sup> Dunham, “Place,” 218.

indulgent, excessively autobiographical, and lacking most any sense of moral urgency. “American poetry lacks ideas,” in other words.<sup>18</sup> This sort of statement demands some explanation, however, as it isn’t entirely clear what ideas he means, or even if ideas are necessary for poetry to be any good anyway. Haines expands on this bold statement, however, saying, “By ‘idea’ I mean, among other things, some kind of conviction about the world and the place of poetry in it. It is an insight, let’s say, that makes of experience and perception a particular way of seeing: what we sometimes call the poet’s ‘vision.’”<sup>19</sup> He expresses dissatisfaction with poetry’s superficiality, the “thinness, sameness, and dullness of so many contemporary poems... I mean that the poems are generated by a sporadic and shallow response to things. [They are] not within the context of a unified outlook on life.”<sup>20</sup> He is not outright condemning American poetry to the scrap heap, at least not exactly. Many of today’s poems “seem good; it is hard to find fault with them in detail. Few of the poems, however, remain in one’s mind. They are poems that convey a certain information or mood, a few images, but which read once and understood offer little to return to.”<sup>21</sup> For an individual who views the act of writing as one of social engagement and edification, the conveying of mood and image is not nearly worth the creation of a poem. With nothing to return to, nothing to find in the poem but observation, Haines believes the central purpose of poetry is missed entirely.

As Ron McFarland points out, Haines is highly unusual among American poets, as he “hold[s] no academic credentials and maintain[s] no regular academic affiliation.”<sup>22</sup> Perhaps it is this distance from the conventional ivory tower—though not a distance that was entirely

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<sup>18</sup> Haines’s words, specifically. Haines, *Living*, 64.

<sup>19</sup> Haines, *Living*, 65.

<sup>20</sup> Haines, *Living*, 64. As this thesis progresses, we will return to this idea of a “unified outlook on life,” examining how unification—or, as I will adjust the terminology a bit, relation—runs as a thread through much of Haines’s work, and how it is appreciation of unity and relation that sets him apart from many other nature writers.

<sup>21</sup> Haines, *Living*, 69.

<sup>22</sup> McFarland, “Haines,” Biographical Essay.



voluntary—that allows Haines to be so critical of the poetic enterprise so broadly. When his own work is considered and categorized, which is not too frequent of an occurrence to begin with, he is often referred to something as a wild hermit who emerged from the dim forest paths of interior Alaska, or, as referenced above, more like Bly's prophet of ruin, a grim harbinger of doom. More than anything else, he is often termed a “regional poet,” a product of Alaska and only Alaska, and when you strip away the hermit and the prophet you find stories of what it is like to trap, to hunt, to live on the frontier and endure the snow and the isolation. But Haines himself is critical of such categorizations: “We are in danger of losing Alaska to the name itself ... so that we will in the end find ourselves living with and by a cliché, the cliché of official histories, the cliché of the tourist .... Something will have escaped us, something we need, as we need air, water, and food.”<sup>23</sup> Haines contends that while he writes about Alaska because it is Alaska that he knows best, he still believes that what he says is also true for the rest of the American continent. He balks, then, at the categorization of himself as a regional poet, a local poet, a poet who is concerned with but one patch of dirt here or there. As he himself writes, he is interested in the “meeting of place and dream,” a meeting he experiences personally in Alaska.<sup>24</sup> His poetry is a product of being in Alaska, yes, but not merely in virtue of Alaska the place, the travel-agency slogans of “the last frontier” and “wild adventure” and so on and so forth. Rather, Haines argues that the “outer place” alone, the landscape in which the poet writes, is not sufficient to create good poetry. In addition, “there must be another place, and that is within the person himself.” That interior place finding its counterpart in an external landscape, the meeting, then, of dream and place, that combination allows for the creation of what he calls “genuine human reality.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Haines, *Living*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Haines, *Living*, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Haines, *Living*, 13.

For Haines, reflection on quotidian day-to-day reality is not sufficient for the creation of meaningful poetry. Nor is a purely inward-gazing eye sufficient to see much of anything worth putting into verse. There must be a synthesis of the inner and the outer, and even then that synthesis may amount to very little if the two are not carefully aligned. This mixture of within and without, as we will see in the pages that follow, is an intriguing and important facet of Haines's work. It is not just an aesthetic concern for him, but an ontological, and ultimately, a moral concern. His poetry and prose are not produced merely to tell us what it was like to live along the Tanana River, or to wonder blissfully about the nightlife of owls. Rather, he writes to persuade us of the virtues of the hybridity of inner and outer in poetry, in art of all kinds, and also in how we relate to the non-human natural world that surrounds us at all times, whether we are wandering a city block in the middle of Manhattan or a forest path on a mountainside. He is interested primarily in the matter of relationship, of how things and people in any combination fit together, inform each other, and sustain one another. It is this matter of relationship that will guide much of this thesis. For all its relative obscurity, Haines's work is of dramatic import to the current moment of ecological crisis and upheaval. Since the 1980s, ecocriticism has been steadily gaining in prominence in English departments throughout the country. Discussions and debates about the very definition of wilderness, of nature, and of man's place (if any) in his surroundings, "natural" or otherwise, are of crucial importance, not just to poets and English departments and ecologists, but to the public writ large, all seven-plus billion of us, living on a world in danger of being forever changed, much to our collective detriment. Because his work is by and large ignored, whether stemming from ignorance or disinterest, Haines's contributions to all these issues have barely scratched the surface of professional awareness, let alone garnered the sort of popular attention granted to fellow essayists such as Aldo Leopold or Edward Abbey.

Differing as he does from these authors and many others, it is important that we pay Haines's work its due attention. His commentary on nature—what it is, our place in it, the fact we *are* it in some curious way, and more—deserves popular elevation, both within and without the academy. His poetry and prose put forth philosophical positions that bear considerable resemblance to newer, far more popular arguments from world-famous theorists like Timothy Morton, Murray Bookchin, and others, and yet those similarities have not been discussed, because they have not been noticed. John Haines and his work should be often regarded in any discussion of nature writing, ecology, or environmental activism, whether it be consideration of his considerable writing talent or his philosophical and political import. His single-minded emphasis on relation to and experience of place, specific place, is unique, informed most certainly by his two decades' worth of work in the Alaskan interior. This thesis, then, does two things: assembles a coherent philosophy from Haines's poetry and prose, and then compares that philosophy to others, such as those put forth by Wordsworth, John Muir, Edward Abbey, and more. We will spend time with nature writing by those authors, and we will conclude with an in-depth examination of the broader philosophical arguments that have come about as concepts such as "wilderness" have been explored and debated. Haines may not have engaged in such debates with chapters in books or articles in journals, but as I will show, he has plenty to say on the subject.

A note on how I will treat Haines's work throughout this thesis seems important at this point. During his long, prolific career, Haines wrote both verse and prose. Sometimes his poetry was accused of being too much like prose, his prose, being too much like poetry. Haines himself addresses his own profession in the preface to his collected poems, *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer*. He considers the German word *dichter*, which as he says does not distinguish necessarily between a writer of verse and a writer of prose. He deems it a more "inclusive" term,

and I find it fitting.<sup>26</sup> It is with this inclusivity in mind that I consider his poetry and prose to be one and the same when it comes to normative position and content. This thesis does not attempt to keep apart John Haines's poetry and prose, cordoning them off into separate literary cages, to be examined only in the context of other poetry or other essays. Rather, I consider the contents of both, and am not finally all that interested in verse form or meter or any nebulous terms like "prose poem." I draw on the few published works about John Haines, including the lone monograph, most of which operate similarly. He was a writer who did not bow to genre or formal considerations, a maverick, if you will, within and without his work. There are doubtless many things that can be said about his poetics, but few of them will be written here, at least in part because I am simply not qualified to do so with any authority. I arrive at Haines's work with my training in philosophy and literature and history, and my appreciation for the written word, however it appears on the page.

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<sup>26</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 2-3.

## WHAT IS NATURE? WHAT IS “WILD”?

Ecological writing keeps insisting that we are “embedded” in nature. Nature is a surrounding medium that sustains our being. Due to the properties of the rhetoric that evokes the idea of a surrounding medium, ecological writing can never properly establish that this is nature and thus provide a compelling and consistent aesthetic basis for the new worldview that is meant to change society. It is a small operation, like tipping over a domino... Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration.

Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, introduction

Let us begin by addressing a question, the answer to which may seem almost too obvious: what does language have to do with environmentalism? It is tempting to see the depth and breadth of the issues facing the human race and want to start big and end bigger. After all, what does defining the word “nature” have to do with slowing climate change, saving the polar bears, or ceasing deforestation? Even moreso, what good could possibly come of *debating* different definitions? Surely this seems counterproductive—the longer we spend arguing semantics, the more oil pipelines are built across fragile ecosystems, ready to spill their toxic contents at any time. Let us consider the debate, raging since at least the late 1980s, over the term “wilderness.” Such a consideration will demonstrate the impact of terminology on how we view and correspondingly treat the world around us, concern for which is a prominent facet of much of Haines's work. In this chapter, I will demonstrate Haines's unique position on “wilderness,” and even the term “nature” itself, at least as compared to many of his fellow ecologically minded writers. I will be examining philosophers and political theorists, from William Cronon to David Kidner. The chapter will conclude by suggesting that Haines's work is especially present-minded and contemporary, placing his worldview alongside “dark ecology” and other concepts made popular by object-oriented ontologist Timothy Morton.

As I turn to various philosophers and theorists whose discussion of “wilderness” and “nature” is so often generalized, devoid of any real specific location or place, it is imperative to keep in mind that Haines's ultimate argument is about “nature” as a lived in, experienced location. As Haines argues in *Living off the Country*, it is “land, *place*, that makes people, provides for them the possibilities they will have for becoming something more than mere lumps of sucking matter.”<sup>27</sup> Haines has in mind a very precise sort of existence in nature, an existence which revolves around specificity, the unique components of a particular location in a particular land at a particular time. The broad generalities of “wilderness,” as we will come to see it defined ahead, mean little to a man who learns the ins and outs of his own blazed trails as well as he knows the muscles he uses to hike them. He quotes Thomas Hardy, “in respect to local life, long residence in a certain place,” at some length in the introductory essay of *Living off the Country*:

The change at the root of this has been the recent supplanting of the class of stationary cottagers, who carried on the local traditions and humours, by a population of more or less migratory labourers, which has led to a break of continuity in local history, more fatal than any other thing to the preservation of legend, folk-lore, close inter-social relations, and eccentric individualities. For these the indispensable conditions are attachment to the soil of a particular spot by generation after generation.<sup>28</sup>

As James Perrin Warren points out in his introduction to *Placing John Haines*, the sole monograph on the author, upon Haines “birth as a poet” in Alaska, “the influence on the young homesteader are numerous, but finally ‘it is the place itself that provided the means of unifying all of these into a single experience,’ The wilderness quality is paramount, a feature that from 1947 to 1969 would stay largely unchanged.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Haines, *Living*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Preface to *Far from the Madding Crowd*, qtd. Haines, *Living*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Warren, *Placing*, xiv.

It is this “wilderness quality” I would like to interrogate over the next few pages, before returning to Haines and launching into an exploration of his poetry and prose and how it compares and contrasts with other, more famous “nature writers.” Warren’s reader almost certainly knows what he means by “wilderness quality,” and probably comes to know without much thought at all, such an understanding being so deeply engrained in environmental discourse. Haines himself points out that when he arrived in Alaska, “I could walk north from my homestead at Richardson all the way to the Arctic Ocean and never cross a road nor encounter a village. This kind of freedom may no longer be available, but at that time it gave to the country a limitlessness and mystery hard to find now on this planet.”<sup>30</sup> But what is wilderness, specifically, and what sort of qualities come along with the concept? Is it merely this “limitlessness and mystery,” by Haines’s own admission almost certainly passed from the earth, or something else, something more? To discuss Haines’s unique place in the canon of nature writing demands we interrogate the concept of wilderness within an inch of its breaking point, and, upon its destruction, leave its wreckage behind as we move onto something more effective in terms of ecological justice, and more cognizant of the apocalypse facing us in the ravages of climate change.

### **Constructionism: Wilderness as Manmade**

What is wilderness? Let us start with a simple bureaucratic answer to the question. The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines “wilderness” as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”<sup>31</sup> Within this definition is a handful of heady claims: that there are areas free of man’s influence, that these

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<sup>30</sup> Haines, *Living*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Wilderness Act, section 2(c).

areas are deserving of a special privilege (special enough to be defined in an act of Congress, at least, and protected by page after page of barely decipherable bureaucratic language), and that these areas are clearly delineated from other, non-wilderness areas, themselves identifiable at bare minimum by the evidence of humanity's presence. We find veneration of such wilderness areas in descriptions of, for instance, Yosemite, the national park whose founding was aided by the efforts of the preservationist John Muir. Part of Yosemite's appeal was its absence of humanity; it was to be, as were all national parks to come, a place where humans came to visit, not to live, and in this sense it would be left to its own devices. The term "virgin" came into vogue to describe this untouched nature, injecting a hint of misogyny to the proceedings. But the problem is that, as William Denevan points out, "virgin forest [and we can assume here other forms of "virgin" landscape as well] was not encountered in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; it was *invented* in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries."<sup>32</sup> Denevan builds on this claim, combining this assertion with another, that "paradoxical as it may seem, there was undoubtedly much more 'forest primeval' in 1850 than in 1650."<sup>33</sup> "Wilderness" in the conventional and legal sense is in fact an invention of man, not something witnessed "out there" and given a name. It is a transformation of the natural world, which is in fact one thing (a world labored constantly and consistently upon by humans) transformed into another (pure, virgin, perfect in its human absence) by language used in historiography. When it comes to America in particular, the focus of this thesis, Denevan concludes that by 1492, "Indian activity had modified vegetation and wildlife, caused erosion, and created earthworks, roads, and settlements throughout the Americas. This may be obvious, but the human imprint was much more

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Denevan, "Pristine," 433. Emphasis mine.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



ubiquitous and enduring than is usually realized.”<sup>34</sup> Denevan is more interested in the historical basis of claims of “pristine” and “virgin” land, and as far as protectionist tendencies today, points out that “[m]uch of what is protected or proposed to be protected from human disturbance had native people present, and environmental modification occurred accordingly and in part is still detectable.”<sup>35</sup> “Wilderness” is born from historical discourse, not discovered, not found – it begins its life as a signifier devoid of a signified, whether through machinations of government or ignorance of environmental history, or some combination of the two.

As J. Baird Callicott points out, this definition of wilderness as virgin, untouched, “assumes, indeed it enshrines, a bifurcation of man and nature.” He continues, arguing that the “man-nature dichotomy insidiously infects even our well intentioned and noble efforts to limit our own grasp.”<sup>36</sup> William Cronon elaborates on some of the ironies of this false dichotomy, the most painful of all being the removal of this now-wilderness's previous human inhabitants, who were “forced to move elsewhere, with the result that tourists could safely enjoy the illusion that they were seeing their nation in its pristine, original state, in the new morning of God's own creation.”<sup>37</sup> Cronon, deeply concerned with the historicity of wilderness, argues similarly: “[T]here is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness. It is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny.... In virtually all of its manifestations, wilderness represents a flight from history.”<sup>38</sup> Such a claim of course echoes Denevan's anthropological account. Cronon goes on to list various myths and metaphors that spring from the wilderness ideal. That this ideal creates and thoroughly reinforces the dichotomy

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<sup>34</sup> Denevan, “Pristine,” 432.

<sup>35</sup> Denevan, “Pristine,” 434.

<sup>36</sup> Callicott, “Revisited,” 349.

<sup>37</sup> Cronon, “Trouble,” 482.

<sup>38</sup> Cronon, “Trouble,” 483.

that Callicott so succinctly points out is its most pernicious act. Part of the problem with wilderness, according to Cronon, is its ability to rob the everyday natural world of otherness, an otherness which naturally provokes feelings of awe and wonder and even joy. As he explains, “[t]he tree in the garden is in reality no less other, no less worthy of our wonder and respect, than the tree in an ancient forest that has never known an ax or a saw.... Both trees stand apart from us; both share our common world.” Cronon continues: “Our challenge is to stop thinking of such things,” for instance, trees, “according to a set of bipolar moral scales in which the human and nonhuman, the unnatural and the natural, the fallen and the unfallen, serve as our conceptual map for understanding and valuing the world.”<sup>39</sup> Wilderness serves to strengthen this dichotomy. It establishes an “other” set far apart from humans who are allowed only to experience it, but never to be part of it, despite history's claim to the contrary. A denial of the actual state of the natural world, wilderness is a transformation of the natural world into something *more*—more than us, more than our small lives, more than our suburbs and cities—while really ending up as something dramatically *less*; for all its grandiosity, mere spectacle. The claim at hand, then, is that this commonly accepted and even venerated definition of wilderness ends up diminishing, rather than enhancing, man's relationship with the natural world. All is reduced to observation, and a true reckoning of the world in which we live is made all the more difficult.

And lest we forget, thoughtful critiques of the wilderness do not always take for granted that however one defines it, the natural world and wilderness is best without escalators and parking lots. In his tome of American environmental history, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Roderick Frazier Nash introduces us to both the “purist” position—one that bears resemblance to the object of Cronon's critique, for instance, or Denevan's historical interrogation—and a

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<sup>39</sup> Cronon, “Trouble,” 494.

philosophy of “access,” supported throughout the 1970s and 1980s in mainstream publications such as *Reader's Digest* and *Harper's*. One of these “access philosophy” proponents is Eric Julber, a Los Angeles attorney and former adherent to the “purist” school. Nash points out that Julber's “purist ethic” came to an end with a visit to Switzerland. “What he discovered,” Nash relates, “was that the Swiss Alps were readily accessible by mechanized conveyances, heavily used by people, and still beautiful and satisfying. ... Returning to the United States, Julber was disturbed that his own country's system of wilderness preservation excluded 99 percent of the people.”<sup>40</sup> He proposed high-speed trams from LA to the heart of the Sierra Nevadas, hotels on Half Dome, and cable cars descending from each rim of the Grand Canyon. Nash is understandably suspicious of Julber's calls for such mechanized, consumer-focused tools: “The problem with Julber's philosophy is that, according to most definitions, the wilderness quality of a place would vanish when the tramways and hotels arrived. The confusion stems from equating 'scenery' and 'natural beauty' with 'wilderness.' The nature Julber liked was not wild.”<sup>41</sup> We can set aside, for the sake of conversation, the problematic nature of the word “wild” here and focus instead on the real horror show: everything else. Say what you will about the “wilderness debate” explicated so far, but I think we can all largely agree that cable cars zipping up and down the walls of the Grand Canyon is dystopian. But it is not hard to imagine that Nash's “scenery” and “natural beauty,” and Julber's “wilderness,” aren't actually all that far apart—and that “wilderness” as a concept, however defined, comes to its end with cable cars in canyon country. For while the Half Dome hotel is clearly a monstrosity, it is a quantitative difference rather than a qualitative difference from set-aside “wilderness areas.” After all, such a lodge does not preclude

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<sup>40</sup> Nash, *Wilderness*, 243.

<sup>41</sup> Nash, *Wilderness*, 244. You will note, too, that the term “wilderness quality” appears here as well, meaning much the same thing as Warren's use of it many years later to describe the landscape Haines found in Alaska. It remains a term of some contention.

the rest of Yosemite from being set aside, cordoned off, and experienced (whatever that means). Embedded within Julber's philosophy of access is that scourge of so many environmentalists, the archenemy of so many strains of environmentalist and conservationist philosophy: consumerism.

With the focus of this thesis being the American wilderness, it seems appropriate at this point to turn to a brief critique of how specifically American the idea of bifurcated nature, which the wilderness concept enshrines, really is. In his withering critique of wilderness preservation (itself contained within a broader criticism of deep ecology),<sup>42</sup> Ramachandra Guha points out that “for the mainstream [environmental] movement, the function of wilderness is to provide a temporary antidote to modern civilization.” He continues, quoting Joseph Sax, historian of the national parks: “As a special institution within an industrialized society, the national park ‘provides an opportunity for respite, contrast, contemplation, and affirmation of values for those who live most of their lives in the workaday world.’ Indeed, the rapid increase in visitations to the national parks in postwar America is a direct consequence of economic expansion.”<sup>43</sup> This suggests a particularly insidious connection between wilderness, free of humanity, and the vast machine of consumer capitalism. With an increase in economic resources, nature—as seen in national parks, themselves often perceived as sprawling wildernesses—became another commodity. Environmental historian Samuel Hays suggests that the rapidly increasing interest in national parks and the exposure to “wilderness” that came along with a visit to them was not, in fact, “a throwback to the primitive, but an integral part of the modern standard of living as

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<sup>42</sup> Deep ecology, a term coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, holds that living beings have value regardless of their utility to human beings. It aims for a biocentric, rather than anthropocentric, view of the world. There is ongoing debate about whether or not deep ecology is an anti-human philosophy, a debate I will not engage with here. For more, see a primer to deep ecology in *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*, edited by Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inoue, North Atlantic Books, 1995, and a criticism of deep ecology in “Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology: A Challenge for the Ecology Movement,” by Murray Bookchin, [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/bookchin/socecovdeepeco.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/socecovdeepeco.html).

<sup>43</sup> Guha, “Critique,” 238-239.

people sought to add new ‘amenity’ and ‘aesthetic’ goals and desires to their earlier preoccupation with necessities and convenience.”<sup>44</sup> The sort of nature that Americans began seeking out was awfully particular, however. Hays himself lists the usual suspects: forests, scenic rivers, ocean shores, deserts, and “more limited ‘natural areas.’”<sup>45</sup> The scare-quotes around “natural areas” are telling. In keeping with the problem of wild nature discussed above, what Americans sought out were carefully segmented areas “out there,” beyond the cities, the suburbs, the town streets. This sort of segmentation is precisely what Cronon and others are criticizing, believing it leads to people caring less for the non-human natural world closer to home: backyard trees, neighborhood parks, wooded lots, all these devoid of grand vistas or scenic views, but all with value nonetheless. This is the natural world that surrounds us on a day-to-day basis, and it is at least as important as the valleys of Yosemite or the vast mesas of Arches. Recall Cronon’s concern for the humble tree growing in one’s own backyard: “no less worthy of our wonder and respect, than the tree in an ancient forest that has never known an ax or a saw....”<sup>46</sup> Cronon is not damning the wilderness concept entirely, merely warning us of its dangers: “If [wilderness] can help us perceive and respect a nature we had forgotten to recognize as natural, then it will become part of the solution to our environmental dilemmas rather than part of the problem.”<sup>47</sup> It is the dualism that the wilderness concept seemingly enshrines, the backyard vegetation being “completely fallen and unnatural,” the plants deep in an old-growth forest as “completely pristine and wild,” that worries him.<sup>48</sup> The question that must be asked, then, if we are to follow

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<sup>44</sup> Hays, “Conservation,” 21.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Cronon, “Trouble,” 494.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Cronon's and Callicott's logic, is how to best come around to this perception of the natural world, leaving concepts of "fallen" and "pure" behind and embracing a holistic perception.

### **Against Constructionism**

Not all theorists engaged in ecological and environmental theory are convinced by Cronon's argument, however. We cannot pretend that his view and those of the writers who come to similar conclusions are taken as gospel by the environmental movement—the anthology wouldn't be called *The Great Wilderness Debate* if they were. It is worth considering objections and counterarguments before we more closely examine Haines's position.

David Johns, a political science professor at Portland State University, writes clearly about some of the problems with the anti-wilderness position. In his chapter in *Keeping the Wild: Against the Domestication of Earth*, an anthology promoting deep ecological positions, Johns critiques the case against wilderness from top to bottom, beginning with a simple point on verbiage. "Critics of the existence of wildlands usually posit a red herring: that *wilderness* by definition means 'pristine' or 'completely without human imprint.' The U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964 ... does not use the term *pristine* but instead deliberately uses the term *untrammeled*, a term very close to the original meaning of wildlands as undomesticated or self-willed land but not necessarily pristine."<sup>49</sup> Challenging one of the fundamental components of the anti-wilderness argument, Johns implies that such blatant misreading of texts may be taken up by bad actors desperate to advance their own hostile-to-nature agendas "as if careers depended on them."<sup>50</sup> Implied by all this, of course, is another critique of consumer capitalism, but one leading to a rather different conclusion than those mentioned above. Where Guha and Hays suggested that

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<sup>49</sup> Johns, "Friends," 35.

<sup>50</sup> Johns, "Friends," 32.

the creation of wilderness areas were an outgrowth of capitalism run amok, wreaking havoc upon the natural world while setting bits and pieces aside to sooth a worried conscience, Johns offers another view: that those very wilderness areas are the only thing standing between nature and unlimited human domination.

Johns is a strong critic of anthropocentrism, sometimes to such an extent that he seems to be flirting with anarcho-primitivism. “It is not the advocates of placing some lands and waterways off limits to human exploitation who have separated humans from the rest of the world. Agriculture and civilization did that,” he says, beginning his refutation of one of Cronon’s argument’s central tenets: that set-aside wilderness reserves separate humans from the natural world. His view of industrialized society is not a pleasant one: “Agricultural and industrial societies depend on the systematic effort to control and reshape ecosystems for the benefit of humans at the expense of other species. They enhance human carrying capacity by subjugating other species—‘the others,’ just as imperial Britain reshaped the Indian economy to serve British rather than Indian interests.”<sup>51</sup> Here he is suggesting that Cronon et al have fundamentally missed the true order of events: we humans were separated from nature long before we established wilderness areas. It is agriculture and the spread of cultivated land that has so alienated us from nature. Pushing the blame onto wilderness reserves not only misstates the real problem but creates all-new ones by further damaging what little we have left.

While the examination of rhetoric is well-taken, this broader point about agriculture and colonization does not make as favorable an impression. Even if we accept his premise that our alienation from the natural world was initiated as soon as we discovered the plow, that does not mean that wilderness preserves do not perpetuate or even strengthen such alienation. Johns is

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<sup>51</sup> Johns, “Friends,” 39.

concerned with the construction of cultural hierarchies, pointing out that as human societies continued to refine and improve their extractive efficiency, hierarchical structures become ever more repressive and harmful.<sup>52</sup> This is not a novel claim, and there is still nothing here that *defends* the setting-aside of wilderness reserves. Indeed, when Johns writes that “the ability to love and the drive to control are opposites,” it is not hard to imagine such a phrase appearing in William Cronon’s article, framing the borders of wilderness areas as themselves a form of control and domination, limiting our ability to love anything beyond them—once more evoking “fallen” and “pure.”

“To merely stop thinking,” Johns claims, “in terms of the wilderness/civilization dichotomy cannot, itself, resolve the actual material separation resulting from the quest to dominate.” Certainly not. But this begs the question by suggesting that constructionists begin and end in thought, that they view having exposed the dichotomy as a decisive victory and need work no further. It suggests that the “quest to dominate” has not been interrogated, denounced, perhaps not even recognized, by the adherents of this anti-wilderness argument. And such a series of assumptions do not find purchase in Cronon’s argument, not even in his initial article, “The Trouble with Wilderness.” Cronon ends that very essay with a call to action. After he suggests an alternative to “wilderness,” “wildness,” he offers this: “Learning to honor the wild—learning to remember and acknowledge the autonomy of the other—means striving for critical self-consciousness in all of our actions. It means the deep reflection and respect must accompany each act of use, and means too that we must always consider the possibility of non-use.”<sup>53</sup> Hardly the credo of one on a never-ending quest of domination. This “other” he names here is thoroughly addressed by John Haines, as we will see.

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<sup>52</sup> Johns, “Friends,” 40.

<sup>53</sup> Cronon, “Trouble,” 495.



David W. Kidner introduces us to a stronger critique of Cronon's constructionist argument, one that does not rely on faulty assumptions and bad-faith interpretation:

In recent academic writings, there has been a concerted effort to convince us that nature is "socially constructed" and that even wilderness is a product of industrial society. [I]n the constructionist view, nature has more of a *symbolic* presence than a physical one. Even outside academia, nature is increasingly an *idea* rather than a physical reality, associated with images on a TV screen rather than embodied experiences of hiking in the wilderness; and it possesses much the same experiential status as Narnia, Middle Earth, or Hogwarts.

After a not-so-subtle jab at Sierra Club wall calendars and Greenpeace donations, he continues:

"It is as if we are no longer sure what is real—what our senses communicate to us, or what our minds, programmed through education and amplified by digital technologies, lead us to believe."<sup>54</sup> If we "define it, represent it, [or] communicate about it" then it must be an "artifact of the human world," and, of course, we do all those things with concepts such as wilderness and nature. Kidner is not optimistic about this state of affairs, and sees a grim fate waiting at the logical conclusion of such a worldview. He claims that by the logic evident in constructionist views of nature, "wilderness that is not shaped by humans is vanishingly rare; and the defender of "pristine" wilderness is portrayed as suffering from a romantic delusion."<sup>55</sup> So far the echoes of Johns are loud and clear, but Kidner does not let his rhetoric get away from him quite so easily. Indeed, unlike Johns, he offers up a very real defense of wilderness reserves and the efforts to continue constructing them:

Given that people have at some time roamed almost every landscape on the face of the planet, virtually the entirety of nature, by this logic, becomes "fashioned as purposefully as Disneyland." There are immediate physical implications for such a view; for if nature is already "a product of . . . civilization," as William Cronon infamously argued, then further domesticating it does not violate nature's own structures but simply continues a natural process of change that began when *Homo sapiens* first chipped pieces of granite to make axe heads.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Kidner, "Assassination," 11.

<sup>55</sup> Kidner, "Assassination," 12.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

It is clear that the aspect of constructionism that most worries Kidner is its (supposedly) logical conclusion: that if wilderness, if nature, is just another product of human society, then any alterations made to it, no matter how exploitative, are just fine—after all, society created nature, and thus has just as much a right to alter or destroy it as necessity (read: growth, expansion, etc.) demands. He spells out even more explicitly in another essay the all-consuming relativism at hand here, pointing out that if nature is socially constructed, and given that different societies exist with different conceptions of right and wrong, then “one attitude toward or interpretation of the natural world is no better or worse than any other.”<sup>57</sup> This claim goes well beyond the criticisms leveled by Johns, and demonstrates a painfully real problem with Cronon’s assessment of normative claims regarding nature. Cronon may assert that the tree in the backyard and the tree in the virgin forest are equally worthy of our respect, but this assertion may very well have the unintended consequence of damning them both with faint praise. Leaving nature entirely at the whims of social construction, as Kidner here accuses Cronon of doing, could prove to be disastrous in even the short term, let alone the long—if, given the ongoing climate crises continue to worsen, we even have a long term to consider.

Kidner does not engage in the quasi-anarcho-primitivist condemnation of agriculture which David Johns suggests. He has a much clearer goal in mind: to restore the dialectic between nature and culture while never failing to recognize the effect social upbringing and cultural factors have on our perception of the natural world. He suggests instead of Cronon’s potentially disastrous constructionism a “humility based on the recognition that nature must, for the most part, remain a mystery to us; and the notion of preserving nature, if it is of any use at all, must be rooted primarily in the willingness to let nature be....” He does not deny that humans are “part of

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<sup>57</sup> Kidner, “Fabricating,” 3.

nature and so have contributed in certain respects to the way it functions,” but claims that “this is a long way from saying that nature is ‘socially constructed’ or that it extends no further than the boundaries of our capacity to recognise or describe it.”<sup>58</sup> It is clear enough that Kidner’s motivation is utilitarian in the sense that he believes the consequences of constructionism to be undesirable; here, then, he says, is a way to avoid such outcomes while retaining elements of Cronon’s (and, of course, others’) central tenets.

It is worth pointing out that it is not explicit in Cronon’s argument that such rhetorical consequences—and thus real-world consequences—are necessary conclusions. Cronon cites Gary Snyder: “A person with a clear heart and open mind can experience the wilderness anywhere on earth. It is a quality of one’s own consciousness. The planet is a wild place and always will be.”<sup>59</sup> This is meant to bolster Cronon’s counter to the apocalyptic rhetoric which claims that humanity will destroy nature itself: “To think ourselves capable of causing ‘the end of nature’ is an act of great hubris, for it means forgetting the wildness that dwells everywhere within and around us.”<sup>60</sup> While it is easy enough to take this assertion down the slippery slope that Johns and Kidner worry about, such an argument stops well short of claiming that nature has no meaning, purpose, or value outside of humans’ perception of it. On the other hand, we may ask ourselves whether or not Cronon’s claims about the “end of nature” are not themselves straw men. It is of course a reach to believe that humanity could bring about the end of nature, because it isn’t even clear what such a phrase *means*. Instead, though, we can point to damning evidence—such as the UN report cited at the beginning of this thesis—that the nature we humans know and have known for the lifespan of our species is, in fact, perched on a crumbling

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<sup>58</sup> Kidner, “Fabricating,” 16.

<sup>59</sup> Qtd. Cronon, originally New York Times, “Week in Review,” 18 September 1994, p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> Cronon, “Trouble,” 495.

precipice, and our species' actions make it less and less likely that such a nature will survive much longer. Whatever comes next may not include us at all, but that says nothing about "nature" as itself.

### **Nature and Aesthetics**

Too often when discussing the non-human natural world, the conversation gets caught up on a pernicious term: landscape. This term for nature itself is worth tackling on its own. Many nature writers, environmentalists, and conservationists use the term to describe the objects out there in nature themselves—mountains, trees, rocks, rivers—and the spaces such objects<sup>61</sup> occupy; indeed, it is difficult to even discuss such spaces without calling them landscapes. As Timothy Morton points out, however, "[landscape is] a word for a painting, not actual trees and water."<sup>62</sup> The aesthetic dimension of nature, it seems, is hard to escape from. So much of our concept of nature is informed by, or revolves around, our capacity to observe it, that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to regard it as anything other than an aesthetic object. Such aesthetic regard has come under fire occasionally, sometimes explicitly, and it is worth addressing two critics of nature-as-aesthetic-object: Timothy Morton, and the subject of this thesis, John Haines himself.

Timothy Morton is an advocate of what is referred to as "object-oriented ontology," or OOO.<sup>63</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, however, we will not get into the weeds of Kantian and

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<sup>61</sup> Is "object" a sufficient term for something like a mountain? One wonders.

<sup>62</sup> Morton, *Thought*, 10.

<sup>63</sup> OOO is a philosophy which claims that the conventional privilege of human over non-human is mistaken, and that, contrary to Kantian metaphysics which holds that non-human objects are defined solely by their relation to the human mind, all objects, human and non-human, relate to each other equally, and that objects exist independently of human cognition. Much as Kantian metaphysics holds that human consciousness distorts objects, OOO holds that nonhuman objects equally distort objects to which they relate. It stands, then, in stark contrast to anthropocentrism. For more, see Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, Pelican Books, 2017.

Heideggerian metaphysics; rather, we will examine Morton's work on ecology, specifically the aesthetics of the natural world. In keeping with his OOO-prescribed ontological flattening, Morton is critical of the tendency to treat nature as the beneficiary of humans' attention, or, worse, to elevate nature to a proper noun, capital-N Nature, to assume that respect for it makes Nature capable of saving humanity from ecological disaster:

Modern thinkers [have] taken it for granted that the ghost of Nature, rattling its chains, would remind them of a time without industry, a time without 'technology,' as if we had never used flint or wheat. But in looking at the ghost of Nature, modern humans [are] looking in a mirror. In Nature, they [see] the reflected, inverted image of their own age—and the grass is always greener on the other side. Nature [is] always "over yonder," alien and alienated. Just like a reflection, we can never actually reach it and touch it and belong to it.<sup>64</sup>

Echoing Cronon's critique of wilderness, Morton argues that the concept of "pristine wilderness" is another form of private property, complete with "keep off the grass" and "do not touch" signs. He is quick to point out that, devoid of an owner, nature is a "special kind of private property, without an owner, exhibited in a specially constructed art gallery. The gallery [is] Nature itself, revealed through visual technology in the eighteenth century as 'picturesque,'—looking like a picture."<sup>65</sup> Its separation from us in this way makes Nature an object to be acted upon or to passively observe, not a subject with which to interact—let alone a subject that relates to us as much as we relate to it, equally capable of interaction, however unknown or unknowable such relations may be. Though Morton does not cite William Cronon, they are clearly on similar wavelengths. We will see soon enough that John Haines is, too.

One of Morton's central goals in his discussion of "the ecological thought" is to rid ecology of this sense of nature, which he always indicates with capitalization: Nature. He aims to do so because he believes, as I have touched on throughout this thesis, that the current ecological

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<sup>64</sup> Morton, *Thought*, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Morton, *Thought*, 6.

crisis is beyond the scope of any environmentalist, naturalist, or ecological framework known to us at the moment, and that it is so unknowable precisely because we have not rid ourselves of Nature. Morton's ecological thought is there as a framework "for coping with a catastrophe that, from the evidence of the hysterical announcements of its imminent arrival, has already occurred."<sup>66</sup> He is critical of worldviews and ethical positions that attempt to maintain Nature for the sake of escapism (a view we will encounter to some extent with Abbey later) or some other instrumental value, such as beautiful objects to admire, or reservoirs of resources to extract. The fact that he lumps escapism and aesthetic appreciation into the same suspicious, negative category as extractive industry would doubtless infuriate environmentalists, as well as those theorists presented earlier who are opposed to Cronon's argument against wilderness. Morton accepts this readily:

Being glued to a heating world that might overwhelm or kill us is bad news. Ecology is stuck between melancholy and mourning. Nature language is like melancholy: holding on to a "bad" object, a toxic mother whose distance and objectlike qualities are venerated. Environmentalism is a work of mourning for a mother we never had. To have ecology, we must give up Nature. But since we have been addicted to Nature for so long, giving up will be painful. Giving up a fantasy is harder than giving up a reality.<sup>67</sup>

This "stuck between" leads us naturally to a central element of Morton's ecological thought, which is its occasionally overwhelming gloom: "If the ecological thought is as big as I think it is," he says, "it must include darkness as well as light, negativity as well as positivity."<sup>68</sup> This sense of darkness and negativity sitting as equals alongside the more conventional environmental language of sunny, hearty, healthy nature is, as we must discuss next, a central element of John Haines's work.

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<sup>66</sup> Morton, *Thought*, 17.

<sup>67</sup> Morton, *Thought*, 94-95.

<sup>68</sup> Morton, *Thought*, 16.

In the preface to his memoir, Haines discusses the nature of his experiences in the Alaskan forests, and how unsuited a chronological narrative or straightforward recollection is to writing about them. An “intuitive relation to the world we [share] with animals, with everything that exists, once outgrown, rarely returns in all its convincing power.... [T]he experience cannot be reduced to abstractions, formulas, and explanations.” Part of this problem, if it can be called a problem, is the dual nature of such experiences, and memory’s inability to reconcile it in words: “It is rank, it smells of blood and killed meat, is compounded of fear, of danger and delight in unequal measure. To the extent that it can even be called ‘experience’ and not by some other, forgotten name, it requires a surrender few of us now are willing to make.”<sup>69</sup> The “unequal measure” of danger and delight is a running theme throughout Haines’s writing, prose and poetry alike, and bears considerable relation to Morton’s emphasis on the gloom, what he calls “dark ecology.” The dark for Morton is in his explorations of climate change, radiation, algae blooms off the Gulf of Mexico, produced by agricultural runoff. For Haines, it is in small, intimate moments with a dead or dying animal, or the uncanny feeling of otherness interpretable as dread he sometimes encounters out in the world:

A drowsy, half-wakeful menace waits for us in the quietness of this world. I have felt it near me while kneeling in the snow, minding a trap on a ridge many miles from home. There, in the cold that gripped my face, in the low, blue light failing around me, and the short day ending, in those familiar and friendly shadows, I was suddenly aware of something that did not care if I lived. Or, as it may be, running the river ice in midwinter: under the sled runners a sudden cracking and buckling that scared the dogs and sent my heart racing. How swiftly the solid bottom of one’s life can go.<sup>70</sup>

This “half-wakeful menace” is not entirely in the external world, however. Haines spends much of his work ruminating on his trapping and killing of animals, meditating, if you will, on the

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<sup>69</sup> Haines, *Stars*, preface.

<sup>70</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 104.

horrors of his methods. He relates the trapping and killing of his first fox, a skill he learns from a fellow trapper, Fred Campbell. The first trap he sets snares the fox, and Haines finds the animal there still alive, “[t]he skin of his caught leg ... broken and bloody, and his eyes had a baffled and wounded look.” He knocks the fox unconscious with a stout stick he finds in the brush nearby, then sits on the ground, drags the fox into his lap, and snaps its neck. Blood gushes from the animal’s nose as it shudders and dies. Haines is horrified yet pleased with himself: “I released him and got to my feet. I stood there, looking down at the soiled, limp form in the snow, appalled at what I had done. ... But I had overcome my fear, and I felt something had been gained by that.”<sup>71</sup> One of his early poems, “On the Divide,” makes the unease palpable: “I am haunted by / the deaths of animals. // Their frozen, moonlit eyes / stare into the hollow / of my skull; they listen / as though I had / something to tell them.”<sup>72</sup> The inversion of a typical relationship with nature is notable: we would expect the narrator to listen to what the animals have to say, not the other way around. This runs contrary to so much of what Romanticism has taught us about how to relate to the non-human, where it is the teacher, and we, its humble pupil. Haines describes the butchering of a moose with the clinical eye of a practiced hunter, after describing the transformation of the animal from living being to “meat and salvage—a hairy mound of bone and muscle”:

When I cut through the hide and strained inner tissue of the paunch, a cloud of red steam burst on the snowy air. And soon I could see deep into the steaming red cavity divided from the upper torso by the taut, muscular wall of the diaphragm. Working by feel alone in the hot soupiness of the rib cage, I loosened the windpipe, then pulled the stomach and the intestines clear, tumbling the heavy, stretched bag and ropy folds onto the snow. There was no fat on the veil nor around the kidneys, but I had not expected to find any. The meat would be lean, but it was better than no meat at all.

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<sup>71</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 12-13.

<sup>72</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 19. (Despite CMS’s insistence that run-ins of more than one stanza should be set off in an extract, I’m using the “//” as prescribed in 13.32 of CMS 16, intending to save space on the page.)



It is this last bit—“better than no meat at all”—that defines much of Haines’s life in Alaska. Haunted as he may be by his actions, ruminating as he does on the deaths of animals, he is nevertheless required to do such things in the name of survival. “I cannot trap and kill without thought or emotion,” he writes, “and it may be that the killing wounds me also in some small but deadly way.” He evokes a similar light-and-dark relationship as that described by Morton, above: “Life is here equally in sunlight and frost, in the thriving blood and sap of things, in their decay and sudden death. It can be hard and cruel sometimes, as we are prepared to see it clearly.”<sup>73</sup> This interconnectedness of living beings is not limited to the life and death of hunter and hunted, however. The relation Haines has to the animal is profound, as is the relation he has to the land, and vice versa.

Timothy Morton writes of “the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things,” what he comes to call the “mesh.”<sup>74</sup> It is tempting, given what is presented above, to claim that Haines’s relationship to the natural world is purely one of subsistence, an interconnectedness that depends on one party dying for the other to live. But nothing could be further from the truth. “What would a truly democratic encounter between truly equal beings look like, what would it be—can we even imagine it?”<sup>75</sup> Morton asks this early on in *The Ecological Thought*, and the whole of his work on ecology seems to return again and again to this idea of a democratic encounter. Morton’s concept of the mesh, of just such a democratic encounter, is visible in two instances in which it is clear that Haines can relate to animals who he need not trap or kill, and that he imagines they relate to him as well, even if such a relationship is difficult to parse. They

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<sup>73</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 82.

<sup>74</sup> Morton, *Thought*, 28.

<sup>75</sup> Morton, *Thought*, 7.

are not utterly foreign beings, but rather part of the world, just as he himself is. This shared being proves to be a source of profound interest for Haines.

The first of the two encounters is a brief one. One summer as he works to clear trees in the yard of his cabin, Haines hears a strange, vaguely human-like whimpering coming from the nearby woods. He cannot place the sound except that it seems close to him and low to the ground, and fears that it may be a bear cub. Given the common knowledge that where there is a bear cub, there is likely to be its mother, he is understandably wary, and takes care not to disturb it. That same summer, during a visit to his friend Fred Campbell (who has, as we saw above, taught Haines much of life in Alaska), he mentions the sound and asks what it could be. Campbell “considered for a moment, then smiled and looked at me in that understanding, slightly superior way of his, and said that it was probably a porcupine looking for a mate.” Years later, walking back from his mailbox, he hears the whimpering again, and resolves to know for certain what it is—by calling it to him. “Putting my hands to my mouth, I began to call, imitating as well as I could that strange, intermittent crying,” he writes, “and very soon it seemed to me that the animal responded, that we were in communication.” This call-and-response persists for a bit, until finally, the animal reveals itself: “Presently the grass and brush parted, and a large porcupine shoved its black nose into the open and stopped in front of me. It rose on its back legs and stood before me, no more than three feet away. It turned its head to one side so that one dark, unblinking eye regarded me suspiciously.” The two figures regard each other, each as curious as the other. But the porcupine recognizes something is amiss:

The mixed odors of the summer afternoon, combined and sorted by the black, twitching nostrils, found their way into the recesses of the small brain. The porcupine slowly dropped to the ground and turned to go. It hesitated, half-turned toward me, as if reluctant to give up the promise in the answering voice it had come to. But clearly something was not quite right about my khaki figure crouched there in the sunlight, something alien in the steady gaze that was

fastened upon it. The porcupine pulled its yellowish, brindled weight into the woods once more. I heard the small crashing of leaves as it retreated, voiceless and betrayed.<sup>76</sup>

Communication has taken place here, even if neither party is capable of recognizing what has been said. Haines acts as a hunter might, as he does many times, using an animal call to lure prey. But there is no murderous intent here, merely curiosity, which is rewarded with this brief encounter. The two beings, human and porcupine, find themselves for a few minutes in communication, occupying a place in the world where each can find its own fulfillment. The porcupine, of course, is “betrayed,” finding instead of a potential mate an “alien.” Haines does not elaborate on what this brief meeting means. There is no utility to this story. Indeed, this small episode in a chapter entitled “Dusk” does not immediately relate to anything else in the narrative. But it precedes, and in a sense foreshadows, a story told later in the book, in which such a relationship is described, interrogated, and celebrated.

One fall evening, Haines ventures outside his cabin to take the air. What he at first takes for an unusually large falling leaf passing by his head, he quickly realizes is in fact a bat, probably a *myotis lucifugus*, or a little brown bat. It is one of the most common bats in North America, but as Haines points out, its range was thought to end several hundred miles south. Clearly they have ventured beyond their boundaries. As he walks towards his mailbox along the highway the following evening, he again notices a bat, flying in and out of the nearby trees. Watching it flitter about, Haines reflects that as he walked along the road, “that the bat in turn was attracted by my passage... I felt oddly comforted, exhilarated by the nearness of this unique and searching creature in the dusk. When I returned from the mailbox, the bat again seemed to accompany me—as if, in obedience to some obscure purpose in life, it too delighted in the

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<sup>76</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 126-127.

companionship.”<sup>77</sup> For four years the bats come and go from his yard, and there are reports of bat sightings from elsewhere in the Alaskan interior. Then, as suddenly as they came, they disappear. Haines laments that, as “[a]nother and distant fall shed its leaves in the wind... no bats came, and something of that rare kinship was missing in the October evening.”<sup>78</sup>

The recollection of the bats’ visit is interspersed with facts and trivia about bats, as well as recounting of bat folklore. Witches and evil spirits, unsurprisingly, feature prominently in the stories, but Haines has no such ill will towards the small creatures. Instead, he finds them to be “warm, curious, and friendly creatures whose lives momentarily touch our own,” animals whose presence, while unexpected and rare, is greatly appreciated.<sup>79</sup> Their mere presence awakens in him an appreciation of what Morton would doubtless call “the mesh,” that sense of interconnectedness that seems both indescribable and mundane. Of the bats, Haines writes, “to speak now and then of companionship and delight is sufficient, for these may be found anywhere in the pure act of being.” Their absence is striking and sad, as even though they had been absent for most of his time in Alaska, their sudden departure “leave[s] not just a momentary gap in nature, but a lack in one’s own existence, one less possibility of being.”<sup>80</sup> This “possibility of being” resonates strongly with the idea of the mesh, and suggests Morton’s idea that we are best when we recognize all objects—human, animal, or neither—as kin, however unknown or unknowable they may be. Morton chooses to refer to animals as “strange strangers,” arguing that “what could be stranger than what is familiar? As anyone who has a long-term partner can attest, the strangest person is the one you wake up with every morning. Far from gradually erasing strangeness, intimacy heightens it. The more we know them, the stranger they become. Intimacy

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<sup>77</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 170.

<sup>78</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 173.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 178.

itself is strange.”<sup>81</sup> Haines is, as we have seen, certainly intimate with these animals—not in the romantic sense, of course, but in his constant nearness to them, and theirs to him. As we shall see in the next chapter, his regard for and relationship to animals—“strange strangers,” perhaps—is unique among nature writers.

“I have wondered,” Haines writes, “if we were not attempting to live in a world of continents and vaster entities with minds and senses conditioned by life in the village.” He aspires to an “ever greater inclusiveness,” recognizing that such grand territory cannot be yielded to the naked greed of the capitalist networks striving for more “power and control,” understanding as they do the “vast commercial enterprises” of the global markets.<sup>82</sup> His interest in vastness and his concern that humans have limited themselves to a myopic view of the world dovetails with Morton’s argument: that we have continued to neglect an ethic beyond the narrow limits of the self, and that such neglect will only add to the ongoing ecological catastrophe going on all around us. Haines’s experience as a hunter and a trapper grants him unique access to the mesh, an access that many of us can never hope to experience, but that we should nevertheless take to heart in order to deal with what has come our way as beings upon this earth: “I was at home there [in Alaska], my mind bent away from humanity, to learn to think a little like that thing I was hunting. I entered for a time the old life of the forest, became part fur myself.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Morton, *Thought*, 41.

<sup>82</sup> Haines, *Living*, 38-39.

<sup>83</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 31.

## HAINES AND ELIZABETH BISHOP

Why animals and plants are as they are, we shall never know; of how they have come to be what they are, our knowledge will always be extremely fragmentary.... [B]ut that organisms are as they are, that apart from the members of our own species, they are our only companions in an infinite and unsympathetic waste of electrons, planets, nebulae and suns, is a perennial joy and consolation.

William Morton Wheeler, *Collected Papers* Vol. 5

Following our exploration of what might best be called “wilderness theory,” wherein we explored political and philosophical attitudes towards wilderness and nature and saw how Haines’s views accord with those of other thinkers, it seems important now to compare Haines to other, more conventional nature writers. We will begin with two poems by Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979). Bishop may seem like an unusual choice, as she is not often considered a “nature writer.” Many of her poems are not nature poems at all, nor are they particularly interested in examining or positing ecological positions.<sup>84</sup> But the two poems I would like to discuss are concerned with precisely the issues Haines’s work interrogates: the landscape which humans occupy, and the relationship which humans have to non-humans. It is worth examining Bishop’s poems and the implicit arguments therein, then comparing them to several of Haines’s poems which consider the same issues. Doing so will allow us to see the similarities and differences between the two poets’ ecological philosophies, a preface of sorts to the later comparison of Haines and Robinson Jeffers.

As a prelude to the following comparison with Haines’s work, it will prove useful to examine a poem of Bishop’s in which she sets the stage for her ontology of nature, as well as

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<sup>84</sup> Robert Boschmann’s 2009 book, *In the Way of Nature*, is explicitly interested in Bishop’s work as a nature poet, but this is an exception to much of the scholarship surrounding Bishop, which is more often than not concerned with her career as a lesbian poet who took exception to much of the branding surrounding female poets.

humanity's place within it. In "Cape Breton," Bishop provides the reader a detailed description where every element of the landscape and its inhabitants is given equal standing.<sup>85</sup> She begins by describing birds on islands visible from the coast, "razorbill auks and the silly-looking puffins all stand / with their backs to the mainland." Sheep get a turn in the spotlight as well, complete with a parenthetical aside about their tendency to fall off cliffs when frightened. The water, "weaving and weaving," is covered by mist, and the "pulse, / rapid but unurgent" of a motorboat stands prominent but unplaced in the scene as well. The same mist that hangs over the water penetrates inland, where trees, "fir: spruce and hackmatack - / dull, dead, deep peacock-colors," stand in folds among hills and valleys. Bulldozers whose drivers are absent this Sunday morning stand still along a road, and "little white churches" seem to "have been dropped into the matted hills / like lost quartz arrowheads." All of this description seems to be building towards something, the narrator certain to be leading the reader towards a conclusion. Perhaps the standing bulldozers will merit additional comment, maybe in comparison with the birds on the islands, themselves standing "in solemn, uneven lines," or the lost churches tucked among the folded, matted hills of fir and spruce. But no – as soon as the reader can begin a search for commentary, a message, a meaning, the narrator stops him in his tracks. "Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been abandoned," Bishop writes, "unless the road is holding it back, in the interior, / where we cannot see."

"Cape Breton" and its resistance to giving the landscape "meaning" is precisely the place to start when discussing Bishop's brand of ecocentrism. In the equal footing given to so many elements of the scene, the reader is given a remarkably broad view of the world. Birds, sheep, water, trees, a motorboat, bulldozers, churches – all of these elements have a part to play in the

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<sup>85</sup> Bishop, *Complete Poems*, 67.

landscape, but the landscape itself is not elaborated upon as some sort of abstract concept in and of itself, and neither are its individual components. The details within are of importance. This method of description demonstrates what Iris Shu-O Huang calls Bishop's "conscious exclusion of solipsism," where Bishop rejects imposing upon disparate elements any sort of unifying vision.<sup>86</sup> There is no grand meaning to be found in the landscape as a whole, or even in the elements which comprise it. Neither visual nor auditory elements confer meaning: "[T]hese regions now have little to say for themselves / except in thousands of light song-sparrow songs floating upward / freely, dispassionately, through the mist." Where many would be tempted to hear something in birdsong, Bishop makes a point of the sparrows' tunes being devoid of human sentiment. The reader is left without anything to hang her hat on in terms of meaning – what she gets is a landscape that, while it has its human presences, is not there solely for the sake of humans, either in a literal or figurative sense. Nor is there the sort of favoritism shown to the non-human elements which we will find in Edward Abbey's or Robinson Jeffers's writings, no anti-Kantian "purity," no "wild God of the world." By resisting the urge to make a metaphor of the sea or the birdsong, or see human emotion present in the rows of birds or bulldozers, not only does Bishop present a world as-is, she insists that human creation is as much a part of the landscape as the trees, birds, and hills. The road courses through the poem, and indeed, it is possible some meaning may be found by following it – but this possibility is never pursued. The road is left to meander into the interior, "where deep lakes are reputed to be," even its eventual destination shrouded in uncertainty. Rather than a hierarchy of elements, birds preceding bulldozers, for instance, or churches taking precedence over the trees surrounding them, the

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<sup>86</sup> Huang, "Landscapes," 15.



reader is instead presented with a heterarchy that resists a single unifying purpose or meaning entirely.

Bishop's view of the world as-is, devoid of human imposition and human context, finds its expression most notably in "The Fish."<sup>87</sup> In this poem, Bishop describes in detail a fish (as the title rather lets on) that she catches off the side of a fishing boat. While "Cape Breton" gives a detailed description of many elements of a landscape, "The Fish" gives a similarly in-depth description of a single animal. Bishop begins by describing the fish's skin, "hung in strips / like ancient wallpaper, / and its pattern of darker brown / was like wallpaper: / shapes like full-blown roses / stained and lost through age." The likening of skin to wallpaper foreshadows the existence of something *within* the skin, covering up a deeper layer (or layers) which will merit their own description in time. As she continues to observe the fish, she begins to imagine what precisely that wallpaper skin covers up: "the big bones and the little bones, / the dramatic reds and blacks / of his shiny entrails, / and the pink swim-bladder / like a big peony." Both within and without, elements of the fish are likened to flowers – though the roses are observed, the peony can only be imagined.<sup>88</sup> The attention to detail here is remarkable, especially considering that, much as is the case in "Cape Breton," the reader is not provided with some overarching singular concept of the fish. The very particularity, the specificity of the description, means Bishop can only be describing *this* fish, not fish in general, or this fish's long-lost second cousin. She is interested in precisely this individual animal.

Most remarkable about this fish is his eyes. The description Bishop provides is worth quoting in full:

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<sup>87</sup> Bishop, *Complete Poems*, 42.

<sup>88</sup> Note that here, Bishop is in a sense seeing *into* the fish. This idea of seeing *into* something external to us will reappear later when we discuss Edward Abbey's desire to rid himself of Kantian categories and see *into* things strictly as they are.

I looked into his eyes  
which were far larger than mine  
but shallower, and yellowed,  
the irises backed and packed  
with tarnished tinfoil  
seen through the lenses  
of old scratched isinglass.  
They shifted a little, but not  
to return my stare.

Bishop continues her meticulous description of the appearance of the fish as she moves up to the fish's eyes, again invoking notions of interiority ("packed / with tarnished tinfoil") driven by imagination. But whereas the reader might expect to find Bishop share some moment of understanding with the fish, which so often happens when eye contact is made between creatures, once again expectations are defied – the fish is utterly independent of her. His eyes do not look back at hers, as the fish is not at all concerned with or interested in her gaze, which has penetrated the depths of the fish in imagination only. Nothing about the fish has *actually* been laid bare, and the alien otherness of the fish's eyes stymies any further attempt to make it so. By these unfathomable eyes, Bishop is forced to recognize all she understands of the fish is surface appearance, bringing sharp relief to the imagined exploration of his interior, when no such exploration has actually taken place. The fish, such as it is, stands alone and apart from her entirely. There can be no communication, no understanding, between the fish and the narrator—an epistemological claim we will see gradually turned on its head in Haines's poetry.

As Bishop continues to stare at the fish, a change begins to take place within her, a change which begins to alter her perception of her surroundings as well. "I stared and stared / and victory filled up / the little rented boat," she exults, caught up as she is in admiration of this "tremendous" fish. It is notable that this victory derives entirely from observation of the fish, "stared and stared" emphasizing the ontological work being done by seeing. Bishop has not

conquered the fish any more than the others who at one point hooked the animal, their efforts displayed prominently in the fish's jaw, monuments to their failure. Merely witnessing it causes her delight, so much so that "everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!" and she lets the fish go. Evidenced here in Bishop's rendition of the fish is her particular sort of poetic imagination, an imagination which constructs the fish without transforming it into anything more than what it is – a mere fish. The "mere" fish is rendered anything but by the near-rapturous attention to particular details of the animal, and indeed, Bishop seems to eliminate such diminutions as "mere" fish or "only" a fish from her (and, in the process, the reader's) lexicon entirely. As Guy Rotella notes, Bishop avoids the desire to "give the shape authority and to objectify or possess the things on which her gaze is turned."<sup>89</sup> The satisfaction she feels derives entirely from the fish's "fishness," if you will, not her conquering of it (she does not) or comparing it to something somehow grander (again, she does not). And the fish may have qualities that are *like* those of humans, but they are never identical, and it is notable too that when these qualities arise (his "sullen face," for instance, with a "five-haired beard of wisdom") they are linked to human artifice itself, the hooks and lines trailing from the unconquered fish. Huang notes that Bishop approaches the fish (and nature more generally) as "an artist, a lyricist, instead of a hunter or a philosopher," a distinction worth keeping in mind when comparing her work to Haines's.<sup>90</sup>

Whereas Bishop encounters a fish and relates her experience of utter detachment and alienation, elaborating on the fish's fishness through mechanisms of poetic imagination and lyrical description, Haines takes a much different tack when it comes to his own exploration of animal nature. Haines's poetic language is spare, stark, devoid of the elaborate detail provided by Bishop. His imagination leads him in a different direction than that navigated by Bishop. She is

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<sup>89</sup> Rotella, *Reading*, 217.

<sup>90</sup> Huang, "Landscapes," 18.

separate from the fish, now and forever, incapable of knowing the fish except as a foreign entity beyond her ken. They do not relate to one another. Haines is much closer to the animals that populate his poems. They relate to each other as you would expect a hunter and prey to relate to one another, and yet sometimes that relationship provides some surprises. There are two poems in particular I would like to discuss wherein Haines describes an animal and/or his relationship to it: "If the Owl Calls Again" and "Cicada." Much of Haines's relationship to the animal world in his poetry is concerned with the methods of communication, or lack thereof, between himself and the animal subject. It is worth interrogating this fixation of his in these two poems, as well as other pieces where silence and speech are prominently addressed.

Beginning with "Owl," the first poem in his first book, it quickly becomes clear that relationships between human and non-human will be key to Haines's interpretation of the natural world. In this poem the narrator envisions himself joining an owl in a nighttime hunt. "We will not speak," the narrator imagines, "but hooded against the frost / soar above / the alder flats, searching / with tawny eyes." Later, after enjoying the fruits of their hunt (some luckless mice), as a "river mutters," "and when the morning climbs / the limbs / we'll part without a sound, / fulfilled, floating / homeward as / the cold world awakens." It is no terrible surprise that, a hunter himself at this time (the poem was written in 1960), Haines could wordlessly identify with what is perhaps the prototypical hunter. There is no need for the narrator and the owl to communicate – they know what it is they are there to do, and they can accomplish their task without exchanging a word. They communicate through shared action, a relationship in a sense above and beyond language, the sort of relationship, perhaps, that the young poet came to Alaska to seek in the first place. The owl is not personified, nor granted anything resembling a human quality. It acts only as an owl would, and the narrator does his best to do the same, devoid of

humanly relatable sentiment. Language here is unimportant. What matters is the narrator's active relationship with the hunting owl, and the fulfillment of this relationship by the end of the poem. The owl stands apart from, yet more than vaguely reminiscent of, Haines himself, a hunter seeking prey. Language is only necessary insofar as words must be put down on paper; one gets the sense that, if he could, Haines would prefer to describe his imagined experience with the owl soundlessly, wordlessly.

The lack of elaboration on the owl, the nearly nonexistent description of the bird itself, could not be more starkly different from Bishop's encounter with the fish. Whereas Bishop cannot relate to that fish except in her separation from it, compensating with meticulous visual description, Haines imagines a relationship based on his and the owl's shared occupation. The distance between himself and the owl is clear—they cannot communicate, will not be sharing tips about hunting mice, cannot exchange pleasantries—but this distance is not what concerns Haines, not at all. He recognizes the owl on his own terms, and the owl sees him likewise. It would be easy to dismiss this difference as simply the result of these two poets' vastly different lives, but this would sell the import of Haines's poem short. Haines's poetry, especially his early work, is notable for its interest in the power of language, or lack thereof, and how he as a poet and as a hunter comes to terms with his artistic ventures in the Alaskan bush. Having discussed Haines's night-flight with the owl, it is worth examining more of Haines's ruminations on communication and language, then turning to more quasi-shamanistic poetry centering on animal transformations.

Haines's initial relationship to the world around him is expressed succinctly in the poem "Poem of the Forgotten."<sup>91</sup> "I came to this place, / a young man green and lonely. / Well quit of

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<sup>91</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 10.

this world....” he begins, expressing early on his readiness to be apart from “this world,” by which he means the non-Alaskan wilderness, the world of people and cities and, as will soon be seen, the world of words. He expresses here a dichotomy between man and nature, a clean split between the two, and his own inability to relate the two. He chooses nature at this early time. “I made my bed under the shadow / of leaves, and awoke / in the first snow of autumn, / filled with silence.” He finds in the Alaskan frontier not only that visual artwork is inadequate to capture the world around him, but that language itself fails – it cannot convey a relationship because he has none to convey, and so language is rendered not just unnecessary for the young poet, but impossible to use. There is no poetic imagination at work here, no construction of nature as we saw earlier in Bishop’s poetry – there is only silence. Haines struggles with language in nature at least as much as he struggled with visual art. This is not the only time one of his narrators is rendered speechless by the natural world.

The poet’s relationship to language continues to be a point of contention throughout *Winter News*. Language and, broader still, sound itself (as well as its absence), is a focal point in much of Haines’s early poetry. For example, in “Fairbanks under the Solstice,” Death itself is a “voice made visible,” and “ghostly newsboys / make their rounds, delivering / to the homes of those / who have died of the frost / word of the resurrection of Silence.”<sup>92</sup> In “Winter News,” “the voice of the snowman / calls the white- / haired children home.”<sup>93</sup> In “The Dream of February,” the narrator hears “the quiet step / and smothered whimper / of something following,” an animal which turns out to be a lynx, and later, after killing a fox with a sharpened stick, “the dead fox / moved again, his jaws / released the / sound of speech.”<sup>94</sup> It seems as if much in

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<sup>92</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 11.

<sup>93</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 10.

<sup>94</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 23.

Haines's world speaks, with, but in a few instances, the notable exception of himself. When the narrator does communicate, it is in the language of the hunter, as in "A Moose Calling." The narrator is blunt about what he is to the moose: "I am neither cow / nor bull – / I walk upright / and carry your death / in my hands," he says to the moose, warning the moose while indicating his determination to accomplish his goal. His voice is a "beckoning, deceitful, / ruse of the hunter."<sup>95</sup> While his words, such as they are, may be mere pretense, it is clear that his sentiment is honest – he is the hunter, his prey is the hunted, and this distinction is as clean and simple as can be. In its short stanzas, none longer than three lines, the poem betrays no confusion about each party's role, and nowhere is the moose or the man identified with one another. Much as in Bishop's "The Fish," where the narrator is knowingly separate from the fish, Haines's narrator is knowingly alien to the moose, albeit in a more actively dangerous manner. There is no pretense of benevolent relatability here – the only way the hunter and the moose relate to one another is as predator and prey. While Haines is deceiving the moose by communicating his own nature falsely, he is not misrepresenting or transforming himself or the moose, merely adhering to the roles circumstance and his position in the Alaskan wilderness dictate as necessity. The hunter must hunt, and the hunted must be pursued. The relationship Haines sees between himself and the natural world will be expanded upon in the following sections of this chapter as we compare his work to that of Abbey and Jeffers.

To wrap this section up, we turn to the 1974 poem "Cicada." The poem is entirely in the first person, just as "Owl" and many of the language poems cited above. Here, however, the narrator is not encountering the cicada, or imagining himself underground with the insect. Instead, the narrator *is* the cicada. Once again we see the stark contrast between the poetic

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<sup>95</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 15.

imagination of Bishop and that of Haines, with the former poet willing only to conceive of animal life as external and alien to her, while the latter is willing, and perhaps prefers, to interact with animal life on a knowing, personal basis, or even imagine himself as something nonhuman. His ability to imagine this is not all that surprising when one considers Haines's own lived experience in the non-human world goes far beyond what the vast majority of people in the Western world will ever receive. It also accords with Haines's belief, as he writes in "The Hole in the Bucket," that the "task" of the poet is "to invest the 'I' of the poem with significance beyond the ordinary, to make of one's own predicament a universal case. Or to say it another way, it is to allow something besides the self to occupy the poem, to matter as much as the self."<sup>96</sup> Indeed, in contrast to Bishop's observation of the fish, which confronts the reader with an unbridgeable gulf between self and non-self and finds rapture in that very separation, Haines believes the poet's obligation is to introduce an audience to something "beyond the private self."<sup>97</sup> "Cicada" can be read not only as a quasi-shamanistic exploration of what it is to be, for a time, something besides human, but also as the poet's obligation, and Haines's own development, spelled out in verse.

"Cicada" has three sections. The first is an account of the narrator burrowing underground, sinking "past bitten leaves, / tuning in a shell my song / of the absent and deaf." The second section of "Cicada" describes a maturation underground, and the narrator begins to imagine its own future:

A whisper, dry and insane,  
repeating like a paper drum  
something I was,  
something I might become:  
a little green knife  
slitting the wind upstairs,  
or a husk in the sod.

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<sup>96</sup> Haines, *Living*, 67.

<sup>97</sup> Haines, *Living*, 20.



It is easy enough to read the “I” as the eponymous insect. Certainly the poem works that way, the slow, painful development of insect life, longing to be and become. Haines, as is his style, is not ostentatious in his language or structure. The words are simple, the lines short. But the intricacy of the insect’s development is not simplified or glossed over, though to recognize that, it does help to know something about the cicada’s life. Those of us who live in the Midwest are surely familiar with the insect and its characteristic whirring, whining sound that fills many a summer evening. Most remarkable about the cicada is its bizarre life story. It spends seventeen full years underground, stuck in a larval stage, as it devours moisture from plant and tree roots. Finally, a biological alarm clock rings, and at sunrise the creature bursts forth from the dirt and climbs the nearest piece of plant life. Hours pass and the skin of the cicada splits open, birthing an insect unrecognizable when compared to the creature that first penetrated the earth seventeen years prior. The cicada now has wings, on which it flies away, singing to attract eligible companions. The cicadas then mate, reproduce, and die, and the cycle begins anew. Peter Wild, examining this poem in his short tract on Haines for Boise State University, cites a passage from *The Audubon Society Book of Insects* which discusses the unusual construction of the cicada’s sound-producing organs. In short, these organs are so large that they take up a disproportionate amount of space within the insect’s body, causing its innards to contort and twist around them. As Wild puts it, “In sum, the slow-to-develop creature is made to sing. It is a living musical instrument.”<sup>98</sup>

The third stanza elaborates on the narrator’s desires and aspirations, recognizing the time has come to emerge after its long growth underground:

It was late summer  
in the grass overhead.  
I wanted wings and a voice,  
my own tree to climb,  
and someone else to answer,

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<sup>98</sup> Wild, *Haines*, 35.

clear across  
loud acres of sun.<sup>99</sup>

Again, this all fits neatly with what we know of the cicada's lifespan. It works just fine as another shamanistic exploration of a non-human creature, such as that seen in "Owl," above, or even in "The Cauliflower,"<sup>100</sup> in which Haines writes from the perspective of, well, a cauliflower plant. As Peter Wild points out, though, it is also possible to read the poem as a deceptively intricate extended metaphor. "Step by step as we follow the cicada in the poem," he writes, "we also see John Haines's struggles toward his personal stability and final emergence with his own poetic 'wings' and 'voice.'" It serves as a tale of the poet's life and process of his own growth, avoiding a turn toward "self-indulgence" by making the metaphor-poet a humble insect.<sup>101</sup>

We see in all of the poems presented here, then, some dramatic differences from the world Elizabeth Bishop represents in "Cape Breton" and "The Fish." Where her ecological perspective represented in verse displays a world flattened and devoid of meaning in virtue of its foreignness and alienation from humanity, Haines paints a picture of an ecology in which humanity is an equal participant, capable of finding meaning and discerning importance even in "mundane" creatures such as insects (or even in vegetables!). Haines's work cited here shows a gradual shift away from silence toward communication, identification, even song, however insectoid he may present such music as being. For John Haines, the world in which he lives is one full of beings on equal footing as himself, with whom he belongs and can identify himself

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<sup>99</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 99.

<sup>100</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 46. Much like "Cicada," "The Cauliflower" can be read as a poem praising those who reach outward and try to experience the world outside of themselves. The narrator wishes to be a cauliflower, "blind roots touched / by the songs of worms," superior to his "cousins, the cabbages, [who] see and hear nothing of this world, / dreaming only on the yellow / and green magnificence / that is hardening within them." The cabbages can be read as writers, poets, whose focus remains solely on themselves and their personal feelings, an attitude that, as we have discussed, Haines despised.

<sup>101</sup> Wild, *Haines*, 36.

within. His poetic imagination differs wildly from Bishop's, his seeking belonging and nearness, hers finding alienation and distance.

## HAINES AND EDWARD ABBEY

I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound here become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one... but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them... Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature – daily to be shown matter, to come into contact with it – rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! The actual world! The common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?

Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 71

Whereas in our discussion of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry and its contrasting ontology with that of Haines's we found clear, stark differences ready for investigation, this next section will prove to be even more remarkable in its comparisons. Edward Abbey has been the subject of countless books and essays, a veritable celebrity in the world of nature writing (even though he himself despised that term). You can find his masterpiece *Desert Solitaire* on the shelves of most every bookstore in this country, not to mention in every gift shop in dozens of state and national parks in Utah and beyond.<sup>102</sup> I recall a conversation with a park ranger at Arches National Park, the setting of *Desert Solitaire*, where the ranger sang her praises of the work and of the author, their influence upon her determining her career and personal priorities, or, as she put it, her soul. Abbey as a character is just as popular and polarizing as his writing: chaotic and misanthropic and full of witty-but-vicious scorn for government and private individuals alike, his tone is frequently about as far removed from Haines's as one could imagine. And yet these two men share a similar interest in the non-human natural world as a holistic entity, both concerned with how we as humans fit into it and utilize it for our own ends, both suspicious (at the bare minimum!) of government's attempts at legislating and regulating "wilderness," both committed

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<sup>102</sup> I can attest to that personally. I have visited six parks in Utah, state and national, and Abbey has a home on every bookshelf. National parks in Nevada have a section for him too, along with Washington, California, Arizona, and, oddly enough, North Dakota.

to a sense of place in nature as opposed to vacations through it. Despite their dovetailing interests and even some occasionally similar arguments, however, a deep divide exists between Abbey and Haines in their idea of how that sense of place ought to be achieved, and just what sort of emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic values we humans impose upon the non-human. Throughout this section I will draw attention to passages from both men's work, comparing and contrasting their philosophies, continuing my argument that John Haines's difference from (yet another) nature writer demands greater attention be paid to his work. The differences with Abbey are especially interesting as Abbey's name and ideas are famous (or infamous, depending on who you ask), while Haines is, as we have seen, virtually unknown—and yet has perhaps even more interesting things to say. I will demonstrate that Haines's constant attention to the matter of community, to a sense of belonging and camaraderie he feels with regards to the other beings around him, human and not, stands in stark contrast to Abbey's preoccupation with rugged individualism. I will further argue that it is Haines's consideration of "the other" that makes his ecological philosophy all the more compelling and necessary today, as we find ourselves increasingly alienated not only from each other, but from the very lands in which we live, along with the other creatures who occupy them. It is this focus on the other that sets John Haines apart from Edward Abbey (among other nature writers), and it is this focus that demands attention (and emulation) from those of us concerned with ecological philosophies today.

Before diving into the works of Abbey and Haines, it is important to point out that these two men knew each other personally. John Murray, a prominent nature writer and editor in his own right, relates the tale of their first meeting at a university reading in 1975 in Missoula, Montana. Abbey was scheduled to read a piece there, but Haines was "dragooned" into doing so—Abbey himself was too drunk to stand up at the podium. The two authors became close

friends afterwards, sharing as they did interests and life experiences.<sup>103</sup> When on a trip to Alaska and asked to name the best book on the state, Abbey cites Haines's first book of poetry, *Winter News*, calling it "pure poetry, and by 'pure' I mean poetry about ordinary things, about the great weather, about daily living experience."<sup>104</sup> Alaska was, in Abbey's parlance, "Haines Country." John Haines was "the Hainester."<sup>105</sup> While Haines seems to have had no fond nicknames for Edward Abbey, the mutual respect and admiration between them is clear enough from Murray's accounts of their meetings.

It is best to begin this investigation with a general overview of Abbey's natural philosophy, before we set specific examples of his writing against some of Haines's work and pick apart the differences on a more minute scale. If one were in the mood for a bit of pithy obscenity, one could perhaps sum up Abbey's prevailing mission using words out of the mouth of his most famous character, George Washington Hayduke of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*: "My job is to save the fucking wilderness," he declares in a pivotal moment in the novel, "I don't know anything else worth saving." While this would certainly get some readers' attention, it is not entirely true to Abbey the author, as it does a grave disservice to the complexity and maddening ambiguity of much of his nonfiction work. Hayduke is not Edward Abbey, of course, as much as some enthusiastic undergraduates may have once argued one might as well be the other (guilty, myself). Abbey presents himself in his work as a walking, drinking, cursing, curious contradiction. As Robert Macfarlane puts it in his introduction to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Desert Solitaire*: "He despises motor vehicles, except when he is driving one. He celebrates personal liberty but also wishes to 'lose' his sense of self in the desert. He is an eco-

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<sup>103</sup> Murray, "Age," 154.

<sup>104</sup> Abbey, *Wall*, 195.

<sup>105</sup> Murray, "Age," 157.

centric misanthropist but also a localist whose sympathy lies most with blue-collar workers, including miners.... Doctrinally, he might be said to lie somewhere between Bakunin, Ammon Bundy and David Attenborough.”<sup>106</sup> He delights in casual misanthropy. Riffing on a line from Robinson Jeffers’s poem “Hurt Hawks,” which we will turn to in the next section, Abbey declares, “I’m a humanist; I’d rather kill a *man* than a snake.”<sup>107</sup> His tone varies wildly from one section of a work to another, sometimes sentence-by-sentence; he will veer from ruminating on the quality of sunlight on rocks at twilight to mocking tourists from Ohio for complaining about a lack of water in the desert. It is, then, difficult to know what to make of Edward Abbey, difficult to categorize his tone one way or another. But luckily that is not our concern here. Instead, we must compare what he writes to what Haines writes, and just as importantly, *how* they say what they say. To this end we turn to Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* as our primary object of investigation, contrasted with Haines’s *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*, and several of his collected essays.

*Desert Solitaire* and *The Stars* share some distinct similarities. Both are by and large disinterested in linear time: *DS* jumps from week to week chapter-by-chapter, while Haines’s *Stars* moves in an even more liquid fashion, skipping years between vignettes, presenting no clear timeline whatsoever. As Haines writes in his introduction in an attempt at explaining to readers the distinctly non-linear nature of his work, “In reliving parts of the narrative, I seem to have wandered through a number of historical periods, geological epochs, and states of mind, always returning to a source, a country that is both specific and ideal.... This journey in and out of time cannot be adequately expressed by any sum of calendar years. In the sense in which I

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<sup>106</sup> Abbey, *Solitaire*, Kindle location 80.

<sup>107</sup> Abbey, *Desert*, 18. He does, however, eventually kill the snake in question, a midget rattler, just as the narrator in Jeffers’s poem must kill the suffering hawk.

write, there is no progress, no destination, for the essence of things has already been known, the real place arrived at long ago.”<sup>108</sup> *Stars*, then, is not a blow-by-blow account of a quarter-century in the Alaskan forests, but rather a compilation of memories, or sketches of memories, presented in such a way as to emphasize the feeling of being there, and to best encapsulate Haines’s impressions of his time there. Abbey’s introduction to *DS* contains its own warning to readers about the passage of time as it concerns his book, one that demands the reader recognize the work as an explicit monument to the past: “most of what I write about in this book is already gone or going under fast. This is not a travel guide but an elegy. A memorial. You’re holding a tombstone in your hands. A bloody rock.”<sup>109</sup> It is also the case that, despite *DS*’s subtitle, “A Season in the Wilderness,” the book is not really about one season at all, but rather several, sketches of incidents occurring over multiple summers, presented out of order, themselves edited to the whims of the author, characters combined or excluded, locations changed, narrative connective material excised or invented. Abbey does not make this clear in the text, however, leaving it up to readers who research the man’s life further to discover this themselves. Both authors are interested in the passage of time not just in how it affects the readers of their work, or even themselves as authors, but in how the worlds that they’ve chosen to occupy shift and change, sometimes in a dramatic instant, sometimes in near-imperceptible glacial time.

Before we examine what I’ll call these two authors’ ecological philosophies, I would like to call attention to another distinction between the two works much of this chapter will rely on. The subtitles of each book give it away. Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* is subtitled “A Season in the

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<sup>108</sup> Haines, *Stars*, preface.

<sup>109</sup> Abbey, *Solitaire*, Kindle location 276.



Wilderness.”<sup>110</sup> Haines’s *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire* has a subtitle reflecting a much longer residence: “Twenty-Five Years in the Northern Wilderness.” As I discussed above, neither of these timeframes are meant to be taken literally, as both books play fast and loose with time, if they bother to establish a timeline of events at all. But it is telling that Abbey’s work is on a “season,” understood as a brief, transient period of time, replete with connotations of change and impermanence, while Haines’s memoir covers two and a half decades in which he built and maintained a cabin, blazed his own trails for miles and miles, and came to rely on the land and its occupants for the sake of his very survival. I draw attention to this difference not to make a value judgement or suggest that one author has a stronger claim to “his” region than the other, but to lay the groundwork for what I argue is the stark difference between the two authors’ treatment of land, its occupants, and the role it plays in human life. Abbey may rail against the parceling-out of wilderness areas and the bureaucratic structures that sustain such boundaries, but his view of wilderness is not so profoundly divorced from that offered in the Wilderness Act of 1964: “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”<sup>111</sup> Abbey himself is just such a visitor, and while he would eventually settle in the desert, *DS* is about a national park, with all of its associated philosophical, ecological, and political baggage. Abbey writes of a place already demarcated as separate, set aside from the rest of the world. It is by its very nature exceptional. Haines, on the other hand, comes to a place where men and women have lived for generations, and where such lives are an inseparable part of the land’s character—its own essence. Indeed, Haines comes to understand the landscape in which he lives over the course of decades as inseparable from its

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<sup>110</sup> This subtitle only exists in some editions; for instance, a paperback edition published in 1991 features it prominently on the cover, while it is nowhere to be found in the 1988 University of Arizona edition I rely on for this thesis.

<sup>111</sup> Wilderness Act, section 2(c).

occupants, human and otherwise, and, as I will argue below, therefore offers a more convincing vision of how we as humans must come to view, operate within, and respect our natural environment.

Edward Abbey's governing philosophy is rooted in, as he says, "bedrock and paradox."<sup>112</sup> He retreats to southeastern Utah, to a park then known as Arches National Monument, as a desert father in early Christian practice might venture into the scorched wastes, a hermit seeking enlightenment in the desert and its separation from what seemed to most as life itself. The very first section of *Desert Solitaire* contains what could be argued is Abbey's thesis statement, which references bedrock while being utterly paradoxical. He remarks on a balanced rock upon a pedestal, the rock and pedestal amounting to an imposing 100 feet. He likens the stone edifice to a "petrified ogre," a "stone god," then immediately chastises himself for having such a thought: "The personification of the natural is exactly the tendency I wish to suppress in myself, to eliminate for good. I am here ... to confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us." He references Kant, as any good student of philosophy would do, and offers his aspiration: "I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description." He talks of a "hard and brutal mysticism," where the human self merges with the non-human while somehow retaining its individual nature.<sup>113</sup> The paradox is obvious enough, but the gist of his mission is clear. Abbey will spend time here in this desert retreat, away from the "the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus," in order to learn what is beneath all that, both in himself and in the world as a whole. Any previous philosophy of nature

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<sup>112</sup> Abbey, *Desert*, 6.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

is not of interest to him. As easily as he discards Kant's categories, he rejects other schools of thought. Emerson's transcendentalism, for example, is to Abbey a "tortured and torturous metaphysical hallucination."<sup>114</sup> He favors reason, instead, or so he often claimed—but in keeping with his affection for paradox, that aforementioned "hard and brutal mysticism" is never far away in his desert ruminations.

Haines proffers his own sort of mysticism, itself quite brutal at times, but not quite as bound to western philosophy and reasoning as the version to which Abbey devotes himself. Haines's mystical sense bears more resemblance to something out of a hazy, half-forgotten pagan past, musings which would not seem all that out-of-place in a tale from early medieval Scandinavia. While Abbey rarely concerns himself with anything that could even resemble the "supernatural" and has precious little to say on the matter of theism, Haines is fascinated by the spiritual world he perceives to be all around him. We saw examples of this in the poems examined above, contrasted with Elizabeth Bishop's visions of non-human life—think of their very different visions of moose, for instance, or Haines engaging in his shamanistic dream of being an owl. This fascination comes alongside an only occasionally glimpsed distrust of Christianity, or at least the idea of monotheism. He writes approvingly of "ancient religions, with their manifold deities; the gods and demons, male or female, principle and manifestation—and which answered in the most apparent and profound way to the variety of nature in the outside world."<sup>115</sup> He condemns the shift from an "attitude of worship with its implied humility toward the resident spirits... together with a necessary respect for their evident powers" to a utilitarian worldview, "our own modern attitude and practice of reducing everything to its particular

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<sup>114</sup> Murray, *Abbey in America*, 2.

<sup>115</sup> Haines, *Fables*, 121.

function and direct usefulness to us.”<sup>116</sup> He laments the “loss of that ancient richness of the many gods and companionable spirits, that all of this multiplicity... should have degenerated into the *One*, the all-demanding, righteous and vengeful father, with the withering injunction to ‘subdue the earth.’” A tantalizing fragment of socio-political commentary comes along with this, where Haines claims that “in [the] idea of the one god lies the origin of the totalitarian spirit, or at least its final justification.”<sup>117</sup>

Recall Abbey’s aspiration when he first arrives at Arches: to eliminate all personifications of nature, to recognize it as it is, in its “barest essence.” He also rejects scientific categorization, as well as social or cultural aspects of and associations with the natural world around him. It is hard not to ask the question, then: what is left? While Abbey would doubtless delight in the sheer mystery of all this, and the contradictory, ambiguous nature of what he appears to be aiming at, it hardly offers his readers a way forward in their own relationship to the world around them. This is made all the trickier by, once again, the fact of where Abbey is: a national monument (now park), a world apart, set aside, cordoned off. Abbey is quick to dismiss the idea of a stone god, rejecting the concept outright. This is in stark contrast to John Haines, who as we have seen embraces the possibility of the numinous, and even finds comfort in it. The world without offers Haines, as quoted above, one more possibility of being—whether in the bats that come to visit his homestead, or the quiet menacing spirits he half-perceives in the dim woods around him. The ideas of multiplicity and the sheer, overwhelming otherness of the world delights him. Where Abbey aims for a disenchantment of the world, reducing the juniper to its barest essence (whatever that may be), stripping it of its associations, its Kantian categories, Haines finds reward in re-enchantment, his own recognition, borne of living as and where he

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<sup>116</sup> Haines, *Fables*, 122.

<sup>117</sup> Haines, *Fables*, 123.

does, of something *else* out there. His appreciation of a lived-in environment allows such an attitude to flourish, as he sees not just how his fellow men and women exist in the same place as he does, but how the non-human community does as well. These other creatures are not objects of mere aesthetic appreciation for Haines, but again, independent beings in their own right, deserving of respect and consideration.

Abbey's writings on the desert are not all philosophical ventures into ontology and metaphysics. *Desert Solitaire* has its fair share of polemical chapters as well, where he rages furiously at what he calls "industrial tourism" and makes explicit calls for action on the part of desert visitors: "Look here, I want to say, for godsake folks get out of them there machines, take off those fucking sunglasses and unpeel both eyeballs, look around; throw away those goddamned idiotic cameras! ... Stand up straight like men! Like women! Like human beings! And walk – *walk* – WALK upon our sweet and blessed land!"<sup>118</sup> If you must visit this place, Abbey says, at least do it properly. His vicious ableism, sexism, and elsewhere, racism, do him no favors in the eyes of today's readers (and probably shouldn't have gone uncriticized at the time of publication, either...), but no doubt he would scorn any such considerations as "concessions" and insult you further. His interest, it is clear, is not people, but the desert. He offers concessions, however grudging. As he describes what he calls the "Western American desert rat," with his "permanent squint, a hide well pricked with cactus acupuncture, the big toes purple and dead from kicking stones," the contents of his skull "a sun-baked cranky semimisanthropic brain," it is not a leap to conclude he might as well be describing himself. Here is where we get a touch of something other than misanthropy, other than a fetish for lonerism and separation. The desert rat, Abbey claims rather unconvincingly, "loves all forms of life, even

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<sup>118</sup> Abbey, *Desert*, 203-204.

people. But though he loves people (in moderation), he prefers to see them, like trees and bushes, spaced well apart. At a comfortable spitting distance from one another—say, two miles—with a sawtooth hogback monocline about five hundred feet high in between for a fence.”<sup>119</sup>

Abbey’s misanthropy and scorn for the people who come to visit the desert is in stark contrast to Haines’s commentary on his own locale, the hillsides and forests of Alaska where he lived for so long, and the people he comes to know there. Once again we must recognize the difference between Abbey and Haines and their residences in these places: a season versus 25 years. It is certainly true that Haines’s Alaska lends itself to prolonged occupation than Abbey’s desert, and it would be a disservice to Abbey to suggest he despised all the people he found in the desert.<sup>120</sup> But their governing philosophies regarding “wilderness” and the place of people in it could not be further apart. Where Abbey seeks to annihilate himself in the desert, become one with the sun-baked rock and dissolve into the sandstone, Haines instead views the world in which he lives as a furtherance of his own being, grounds for, as he says, encountering further “possibilit[ies] of being.”<sup>121</sup> These possibilities are not found merely in the rivers or the hillsides or the trees, nor in the moose he kills for food or the marten he traps for fur, but also in the people whom he comes to know.

Throughout his memoir, Haines relates many stories of the people he came to know in Alaska. Oddly enough, considering the book is about such a remote place full of so many creatures and so few of them being people, many of his tales involve other human beings. There are chapters that relate his sitting around a table with whiskey, coffee, and other residents of the

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<sup>119</sup> Abbey, *Wall*, 149-150.

<sup>120</sup> Mostly the tourists, really—he speaks fondly of a cowboy or two, and a few of his ranger compatriots. Reading *Desert Solitaire* you would never know that for a while, his wife and young daughter lived with him in his camp trailer.

<sup>121</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 178.

area, all sharing stories of previous occupants of the land. Others involve his learning the ins and outs of the trapping trade from “old-timers,” men who had been living the life for decades, patiently teaching this newcomer from the lower-48 how to trap rabbit or how to skin a porcupine. Haines makes clear that without these lessons and the people who impart them, he could not have lived long in the northern country. Nowhere does he phrase his respect and affection for his fellow country-dwellers more elegantly than in the chapter entitled “With an Axe and an Auger,” where he relates several visits with the locals he came to know. Reflecting on the death and absence of those who came and left before him, Haines writes that he was “lucky to have known them when I did.... And the best of them I have loved with a deep appreciation that has never left me. They were friends and teachers, and I do not expect to see their kind again.”<sup>122</sup> This is no mere interpersonal sentimentality for Haines, however. These people are not mere fellow-travelers whose existence centers around himself and what he gained from their presence. Instead, he suggests a more profound connection, one between the land and the people who occupy it:

The land lives in its people. It is more alive because they worked it, because they left this hillside and that creek bottom marked by their shovels and axes. The meaning of this place lies in the rough weight of their hands, in the imprint of their gum-booted travel.

They are useful ghosts, these old inhabitants with their handworn implements, their settled lives. They tell us something of what we have been, and if we live long enough and well enough, what each of us may become: one more sign of our residence on earth, alive by reason of remembered love.<sup>123</sup>

He does not here lament the presence of people, nor the impact they made on the land he comes to know and love. Such an impact is instead something to be applauded, even emulated.<sup>124</sup> The

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<sup>122</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 164.

<sup>123</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 163-164.

<sup>124</sup> Absolutely none of this should be read as praise of *all* human impact on land. Haines elsewhere vehemently critiques oil pipelines and interstate highways. What is to be read instead is an affection for those who live alongside the land they occupy, rather than treating it as extractive potential or space to be filled.

version of “wilderness” we saw in, say, the Wilderness Act of 1964, has no room for such an attitude, nor would its advocates seem inclined to agree with Haines on the matter. This startlingly different view suggests that Haines’s prolonged living-off-the-land lifestyle had a major effect on how he came to view the land and himself, as well as the others he saw living similarly. Rather than lament human presence, he celebrates it—not without implicit caveat of course, but surely moreso than a “take only photographs, leave only footprints” ethos could ever allow.

It is not just in regard to other people that Abbey and Haines philosophically and emotionally differ in opinion and attitude, or in their views of the non-human world, or in their choice of residence and length of their stay. Their treatment of the deaths of animals varies wildly as well. To close out this section comparing Edward Abbey and John Haines, I would like to examine a particularly striking treatment by each author on the subject of death, specifically, the death of a rabbit.

One day, returning to his pickup truck after a sojourn through the national monument, Abbey happens upon a young cottontail rabbit. The animal bolts at his presence, hopping from one bush to another, where it settles underneath the brush and examines this interloper with “one bright eye.” Abbey thinks to himself of the give-and-take of predator and prey, and decides to try an “experiment”: he will kill the rabbit. He finds a stone that fits well in his hand, and with one decisive motion, throws it with all his might “straight at [the rabbit’s] furry head.” The rock flies true, smashing the rabbit in its skull, killing it instantly. Abbey’s description of its death is somewhat disturbing in its brevity: the stone “knocks the cottontail head over tincups, clear out from under the budding blackbush. He crumples, there’s the usual gushing of blood, etc., a brief spasm, and then no more. The wicked rabbit is dead.” Abbey’s response to the killing is equally



disturbing. “For a moment I am shocked by my deed; I stare at the quiet rabbit, his glazed eyes, his blood drying in the dust. Something vital is lacking. But shock is succeeded by a mild elation.” He leaves the corpse behind, deeming its flesh contaminated with tularemia, obviously unfit for human consumption, and continues on his walk,

with a new, augmented cheerfulness which is hard to understand but unmistakable. What the rabbit has lost in energy and spirit seems added, by processes too subtle to fathom, to my own soul. I try but cannot feel any sense of guilt.... No longer do I feel so isolated from the sparse and furtive life around me, a stranger from another world. I have entered into this one. We are kindred all of us, killer and victim, predator and prey, me and the sly coyote, the soaring buzzard, the elegant gopher snake, the trembling cottontail, the foul worms that feed on our entrails, all of them, all of us.<sup>125</sup>

Abbey’s delight in his newfound place in this world is striking for what action he had to perform to feel it, not to mention his seemingly missing the point Haines understood all too well as a trapper, a professional killer of animals. The coyote would eat the rabbit, as would the buzzard. What Abbey has done here bears precious little resemblance to the actions of an animal who exists in concert with its fellows. Indeed, he gives the game away by his own reckoning: the whole affair is an experiment, after all. Rather than the connection Abbey claims to feel upon killing the rabbit, it seems that by all rights he has wandered even further afield from the rhythms of the natural world.

Given that John Haines lived as a fur-trapper and subsistence hunter for more than two decades, it comes as no surprise that his works are filled with accounts of the deaths of animals, whether at his hands or the mechanics of his traps, or observations of one animal taking the life of another. To contrast Haines’s experiences and feelings on the matter to Abbey’s, I would like to focus on two specific instances: Haines as a young man trapping and killing his first fox, and Haines as a teenager, discovering the corpse of a rabbit in a field.

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<sup>125</sup> Abbey, *Desert*, 32-33.

The story of the fox is simple enough. Haines traps the animal on his first attempt, taking lessons from one of the aforementioned “old-timers,” a man named Allison. He sets a trap and returns one afternoon to “find the fox caught fast in the trap by one of its hind legs. He had not run far, but was still tugging on the chain where it had tangled in the brush, trying to get free. The skin of his caught leg was broken and bloody, and his eyes had a baffled and wounded look.” He could not shoot the fox; after all, he trapped the animal for its fur, and the pelt would not be nearly so valuable with a gunshot through it. Instead he knocks the fox out with a piece of wood to the snout, then, kneeling in the snow, “drew [the unconscious fox] into my lap. Holding him there with one hand, I grasped his muzzle tightly in my other hand and twisted his head as far around as I could, until I felt the neck-bone snap, and a sudden gush of blood came from his nostrils. A shudder ran through the slender, furred body, and then it was still.” Note already the striking difference between Abbey’s and Haines’s description of the moment of death: Abbey fills his in with a casual “etc.” while Haines describes the moment in painful detail, relying on his description of the physicality of the killing to tell the story. It is not only in writing style that the two men differ, however. Haines’s reaction to his kill is not at all one of joy: “I stood there, looking down at the soiled, limp form in the snow, appalled at what I had done. This is what trapping meant when all the romance was removed from it: a matter of deceit and steel set against hunger. But I had overcome my fear, and I felt something had been gained by that.”<sup>126</sup> There is a bracing sense of necessity present in Haines’s account that Abbey’s lacks entirely, a recognition of the brutality of it all and, still, the knowledge that this is his life’s work for the time being.

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<sup>126</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 12-13.

Another example of Haines's profound reckoning with death is his account of the discovery of a rabbit's corpse. At the age of 13, while out on a walk, mind racing with thoughts long forgotten, Haines comes upon a dead rabbit on the side of the road. His description is characteristically disturbing in its detail. "Its brown and white fur was torn and its belly ripped open," he writes, "the blue bulge of its gut lay half-spilled from the body and shone brightly, glazed with blood, in the morning sunlight. A few flies already buzzed around it." As he stands over the corpse, he is gripped by a "nameless panic":

I was alone under the sun in an open field with death, unmistakable, physical death. It was not just that still form lying at the edge of the road, nor the blood that was dried upon its fur; I had seen things like it before. It was something new - an awakening that fastened on the incredible shining blueness of the inside turned outside, the innermost part ripped from its place and spilled into the light where it did not belong. Gazing, fixed before it in the sunlight, I felt, perhaps for the first time, an absolute aloneness. And I who at that age loved solitude, knew that this was death, the loneliest solitude of all.

As Abbey leaves his victim behind and continues his walk, so does Haines move past this corpse, one not of his making. Despite his having nothing to do with the rabbit's death, Haines writes that he "felt deeply that I was guilty, but of what I did not know. I walked a long way that morning, troubled and confused."<sup>127</sup> Whatever guilt Haines is feeling here, the cause is unclear, but the effect it has on him is profound. A starker contrast between Edward Abbey and John Haines could not be made than reading these stories of the deaths of animals. It is striking to keep in mind, reading Haines's recollection of his 13-year-old-self finding the body of the rabbit, that he would go on to become a fur trapper, killing hundreds of animals in his later years. But it is clear from these accounts that only one of these men takes the death of animals seriously, reflecting upon them as a matter of importance, recognizing within the death of the non-human that piece-by-piece loss of multiplicity, the loss, once again, of "one more possibility of being."

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<sup>127</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 130-131.

## HAINES AND ROBINSON JEFFERS

There is no God. This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit co-eternal with the universe remains unshaken.

Percy Shelley, note on *Queen Mab*

So far we have examined Haines's work and philosophy in comparison to two prominent American nature writers: Elizabeth Bishop and Edward Abbey. As discussed above, while Bishop's name may not be the first to leap to mind when considering eco-poetry, her considerations of human-to-non-human and human-to-landscape relations allowed us to clearly examine what sets Haines's poetry (and the ecological arguments contained therein) apart from more conventional works. The relationships his poems' narrators have with the animals and worlds they encounter are dramatically different from Bishop's: she emphasizes apartness and foreignness, while Haines emphasizes quasi-mystical togetherness and interrelatedness, a sense of fulfillment rooted in belonging, rather than coming to terms with irreconcilable differences. Edward Abbey's investigations of the desert allowed us an opportunity to closely examine some of Haines's prose, in which he wrestles not only with animal and landscape, but with the people that come to populate the world around him. We found in comparing Abbey and Haines a dramatic difference in how the two men view humans' place in the world: Abbey, suspicious if not outright scornful, Haines, caring and invested in their well-being, so long as that well-being came about through careful treatment and contemplation of the world. Despite his chaotic, ambiguous, and at times outright contradictory views of the non-human world and its inhabitants, we found in Abbey's philosophy a conviction that the concept of "wilderness" as spelled out in the Wilderness Act and espoused by environmentalists for generations is fundamentally sound: the best nature is one in which humans do not remain. While Abbey is

deeply distrustful of government's role in managing and preserving said wildernesses, he nevertheless sympathizes with their existence as set-apart entities. Haines offers a more nuanced view of our place in non-human nature, and once again, a more mystical, quasi-animistic relationship with the world in which he lives, compared with Abbey's stated desire to strip the natural world of all meaning and association, save its "bedrock" existence. We found Abbey's goal to be only half-comprehensible, consistent with the author's preference for chaotic, inherent contradictions. Haines may not have set out a "mission statement," such as it is, with the same clarity that Abbey did, but by examining his work we find a carefully thought-out, developed, and lived-in perspective which grants us humans agency and relevance in our relationship to the non-human around us, something much closer to Morton's ethics of the non-self than either Bishop or Abbey could get.

These examinations bring us to the final figure in this chapter: Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962). The following pages will explore some of Jeffers's work and, following suit with the pages above, will compare and contrast Haines's work and philosophy with that of Jeffers. In so doing, we will find some striking similarities between the two men, but differences too, demonstrating once again that John Haines is a poet and author like no other, however tempted we may be to find his equal in others, or to dismissively claim that Haines was merely exploring well-trodden ground.

Robinson Jeffers has not enjoyed nearly the same amount of fame as Edward Abbey, or even Elizabeth Bishop. While he was quite popular in the 1920s and 1930s, his fame diminished considerably as the years wore on. A notable example of Jeffers's strange place in the literary canon of his day can be found on the book-flap of his poetry collection, *The Double Axe and Other Poems*, published by Random House in 1948. Throughout the book, Jeffers's poetry takes

on a staunchly isolationist tone, criticizing U.S. foreign policy and its involvement in World War II. The publisher includes a note, displayed with Jeffers's permission, stating that "their views are at variance with the poet's," and that "Random House feels compelled to go on the record with its disagreement over some of the political views pronounced by the poet in this volume." They point out that this is the "fourteenth book of verse by Robinson Jeffers published under the Random House imprint," and make clear their respect for the author, political disagreements notwithstanding.<sup>128</sup> The controversy surrounding the book, and its less-than-complimentary reception by literary critics who had previously been quite fond of Jeffers's work, doubtless accelerated his slip into relative obscurity. He went from being one of the few poets to ever have his portrait on the cover of *Time*<sup>129</sup>, to being literary *persona non grata*. Since then, however, there has been some continued interest in his work. The Robinson Jeffers Association, based in California, publishes a journal—*Jeffers Studies*—and holds an annual conference. By and large, though, students of Jeffers find a similar void of silence throughout the academy as do those interested in John Haines. Perhaps it is no great surprise that there has been a lack of critical interest in Jeffers—those who might be interested in him will not find him in any American literature anthologies, at least not any published within the last half-decade. Echoes of my earlier laments about scholarly works on Haines being painfully rare can be found in the introduction to a 2015 anthology of Jeffers scholarship, where the editor points out that "[t]here hasn't been an edited collection of critical essays on Jeffers published in twenty years, and a great deal has changed in the critical landscape since then."<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Scans of the original 1948 edition can be found at <https://archive.org/details/doubleaxeotherpo0000unse/page/154/mode/2up>. Interested readers will have to register with the site to get access to all of the images, but registration is free and the site is intuitive.

<sup>129</sup> <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19320404,00.html>

<sup>130</sup> Tangney, *Wild*, xiv-xv.

The pages that follow draw on a handful of recent works of Jeffers scholarship, including pieces from that 2015 anthology, as well as several of Jeffers's poems. Our primary focus will be Jeffers's philosophy of "inhumanism," defining and interrogating this term, and comparing it as much as possible to the various ecological thoughts offered by Haines throughout his own work. Happily enough for this present venture, Robinson Jeffers is one of the few poets about whom Haines writes at any length, two essays devoted entirely to the California poet. He speaks approvingly of Jeffers in both, praising his willingness to take "the real risk of assuming that he had something of importance to say."<sup>131</sup> The piece collected in *Descent* was presented at a conference in Carmel, CA, in 2000, and Haines continues there, remarking that Jeffers's work partakes of a tradition in which "the poet and artist [are perceived as] speakers of the truth."<sup>132</sup> He writes that he took an example from Jeffers, even if his own work was not much influenced by his, admiring "the force of... his convictions and his stating of them. Here... was a poet who would speak openly and honestly on history, on politics and public life, and with no apparent regard to the consequences."<sup>133</sup> He castigates an unnamed "Ivy League critic" who dismissed Jeffers as a "West Coast nature poet," arguing instead that Jeffers "is among the foremost of our modern poets, rare in any age, and in ours an outstanding figure."<sup>134</sup> Nevertheless, Haines is clear that he and Jeffers are not in philosophical agreement, however much he admires the man's work: "I myself am no longer as sympathetic to Jeffers's philosophical outlook, his 'inhumanism,' as I once was." The following pages aim to discuss that inhumanism, examining its presence in several of Jeffers's poems, then contrasting his philosophical positions, especially

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<sup>131</sup> Haines, *Fables*, 56.

<sup>132</sup> Haines, *Descent*, 32.

<sup>133</sup> Haines, *Descent*, 24-25. He may have been thinking here of the publisher's note in *Double Axe*, though Haines refrains from specifying. Jeffers airing his opinions there cost him dearly.

<sup>134</sup> Haines, *Descent*, 24.

as regards hope and numina, to Haines's own. While we will come to see that Jeffers's worldview certainly bears more resemblance to Haines's philosophy than Bishop's unbridgeable separation or Abbey's "bedrock and paradox" anti-Kantianism, there are nevertheless key differences worth considering as we work to construct Haines's own ecological ethic.

To describe Jeffers's inhumanism, all we need to do is read his preface to *The Double Axe*. He writes that the poem, though written during World War II,

is not concerned primarily with that grim folly. Its burden... is to present a certain philosophical attitude, which might be called Inhumanism, a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence.... [Inhumanism] offers a reasonable detachment as rule of conduct, instead of love, hate and envy. It neutralizes fanaticism and wild hopes; but it provides magnificence for the religious instinct, and satisfies our need to admire greatness and rejoice in beauty.<sup>135</sup>

If you had only the poems in the volume that follows that preface, however, you would be forced to conclude that such "reasonable detachment" and "rejection of human solipsism" seems to come along with what can only be read as an indictment of the human race as a whole. The poem Jeffers writes of in that preface has its own things to say about the value of humanity. In an aside by the narrator on the value of hope ("a great folly," he calls it) and a brief rumination on fate ("what comes will come," advising against expectations), we get a summation of the evolution of humanity: "The great bear and the sabre-tooth tiger, the powerful ones perish; an absurd ape drops from a tree / And for a time rules the earth."<sup>136</sup> Later in the book, in a poem entitled "The King of Beasts," Jeffers addresses "cattle in the slaughter-pens, laboratory dogs / Slowly tortured to death, flogged horses, trapped fur-bearers," informing them that "Mankind, your Satans, are not very happy either." He writes that "it is quite natural the two-footed beast / That inflicts terror, the cage, enslavement, torment, and death on all other animals / Should eat the dough that

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<sup>135</sup> Jeffers, *Double*, vii.

<sup>136</sup> Jeffers, *Double*, 74.



he mixes and drink the death-cup. It is just and decent.”<sup>137</sup> In “Original Sin,” Jeffers continues his scathing criticism of humanity:

... As for me, I would rather  
Be a worm in a wild apple than a son of man.  
But we are what we are, and we might remember  
Not to hate any person, for all are vicious;  
And not to be astonished at any evil, all are deserved;  
And not fear death; it is the only way to be cleansed.<sup>138</sup>

One could read such verse and wonder: where is that “transhuman magnificence” mentioned in the preface? And as for “reasonable detachment,” that is clearly not found in a poem delighting in the mutual suffering of animal and human alike, or in verse declaring all suffering as deserved, and praising death as the only remedy for humanity’s filth. The lines seem to offer only grim resignation. The apocalyptic misanthropy throughout *The Double Axe* can be explained, perhaps, by Jeffers’s loathing of the war. He pulls no punches on that front: Roosevelt, Churchill, Hitler, Truman, Mussolini, and others—all are castigated as warmongers, death-lovers, villains. There is far more misanthropy present here than what the brief preface would have prepared a reader for, far more insults of the human race, self-loathing bundled up with an outward-gazing hatred of all fellow humans. The material found in *The Double Axe* cannot be treated as representative of Jeffers’s work, however. An earlier poem, “The Answer,” has a far more nuanced view of humanity: “man dissevered from the earth and stars and his history . . . [o]ften appears atrociously ugly,” but “the greatest beauty is / Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the universe. Love that, not man / Apart from that, or else you will share man’s pitiful confusions, or drown in despair when his days darken.”<sup>139</sup> Humankind, then, is only ugly when divorced from its natural context, its “organic wholeness.” Such separation can

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<sup>137</sup> Jeffers, *Double*, 136.

<sup>138</sup> Jeffers, *Double*, 146.

<sup>139</sup> Jeffers, *Collected*, 536.

happen when humanity is seen as somehow “above” nature, for instance, or if it is judged to be the sole arbiter of truth and value, or if it is perceived in an ontological vacuum. But taken in proper context, as a part of a whole, dependent, the species is deserving of affection.

When such context is not respected, there is little beauty in the works of humanity. The two poets share a sense of horror at the gradual changing of the world around them, one that even Edward Abbey would raise a glass to and join in round condemnation. Jeffers’s poem “Carmel Point” serves as a lament, comfort, and call-to-action, simultaneously. He writes of the area where he lives: “This beautiful place defaced with a crop of suburban houses- / How beautiful when we first beheld it, / Unbroken field of poppy and lupin walled with clean cliffs.” The suburban incursion and its ugly structures have profoundly altered the place, and not for the better. However, Jeffers does not despair overmuch, as he reminds the reader that “the people are a tide / That swells and in time will ebb, and all / Their works dissolve. Meanwhile the image of the pristine beauty / Lives in the very grain of the granite, / Safe as the endless ocean that climbs our cliff.” Still, we who live here should not merely take our inevitable demise for granted and maintain our destructive habits without compunction, happy in the knowledge that nothing we do will matter that much anyway.<sup>140</sup> He urges us to “uncenter our minds from ourselves; / We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident / As the rock and ocean that we were made from.”<sup>141</sup> Funnily enough, in a humorless sort of way, Haines focuses also on California when he writes his own commentary on the invasion and ruination of the natural world by humanity.<sup>142</sup> He writes of “the accumulating ruin of the North American landscape,” his feelings of “actual pain and outrage” upon seeing California again after 12 years in Alaska, “this fallen kingdom,

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<sup>140</sup> Cheerful.

<sup>141</sup> Jeffers, *Wild*, 175.

<sup>142</sup> Having spent a fair amount of time in northern California myself, I suppose I can understand this. So much natural beauty, so many McMansions.

the landscapes we make everywhere, devoid of beauty and grandeur.”<sup>143</sup> There is precious little to celebrate when it comes to the way in which humans construct their lives here.

Returning to Jeffers’s preface and its musings on “transhuman magnificence,” it is worth treating on the prose on its own. Robert Zaller addresses this preface as the call to action it is, pointing out that “[a] merely pragmatic approach to the physical environment [does] not... suffice. The beginnings of a genuine ecology require a radical shift from the dominant mode of Western thinking, which [makes] man the locus of value, to one which perceive[s] again the intrinsic value of all creation.” Zaller finds special significance in the term “creation,” echoing some of the theorists we encountered in chapter two who were concerned with ecological terminology: “The very degradation of our terminology for the world—from *creation*, with its implicit recognition of a divine totality, to *environment*, that which surrounds and is exploitable by humankind—reveal[s] our false perspective.”<sup>144</sup> It is not difficult to see a similar degradation in conceptions of “wilderness areas” or a “pure,” “virgin” nature—simultaneously elevating “nature” to a high pedestal while divorcing it entirely from humankind, and vice versa.

“Creation” versus “environment” is a philosophical opposition as much as an aesthetic one for Jeffers. The prospect of a world in the midst of ecological collapse demands an acceptance of “creation” rather than “environment.” Jeffers’s vision of ecological catastrophe “is not destructive but purgative,”<sup>145</sup> resting on the idea that humanity has swung too far toward a stubborn belief in “environment” and that the resurgence instead of “creation” dooms the species to destruction, not out of spite but of self-correction.<sup>146</sup> Humanity cannot survive justly—or at all—in a world in which it views itself as separate and exceptional. As Zaller notes, Jeffers-as-

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<sup>143</sup> Haines, *Living*, 6.

<sup>144</sup> Zaller, “Ecology,” 17.

<sup>145</sup> Zaller, “Ecology,” 15.

<sup>146</sup> “Creation,” we could imagine, may arrive in the form of climate change, one of Morton’s “hyperobjects.”

poet must speak “in his vatic mode... even in the knowledge that his voice will be futile. It is a duty of counsel but also of praise, and the vision [he] offers is a comprehensive one: the earth must be saved not for man but for itself and its creatures, only thus including man.”<sup>147</sup> Anthony Lioi, speaking of Jeffers’s comprehensive vision, suggests that the poet be viewed as a descendant of the Stoics, who “thought of their philosophy as a therapy for what ails the species, and two of its aspects—the doctrine that the universe is a living, divine whole and that humans must conduct our lives as part of a cosmos—anticipate the claims of Inhumanism by millennia.”<sup>148</sup> This doctrine is one that John Haines, as we have seen already, has much to say about, but he frames it extraordinarily clearly in an interview contained in *Living Off the Country*. Asked whether our society has become too complicated, too industrial, Haines replies in the affirmative, but with a caveat:

But I don’t think we ever completely lose touch with the earth and its cycles. Nature has hold of the other end of the string, and sooner or later we will find this to be true. If we exceed the capacity of the land to support and contain us, whether we are rabbits or men, we die.... There is peace in knowing that we cannot have it all our own way.... We must face life finally on the terms offered. To go beyond that is excessive pride, whose consequence is ruin and death.<sup>149</sup>

“Excessive pride” is doubtless a term Jeffers would find appropriate. We have seen in his philosophy of inhumanism an urging to step aside from such hubris as to believe that humanity lords over anything at all. Going beyond what is offered to us, pretending that there are boundaries we can freely cross and survive unharmed, imagining ourselves to be lords (or even stewards) of the earth—these are all dangerous acts and beliefs, and both Jeffers and Haines see only death as their consequence. Jeffers, as we have seen, finds nothing lamentable in that inevitability. His vision of “purgative” ecological collapse is not one shared by Haines, however,

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<sup>147</sup> Zaller, “Ecology,” 16.

<sup>148</sup> Lioi, “Cosmic,” 118.

<sup>149</sup> Haines, *Country*, 153.

who, while he accepts (with some considerable chagrin, might I add) the potential destruction of the species as a distinct possibility, he does not delight in its end as some inevitable byproduct of its hubris.<sup>150</sup>

Jeffers and Haines do share a belief in the comprehensive wholeness of humanity and non-humanity, however. As Zaller points out, “[Jeffers’s] idea of nature is not wilderness<sup>151</sup> but pastoral, human need not usurping other needs but taking its place beside them.” Jeffers does not urge a return to some Neolithic world in which agriculture is as alien as smart phones, but instead recognizes that “[m]an *must* transform his environment to survive in it, like every other species; it is only when he abuses, degrades, and destroys it—which occurs whenever he sees it in utilitarian terms alone—that he exceeds his biological mandate.”<sup>152</sup> Haines’s poetry is full of people living in their environment well, that is, within their “biological mandate.” They are shown to exist as a part of the landscape, or as equal participants in it as is any tree or moose—reminiscent of the ontological flattening we saw earlier with Morton and Cronon. An early poem, “The Tundra,” features “coarse, laughing men / with their women; / one by one the tiny campfires / flaring under the wind.”<sup>153</sup> “The Traveler,” in its third section, recalls a time when “People were camped on the bank / of a river, drying fish / in the sun. Women bent over / stretched hides, scraping / in a kind of furry patience.”<sup>154</sup> Not all of Haines’s nameless characters are as content as these people, however. Some are quite unhappy. “Deserted Cabin,” also from his first book of poems, *Winter News*, contains the sad story of an old man, since deceased, the

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<sup>150</sup> “Rolling Back,” and the unforgiving land it describes, is an example of Haines’s apocalypticism, and carries with it none of the “we deserve it” tone that Jeffers often adopts. So too is “It Must All Be Done Over,” with the narrator living through what appears to be the end of the world as he knows it, learning “to build with air, / water, and smoke,” after “leav[ing his] house to the wind / without baggage or bitterness.”

<sup>151</sup> We can understand the term “wilderness” here as meaning what it does in the Wilderness Act: pristine, inviolate, unoccupied.

<sup>152</sup> Zaller, “Ecology,” 19.

<sup>153</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 38.

<sup>154</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 26.

poem's narrator imagining him on a porch "...sitting there / now as he used to / ... // The bitterness of a soul / that wanted only to walk / in the sun and pick / the ripening berries."<sup>155</sup> The figure in question had ranted about poverty, lamented his station in life, but Haines sees a person who is cognizant of what he lacks, rather than merely bitter and defeated. And it is not just the works specifically about fellow humans that are of interest here. Even when poems are named after animals, contain only animals, or ruminate only on animals' lives and actions, it is imperative to recall an answer Haines gives in an interview, responding to a question about the seeming omnipresence of animals and comparative lack of human life in his book *Winter News*:

...[T]he animal world *was* so much more felt than the human. But I want to say I don't feel entirely easy about saying it this way. I don't think we can separate these things so easily. The human, it seems to me, is abundantly present in *Winter News*, though often disguised in the animal.... When you live a long time alone in the woods, with mostly animals for companions, some strange things happen inside your head.... [T]he lines between human and animal, between yourself and the forest world, become indistinct.<sup>156</sup>

The blurring of these lines, as I have indicated before, is precisely what needs to be done in any construction of an ecological ethic. It is the ethic of the "non-self," as discussed explicitly by Morton, Cronon, and others, and as suggested repeatedly by Haines's work. It is this non-self-oriented ethic that concerns us from here, and how Jeffers and Haines arrive at different versions of such. We will see such differences in the two poets' treatments of gods and spirits—Jeffers finding a god that is difficult to relate to and often inaccessible, while Haines half-perceives gods and spirits all around him, waiting to be noticed or propitiated.

Jeffers, as discussed above, has a distinctly pantheistic view of the world and its occupants. Jeffers's God, notably capitalized, is rarely accessible and viewed largely in aesthetic terms, beauty and horror. When the deity does weigh in on moral or philosophical judgements,

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<sup>155</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 21-22.

<sup>156</sup> Haines, *Country*, 140. Emphasis found in the original.

they are often obscure or unknowable, except to a select few. In one of his most famous poems, “Hurt Hawks,” Jeffers describes an omnipresent deity:

The wild God of the world is sometimes merciful to those  
That ask mercy, not often to the arrogant.  
You do not know him, you communal people, or you have forgotten him;  
Intemperate and savage, the hawk remembers him;  
Beautiful and wild, the hawks, and men that are dying, remember him.<sup>157</sup>

We can see here Jeffers’s pantheistic deity, all-encompassing and immanent. It is a god—singular—that is unknown and inaccessible by “communal people,” humanity in its aggregate form, city-dwellers and townsfolk. These are the people described in another poem, “The Purse-Seine,” who live in the “great cities,” “locked all together into interdependence,” “vast populations incapable of free survival, insulated / From the strong earth, each person in himself helpless, on all dependent,” unable to survive on their own yet horrifyingly powerful in their collective ability to thoughtlessly destroy anything and everything else.<sup>158</sup> Their interdependence robs them of an ability to comprehend a world without, which only the “beautiful and wild” hawks can recognize. Something about *people*, groups, multiples, divorces each subsumed individual from the world. In “Birds and Fishes,” Jeffers comments on “justice and mercy,” deeming them “human dreams [which] do not concern the birds nor the fish nor eternal God,” suggesting all such entities have something profound in common, that they all share some aspect or another. However, watching sea-birds feast on fish along the ocean, he urges the reader to “look again,” to see

The wings and wild hungers, the wave-worn skerries, the bright quick minnows  
Living in terror to die in torment—  
Man's fate and theirs—and the island rocks and immense ocean beyond, and  
Lobos

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<sup>157</sup> Jeffers, *Wild*, 49.

<sup>158</sup> Jeffers, *Wild*, 157.

Darkening above the bay: they are beautiful?  
That is their quality: not mercy, not mind, not goodness, but the beauty of God.<sup>159</sup>

Why is the death of man, invoked again in comparison to the minnows, “living in terror to die in torment,” so important to Jeffers’s conception of God? Perhaps because in their proximity to death, they have found themselves separated from their fellows, once more alone and confronting the immensity of the world apart from themselves, able only then to perceive the uncaring divine.

Haines does not often place a singular divine entity in his own poetry, and when he does, it tends to be grim indeed. For Haines, there are instead multiple gods and spirits, sometimes contained within the animals he meets and the landscapes he inhabits, sometimes perceived as entities themselves. These gods can be experienced in both quiet contemplation and dramatic moments, such as when he lures a moose to his camp in the poem “Horns,” “rub[bing] with a piece of horn / against a tree. He describes the moose’s arrival, “[his] horns explod[ing] in the brush,” lingering, “breathing softly. / Then with a faint sigh of warning / soundlessly he walked away. // I stood there in the moonlight, / and the darkness and silence / surged back, flowing around me, / full of a wild enchantment, / as though a god had spoken.”<sup>160</sup> In a darker, more mysterious poem, “The House of the Injured,” he finds an entirely different divinity: an injured bird, its “beak... half eaten away, / and its heart beat wildly / under the rumped feathers.” Upon witnessing this, the narrator “[sinks] to [his] knees-- / a man shown the face of God.”<sup>161</sup> The single God here, capitalized, is notable for its horrific appearance, suggesting something brutally damaged inherent in the concept of monotheism.<sup>162</sup> It is difficult to imagine Jeffers hearing a god

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<sup>159</sup> Jeffers, *Wild*, 182.

<sup>160</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 16-17.

<sup>161</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 12.

<sup>162</sup> As discussed in the Abbey section, above, Haines writes approvingly of multiplicity and “companionable spirits” and condemns “the *One*” as the origin and justification of totalitarianism.



speak in the woods as the moose stalks away, or witnessing the visage of a deity in the sight of a wounded, broken bird. These are too specific, too value-laden, too bound up with human perception and human presence. Where Jeffers's deity is omnipresent yet simultaneously distant, unconcerned with mercy or goodness, Haines's deities are always there, hidden but accessible, often with a message for those who listen. Indeed, Haines invokes something like shamanism, humans interacting with spirits—gods?—if only given the proper time and setting: “Before knowledge there was wisdom, grounded in the shadows of a dimly lit age. We ourselves have been night creatures, and once the human soul left its sleeping body, to soar and feed nightlong in the shape of a bat or exotic bird, returning to the sleeper at daybreak.”<sup>163</sup> Haines's identification of himself, of the entire human race, with the non-human natural world stands at odds with Jeffers's vision, just as it does with Bishop's and Abbey's. Where these other writers see otherness and distance, Haines sees community, one to which he belongs just as much as the owl and the mole and the cicada.<sup>164</sup> The same appreciation for community extends to his fellow people. Haines delights in his fellow Alaskans, those old trappers and bartenders and taxidermists who have lived there for ages immemorial, relics of a bygone era. Just as we saw in our discussion of Edward Abbey, we see here Jeffers's distaste for those around him, except in certain circumstances, certain formulations of “person.” This reduces the person in Jeffers's work to abstraction, and I am sure he would not have it any other way. Haines, however, delights in individual people, named and described and loved, as we saw above.

While Jeffers and Haines share more philosophically (if not in the form of their poetry) than do Bishop and Haines or Abbey and Haines, the distance between the two poets is clear enough, even without Haines explicitly telling us so. Where Jeffers's apocalyptic vision and

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<sup>163</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 176.

<sup>164</sup> Recall the poems mentioned in the Bishop section, above.

near-misanthropy can convince a reader that the world is worse off for humans being in it, life itself being “not a great gift,”<sup>165</sup> Haines shows us a world in which people belong and life is to be enjoyed, even if we as a species continue to make mistakes. When the narrator in “Victoria” asks his “dear friend at the continent’s end,” “Will we ever again be at home / on earth?” one knows Haines’s answer, however desperately aspirational it might be.<sup>166</sup> The “rougher spirit” which brings with it a “noise like death” that Haines writes of may be horrific, dangerous, deadly, but in the same poem where he laments its presence he fondly recalls other people, their lives meaningful, their relationships important.<sup>167</sup> The mistakes of the human race, Haines seems to say, are not unfixable, and there is more to care for than despise.

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<sup>165</sup> As Jeffers writes in “The Deer Lay Down Their Bones,” where the poet confronts his own mortality after the death of his wife and comes to terms with his continuing life absent her company.

<sup>166</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 133.

<sup>167</sup> Haines, *Owl*, 143-144.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis we have seen examples of the language and discourse of environmental ethics, and how that language and discourse can come to affect the non-human world itself. The ethical systems that determine how we interact with the natural world emerge from considerable thought, discussion, and debate, whether in prose or verse. We have seen systematic constructions laid out by philosophers, literary theorists, and poets, many of whom disagree with one another, even when they do not say as much explicitly. Arguments for *this* worldview or *that* worldview need not take the form of syllogisms, line-by-line breakdowns of congressional documents, or direct confrontation with other writers; rather, they can be found in lines of poetry, whose author had not so much as hinted that she was making a prescriptive argument, or embedded in an essayist's stories of his time as a park ranger, stuck between wry observations of birdlife and polemics about camper trailers.

I began this project aiming to show John Haines's work as a series of claims about the non-human world and our, humanity's, relationship to it. I described his upbringing, setting the stage for the exploration of his work to follow. I laid out the broad debate about "wilderness" and "nature" as it has gone on for the past 30 years, demonstrating that the positions Haines suggested through his work had not been adequately accounted for in the wider discourse. And finally I compared John Haines's poetry and prose to that of three other prominent authors, each of whom offered his or her own set of observations and conclusions about the world outside of us. Haines's work stands apart from all of the other material discussed here, from the more general perception of the natural world within pop culture, and even from much of what you can find environmental activism circles.

Haines does not see our relationship to animals as one of unbridgeable distance, like Bishop does. He does not attempt to strip away human cognition from the non-human world, like Abbey sets out to do in his anti-Kantian ventures into the desert. And he does not find purchase in inhumanism, or anything resembling the misanthropy one can discern in Jeffers's worldview. Instead, he sees the world in which we live as a part of us, and us a part of it: "This is the world we know," he writes, "and we know ourselves as part of it."<sup>168</sup> There is nothing but hubris in seeing ourselves as the death of nature, or in believing ourselves to be apart from it, or in seeing in nature a hatred of the human.

I am finishing this thesis as the world grapples with a generation-defining global pandemic. There should be no doubt in our minds that, as I suggested in the introduction, worse is yet to come. The planet continues to warm at an alarming rate, causing the death of countless species, the destruction of habitat for humans and non-humans alike, and possibly the emergence of forgotten and unknown diseases, long buried in permafrost, patiently waiting for a vector. I would not dare suggest that reading John Haines can stave off any or all of these impending disasters. But it does seem imperative, now more than ever, to contemplate an alternative to all of the environmental messages we are given, day in and day out. And I believe I have demonstrated throughout this thesis that John Haines's work offers just such an alternative, one best described in his own words:

[S]omething has been lost in the art of nature study in this century; not simply curiosity, or even excitement, but a better word: *rapture*. It is an emotion that comes, not merely from looking at things, but from seeing them with a kind of veneration, as if within these objects, these vistas of water and mountain, something of the impenetrable mystery might be sensed and named, and before which one might be, not designing or dominating, but quietly attentive.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Haines, *Stars*, 162.

<sup>169</sup> Haines, *Fables*, 120.

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